

FRANK EDWARD NORA

# SOVORO REPAIR.

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BOOK ONE

AN INTERDIMENSIONAL  
UNIVERSE OF CHARACTERS  
ON THE CHAOTIC EDGE  
OF THE END OF EVERYTHING



# SEVERE REPAIR: BOOK ONE

BY FRANK EDWARD NORA

This is a work of fiction. All characters and events portrayed in this novel are either fictitious or are used fictitiously.

## SEVERE REPAIR: BOOK ONE

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**SEVERE REPAIR:  
BOOK ONE**



# ONE

“It’s time I told you all something about Yellowhaus,” Chamomile said, walking to the far side of the meeting table. She wore a light-yellow martial arts outfit.

Sulfur let out a single cynical snicker.

“What does it matter now?” he said.

Chamomile sat down.

“I guess it’s back to Hell for me!” the devil girl Lemon said, leaning on her pitchfork.

“Me too! Me too!” the mad dog guy Canary yelped out.

The huge, furry, yellow beast Buff jumped up and grabbed a bar on the ceiling, swinging. “I don’t think you have anything to worry about, Canary. You’ll get there one way or another.”

“How! How!” Canary yelled, swinging his chain around.

“There’s something you all need to know about Yellowhaus,” Chamomile said softly but firmly.

“What?” Sulfur asked, fashioning and solidifying a grim reaper figurine out of the mists surrounding his body. He wore yellow combat fatigues.

“Hey, I know that guy!” Lemon commented brightly.

“C’mon everybody,” Buff said, still swinging. “So what if it’s not us saving the day this time? We can’t save the world every time. The Libertine A-Wave needs some practice anyway!”

Chamomile looked up at Buff, a deadly serious look on her face.

“The Libertine A-Wave are all dead.”

Buff paused in his swinging, then continued, saying only “Oh.”

“Now how could that have happened?” Sulfur asked.

“Look all of you!” Chamomile said loudly, standing up. “I know we’re used to this sort of thing, but there’s something you have to know! Yellowhaus is a lot more than just our base of operations. It’s an ancient... vehicle.”

“Is that why we never had a Yellowhausmobile?” Lemon asked, smiling broadly.

Chamomile looked down, trying to hold in her frustration, a dull, dead feeling covering her whole body. Then she looked up and spoke, the beginnings of tears in her eyes.

“I never told any of you because I didn’t think it was important. But Yellowhaus has the ability to move between worlds, between universes. And it... and...”

The four others were silent.

“...it has a... a safety mechanism. Whenever a world is about to... end... it gets ready to transport away, automatically. And... and when we were just coming in, I noticed that... that the worldend autotransport had activated itself.”

Chamomile was now openly weeping, a sight none of the others had ever seen from their leader.

“Yellowhaus will transport away from this world in about 40 minutes,” she said.

“So what does this mean?” Sulfur asked.

“It means,” Chamomile said, nodding and looking up, “that the world will end in 45 minutes. Universe O’Riley will finally get his way.”

“No way!” Canary yelled. “Come on team! Let’s go kick his celestial ass! Come on!”

“Yeah!” Lemon shrieked. “Let’s go teach this guy a lesson he’ll never forget!”

“I’m ready to cause some major damage!” Buff exclaimed as he jumped down to the floor.

Chamomile shot out a spirit-energy fireball that exploded against the back wall, narrowly missing Buff.

“You don’t understand,” Chamomile said. “The mechanisms within Yellowhaus are not reacting to a possible end of the world. They are detecting a definite, inalterable end to our world. If we had any chance of stopping O’Riley, the mechanism would not have activated!”

“So that’s it?” Buff asked. “After everything that’s happened, this is the way it ends?”

“Where do we get to go! Oh boy!” Lemon asked brightly.

“What?” Chamomile asked, taken by surprise.

“Where will Yellowhaus take us? To another world like you



said?” Lemon asked.

“I don’t know. As far as I know, we should get to a safe place in another world, but I have no way of knowing where that might be. Kimberly only gave me a rough overview before she... departed,” Chamomile said.

“Shouldn’t we try and save some other folks?” Buff asked.

Chamomile turned away.

“There’s not enough time. All our communications are out, and as you know, our hovercrafts are shot.”

“But there’s a town near here. We could at least save a few people,” Buff said.

Chamomile turned to face him.

“They have no idea what’s happening! Why should we ruin the last few minutes of their lives—especially with the injustice of only being able to save a few of them! Besides, there’s not even enough time for that!”

“We should at least try,” Buff said.

“Why?” Chamomile said. “It’s all over! We just happen to be incredibly lucky! It’s not our fault. So let’s just start getting prepared for what we might encounter in the next world. Or rather, the alternate world we’re going to—hopefully not the next world yet.”

“Yeah!” Lemon said. “What’s gonna happen to Hell if the world ends? Isn’t Hell part of the world?”

“Well Lemon, I’m not sure, but I believe that O’Riley seeks to destroy everything, Heaven and Hell included,” Chamomile said.

“I see,” Lemon replied, a little shaken. Then she brightened and said “No more Hell! No more Slavercth! No more responsibilities! Yippee!”

“Yeah, yippee! Yippee!” Canary echoed.

“I still think—” Buff started.

“—look Buff!” Sulfur interrupted. “I admire you as the only moral voice on our team, but truly, it’s over. What would you do, separate people from their friends and relatives, and thrust them into an unknown new world? How could they make a decision such as that in a few seconds? Letting them die in peace is far more humane.”

“I’d still like to save a few people,” Buff said, looking down. “But Chamomile is right. There’s not time.”

“Heh heh, look!” Canary said, crouching down and cupping his hands together.

“What?” Sulfur asked.

Canary made an explosion noise and moved his hands apart.

“The world blowing up! The world blowing up!”

Chamomile rolled her eyes.

“Okay everyone! Pay attention! Back to reality! Anything that’s outside the Haus has to be brought in—only the Haus itself and everything inside will be transported.”

“There’s not much stuff out there. We brought most of it in when it rained last week,” Sulfur said.

“My bike’s out there,” Buff said.

“Okay. Lemon, go out with Buff and get his bike. The rest of us will continue preparations inside,” Chamomile said.

“Okay, c’mon big boy,” Lemon said to Buff as they headed for the elevator.

Soon, the two were outside in the yard of Yellowhaus.

“So where is it?” Lemon asked.

“I think it’s over by those trees,” Buff said, pointing.

They walked about a hundred yards to the edge of the woods and found Buff’s enormous bicycle on its side on the ground.

“Okay, get it and let’s go in. I don’t like it out here. Too quiet,” Lemon said.

“You’re probably used to the sounds of souls being tortured day in and day out!” Buff said, picking up his bike.

Lemon smiled.

“And oh, what a sound it is!”

The two began to walk back.

“So now you’ll never be Queen of Hell.”

“Who gives a damn?”

Then, suddenly, a sound of thunder split the sky.

“What in—” Buff began, but stopped as he saw a figure fall from the sky and land with a thud on the ground.

“Who is that?” Lemon asked.

“Dunno. Looks like one of The Libertine A-Wave, maybe.”

The two walked forward, and the red-and-black clad figure began to stir.

“Sure! That’s Colonia the Sword! You know, from Libertine A-Wave. Right,” Lemon said.

“Oh yeah... but I thought they all died!”

“Maybe it’s a trick! Maybe it’s O’Riley’s doing!” Lemon said, pointing her pitchfork forward.

Colonia the Sword lifted himself up into a sitting position.

“Yellowhaus!” he struggled, out of breath. “It’s all over...”

only one left.. have to help... help stop... O'Riley."

"Think it's really him?" Lemon asked.

"Yeah. I mean, why would O'Riley bother with this sort of charade when his victory is at hand? It's gotta be Colonia. He can teleport, you know," Buff said.

"I guess," Lemon said. "Colonia! Whattaya doing man? The world's gonna end in about a half-hour! Hey, guy?"

Colonia fell back to the ground, barely conscious.

"Can ya bring him in Lemon? My hands are full with this bike."

"No problem," Lemon said, and she poked her pitchfork under the collar of Colonia's jacket and lifted his limp and unconscious form.

"So we did save at least one person," Buff said.

"If you wanna call him that."

"Oh, he's a person. Maybe not a human being in exact terms, but a person nonetheless. I mean, am I a person? Are you?"

"I guess you're right Buff. It's just—isn't this guy a sword?"

"Yeah, he was some god's sword. But he had a life power all his own."

"Nice," Lemon said.

Inside, Chamomile and the others were busy figuring out how to airtight a portion of Yellowhaus in case the atmosphere of the alternate world was unbreathable. Then Buff and Lemon came in with the bike and Colonia the Sword.

"Look what we found, Chamomile!" Lemon said, smiling, her little fangs sparkling in the fading sunlight.

"What the—it's one of The Libertine A-Wave!" Sulfur exclaimed.

"I thought they had all died," Chamomile commented as she approached, "but it makes sense that Colonia might have escaped with his teleportation power. But how did he know to come here?"

"And did O'Riley follow him?" Sulfur wondered.

"Aw," Lemon said, dropping Colonia gently onto a table, "me and Buff figure O'Riley is too busy destroying the universe to care about any of us."

"That may be," Chamomile said, turning toward an instrument panel, "but I hope everyone's in, cuz I'm sealing Yellowhaus."

With that, she pulled a lever and a loud chime echoed throughout the structure.

“Nothing will ever come into or go out of Yellowhaus in this world ever again,” Chamomile said.

“What do you mean?” Buff asked.

“Another of Yellowhaus’s many secrets. Reality seal. It takes Yellowhaus slightly out of phase with the current world, thusly still allowing observations but preventing any passage in or out,” Chamomile said.

Suddenly Canary began whooping and hollering by a window.

“Look!” Sulfur said. “Out the window! It’s Universe O’Riley!”

All five rushed to the bay of windows and saw the horrific form of Universe O’Riley hovering in the middle of the yard, pointing at them.

“Damn!” Buff said. “Are you sure we’re safe? Are you sure he can’t follow us into the other world?”

“I believe we’re safe,” Chamomile responded. “Look.”

O’Riley raised his other arm and made both hands into fists. Soon, a massive windstorm overtook the area, getting more and more powerful each second. Before they knew it, trees started to uproot and fly away, as the ferocity of the storm grew.

“It’s totally quiet in here,” Sulfur remarked.

“That would make sense,” Chamomile responded. “Only visible light can pass back and forth between in here and out there. No sound.”

Buff continued staring at O’Riley for a few moments, then suddenly tackled the other four, knocking them all to the ground.

“Close your eyes!” he yelled, still on top of them.

“What the fuck!” Canary yelled.

“Stay down and keep your eyes closed!” Buff yelled, his enormous voice echoing through the silence of Yellowhaus. “Visible light! Don’t you get it? He could mind control or even kill us with his power. Pulses of hypnotic light! He could have shut our hearts down in a blink! He could have made us do anything!”

Suddenly, violent pulses of light began to flicker from outside, barely perceptible by the five, their eyes tightly shut.

“Damn that O’Riley!” Chamomile yelled. “Have to opaque the windows! Have to get to the control panel!”

“Keep down!” Sulfur yelled. “Shield your eyes! If you can see the light even a little, he could get through with his

power!”

“Damn!” Chamomile yelled.

“I’m over here!” the five heard a weary voice say from within the room. “On the table! It’s me, Colonia the Sword, from Libertine A-Wave. I have eye protection on. Tell me where to go and I can close the windows.

“Shit,” Chamomile muttered. “Okay Colonia! You’re right by it! Just get off the table away from the sound of my voice!”

“Got it!” Colonia yelled.

“Now—” Chamomile began.

“—what if he’s under O’Riley’s control? How can we trust him?” Buff yelled.

“We have no choice, Buff,” Chamomile answered. “Now Colonia, walk forward and to the right. You should feel the counter there. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Now, move to the right along the counter and you’ll feel a dome shape.”

“Got it,” Colonia answered after a few seconds.

“Okay, that’s it,” Chamomile said. “Feel for a ring. It’s on the upper-left of the panel. Just pull on the ring. It’s the only ring there.”

The intensity of the pulsing light increased. A few tense moments passed.

“I can’t find it!” Colonia yelled.

“Damn!” Chamomile exclaimed. “Okay, feel for a lever, then—”

“—I got it! The ring! Just pull?” Colonia said.

“Yes! Pull it! Just pull it!” Chamomile responded.

Suddenly it was dark.

“Whew!” Buff puffed.

“Get offa me you throw rug!” Canary yelled.

“Someone get the lights!” Sulfur yelled.

“You called?” Lemon asked, as the room was bathed in the hellish yellow glow of her pitchfork.

“Great. But can we get some real lights?” Sulfur said, getting up.

“I’ll get ‘em,” Chamomile said, already on her feet.

“You’re all very lucky,” Colonia said, taking the opaque goggles off his eyes. “He was going for the kill, not mind control or hypnosis or anything like that. You were right when you thought he would shut your hearts off—that was his intention.”

“So what now?” Buff asked.

“Well, he can still see Yellowhaus,” Chamomile said, turning the lights on. “But other than that, he can’t make any contact with it.”

“So will he be able to follow us?” Buff asked.

“No,” Colonia said. “He’s locked into this world. There’s no turning back for him now. He has to go through with it—destroying himself in the process. But we’ve defeated him in a little way—he’ll face his doom knowing that he failed to destroy everything.”

“That’s a comforting thought,” Sulfur commented.

“Well everyone,” Chamomile said from the control panel. “We transport in 26 minutes. All we can do now is wait.”

“Yeah,” Sulfur said.

“It’s creepy, knowing that guy is right outside!” Lemon said with a shiver.

“It’s creepy with you in here! Whoop!” Canary said.

“Roll over, boy,” Lemon said.

Canary growled at Lemon with a smile.

“So Colonia,” Chamomile said, looking the fellow over, “how’d you manage to escape from our friend Mr. O’Riley?”

“It’s a long story. For now, let it suffice to say that two of my teammates sacrificed themselves that I might survive to tell the tale.”

“But how did you know to come to Yellowhaus?” Chamomile asked.

“I had suspicions about this place. Call it ‘weapon’s intuition’ if you will. I just had a gut feeling you could help us. And as it turns out, you’re at least helping me, and maybe through me Libertine A-Wave can live on.”

“Well friend,” Chamomile said. “We’re happy to have another ally on our journey into unknown territory. Let’s just hope our flight lasts more than 25 more minutes.”

“Indeed,” Colonia said. “So we are off to another world then, really?”

“Really,” Chamomile said.

“Hmm,” Colonia said with a sigh. “The adventure continues.”

“Except,” Sulfur cut in, “all our friends and relatives, and everyone we ever knew, will be dead and gone.”

“Oh Sulfy! Don’t be such a party pooper—this is fun!” Lemon said.

# Two

Sitting in his room at the Supbam Hotel in Agoopish as Bright (the thing that passed for the sun here) was rising, Daptin Gone didn't want to make the phone call.

He ran his hand through his long green hair and leaned back in his chair. His mind was wandering, seeking avenues of thought engaging enough to justify delaying the call. He looked out the window at the city below, at the people starting to throng, at the weird hospitals in the distance, at the unpredictable Tuhalong River.

He'd been in a hospital once. Cringing, he recalled in vivid horror the terminal illness he had had, and how he somehow beat it, and that Glorious Place, and how things hadn't seemed to be working quite right.

He mulled over the matter, as he had done so many times before. This whole superlife of his, which seemed to casually annihilate the infinite suffering of his miserable diseased state. Crushed it like stepping unknowing on a little spider.

The miracle cure that people didn't like—they thought he'd been faking it. Escape down to Baskonontana, to college in Gullia Fair. Recruited into a dimension-hopping company of weirdoes, Overwhelm Associates. And then introduced to these cities, these hidden Avert Cities... and Agoopish was the one he called home.

It all started in that Glorious Place...

Such a wonderful day, such an excellent location. Walking up the grassy hill, perfect sunlight and breezes, Daptin saw the rock and the fox on top of it, jumping off. Near the rock was a blackboard with the words "Here is Canyon" scrawled across it.

The little red fox trotted toward Daptin and said, "You're

late. Oh so very late.”

Daptin stopped. Fox approached and sat.

“I knew you were still here,” Fox said. “Sit, and I’ll let you know what you missed.”

Daptin slowly sat down in the grass, mind racing, all so familiar. It was the beautiful smell in the air more than anything else.

“We’re so far along,” Fox said, shaking his head. “So few left.”

Daptin took a deep, deep breath and smiled in recognition. He knew Fox, somehow. The furry fellow was familiar.

“And I’ll be departed myself before the next Time,” Fox continued. “So few left.”

“Who?” Daptin asked, his voice sounding unusually rich.

Fox sighed.

“Twenty-five, including you and me.”

Daptin took a moment to think about it.

“Twenty-five?” he asked, dumbfounded.

“Yes, and all of you were so far scattered that we only found you two Times ago. The absolute bottom of the well. All that’s left.”

Daptin tried to remember more, but couldn’t.

“All the others have departed, returned to their Lives,” Fox continued. Then, looking up at Daptin. “Who will find it?”

Daptin met Fox’s eyes and was struck with the little fellow’s deep aura of being.

“It?” Daptin asked.

Then something happened. The beautiful environs disappeared, and Daptin was back in his bed at the hospital in his native country of Arctica. He’d been there, asleep, before Fox had somehow called him into that other world. It had just been a few minutes earlier, by his reckoning.

Daptin panicked as the pain of his Hizzings Disease returned in a massive wave of horror. There was a game show on the TV as he looked over at his roommate, Tag, who was sleeping. The pain made Daptin angry, and he tried to get out of the bed, but he only managed to nudge himself a little and get light-headed.

Half-conscious, Daptin saw a nurse walk into the room and emit a shocked “What?”

She ran from the room, but her exclamation woke Tag, who looked over.

“Holy crap! How’d you get back, man? We thought you did



yourself in. Where've you been?"

Daptin struggled to form the words through dry lips.

"How long... have I..."

"What, three or four days? I dunno. So where you been?"

"I don't... know... for sure."

"Huh. Well the police will sure want to talk to you. They grilled me for a couple of hours, y'know, man. They thought your family or maybe your girlfriend took you away and helped you commit suicide the easy way, man. Without a judge."

"No," Daptin managed.

"Well you have a lot of explaining to do, Daptin, my man."

Daptin grunted.

How frustrating it was, being strong and healthy one minute and so weak and pathetic the next.

The nurse returned with a security guard.

"Look!" she said, pointing at Daptin.

"What the—everything's hooked up. The machines—who set them back up?" the guard said.

"Nobody!" the nurse said in her irritating nasal voice.

"Nobody here, anyway. Maybe whoever took him away put everything back?"

"Well, we can figure all this out later. The police are on their way," the guard said, looking quite glad to have something interesting happen on the job.

"Should I call his family?" the nurse asked.

Daptin wished she would just shut up.

"No—let the police take care of that. We don't know who's involved," the guard said.

"Okay," the nurse said, as she approached Daptin's supine form.

"Can you hear me?" she asked.

"Yes," Daptin managed.

"Do you know where you are?" the nurse said.

"Hospital."

"That's right. But where were you?"

Daptin couldn't stand that voice so close to him.

"Leave... me alone."

"We'll leave you alone once we figure out what in the name of Locket is going on," she said, hovering over him.

Then she removed the covers from Daptin and began examining him.

Daptin couldn't stand it, the misery of being taken care of

by such an idiot. But he knew how to escape. Somehow, he knew.

“Here is Canyon,” Daptin said with some difficulty.

Instantly, the world shifted, and Daptin was standing in a room with a window, looking out onto Canyon.

He was back in his regular clothes, and healthy again, as he had been with Fox. He looked around the room, which was carved out of rock, and saw a number of tables and comfortable-looking chairs, along with an opening in one wall leading into another room.

From outside, which was sunny and beautiful, he heard a distant “Hahoo!”.

Daptin moved to the window, looked out, and saw someone approaching from below. Soon, he saw it was a young woman flying up toward the window. He backed away, and a moment later she approached the window and hovered there for a moment.

“Yes!” she exclaimed, and did several backflips in midair.

Daptin stood still as the pretty girl flew into the room, landed, and stood before him. She was short, with long, full blond hair, and a wonderful, whimsical blue-and-white outfit.

“You’re the one who didn’t make it. Did you see Fox, then?”

“I did,” Daptin said.

“Cool! What do you think about it?”

“Um, I think, uh, it’s pretty good, I guess,” Daptin managed.

“Good. Do you remember me?”

She did look familiar, but Daptin couldn’t place her.

“Sort of.”

“Well, you seem familiar, but likewise, I don’t quite remember. My Lifename now is The Tracy Taciturn. What’s yours?”

“Daptin. Daptin Gone.”

“Pleased to see you again, Daptin.”

“Uh, same to you, Tracy.”

Tracy looked out the window.

“I love flying. It feels so good to be doing it again. Can you believe we’re all that’s left? Well, except for Fox. But he’s leaving. That means we have a chance to make up for our rotten lot in Creation.”

“Is anyone else here?”

Tracy turned to face him.

“Oh, just one other. The rest are off in search of the it, I

suppose. They must know what they're doing, unlike us."

"Yeah."

"Assuming you came here like me to get a handle on what's going on."

"That's a reason."

"Cool. So how much do you remember?"

"Not much."

"Well, that's alright. Deskerhilm seems to know everything. He should be up in a while—doesn't fly you know. Do you?"

"I'm not sure."

"Wanna try? It's great. Please, you must."

"Okay, what do I do?"

"Well, I guess, you could just jump out the window, but that wouldn't do if you're not a flyer."

"I'd fly, but only in one direction—down."

"True. So why don't I carry you along, and you can let go if you feel your Flight."

Tracy approached Daptin, and put her arms around his waist. Before he could react, she flew out the window upside down, holding Daptin on top of her. They soared out over Canyon and Daptin took in the majesty of the place for the first time. And he enjoyed the tight embrace.

"What do you think, Daptin?"

Daptin wasn't at all apprehensive. In fact, he began to feel his own Flight.

"I think I can do it," he said.

"Shall I let go?"

"No, not yet. Let me get a good hold on it."

They flew for a few more minutes, swooping and speeding all around Canyon. Then Daptin made fists and felt his Flight fully. Without a word, Tracy let go, and Daptin felt an amazing rush as he took over and was himself flying.

He soared all over Canyon and frolicked with Tracy for a long time, laughing and hahooing all the way.

Brilliant and vague. Daptin had a sense of memory, an existence before the Daptin Gone incarnation. Growing up in the suburbs of Arctica... then struck with disease just as he should have started sowing his teenage wild oats. And now the mega-glorious flying, and he knew for sure it wasn't just a dream.

The frolic was for hours, then they had to head back.

Flying next to Tracy toward the Palace in the Wall from far down Canyon where they'd flown, Daptin was struck with the irony of it all.

“I tell you, I spent so much time coming to terms with death, from the first diagnosis to my present state. So much denial, so much agony. For everyone, my family, my friends, my girlfriend. And I didn’t even know. Well, I hardly knew, about all this. And now, flying... with you and everything... in this Highworld, it seems so...”

“Sounds like a pretty nasty disease, that one you have.”

Daptin laughed.

“Hizzings Disease. Yeah. Still don’t know how I can cure it.”

“Deskerhilm will have the answer,” The Tracy Taciturn said. “Fox knew Deskerhilm was beyond most of us, that he wouldn’t want to get involved in it. Knew he’d help those of us who needed it.”

“And out of the 24 left, or 23, I guess, we’re the only ones who need help? The 21 others know what they’re doing?”

Tracy shrugged as best one can while flying.

“Maybe they don’t, but also don’t want to seem too anxious for help.”

“What were they like, the others?”

“Oh, a mixed lot. Most were human. Some were—well, some were beyond description. 44 Times is a long time, especially for those prone to mischief and wandering from the Path.”

“Yeah.”

Tracy picked up speed and Daptin matched it easily. They were going so fast that they couldn’t hear each other when they tried to speak, so they didn’t.

The Sun was setting as they reached the Palace and flew into the same room Daptin had arrived in. Deskerhilm was waiting for them.

He looked up from the book he was reading and greeted them. Daptin was a little shaken at Deskerhilm’s appearance. He was a very short, stocky creature, with a barely humanoid shape. He was a brown-gray color, and his skin resembled a cross between rock and reptile. His face had an ancient, calm look to it and vaguely resembled a toad. He had an air of might about him, but also an air of patience and benevolence.

Suddenly, the strange little fellow held up his hands and backed away from the two.

“No! No! Cannot be!” Deskerhilm said, and like a video camera falling off a table, the world collapsed.

And it was back to the hospital, where the scandal began.

Daptin yowled in pain, thought he was gonna die any minute. But an hour later he was in a peaceful sleep. A day later he was fully cured.

The memory of Canyon was still there, but blurred. And saying "Here is Canyon" from then on gave him a strange buzzing feeling, but didn't transport him. It felt like a signal blocked.

A signal blocked... a signal blocked...

Back in the present and the hotel room, Daptin was shaken out of his musings by the sound of a massive explosion in the distance. From that weird bomb test place? Maybe. But now, he just had to make the call.

Had to make the call... picking up the phone as confused memories danced in his head... home from the hospital and totally healthy... they all thought it was a hoax, that he did it for sympathy and to go on his "end journeys"... he had to leave his homeland of Arctica... he went south, to Baskonontana... to Thatterine College in Gullia Fair...

The end journeys... a great four months... the grand tour of Arctica, paid for by willing donations from his hometown... followed by two years of evil disease. How could they think he had faked it...?

Dialing... dialing...

He heard the phone ringing on the other end as he twirled the cord around his arm. Out the window of the suite, he saw morning dawning over Agoopish. This had to be the most way-out phone call ever made, being that it crossed the boundaries of no less than five worlds.

"Hello?" came the unfamiliar high-pitched female voice on the other end of the line.

"Uh, yeah. This is, uh, Daptin. Can I talk to Eb?"

"Mr. Traipse is in a meeting at the moment... tee hee," said the voice, giggling.

"What? A meeting? What time is it there? Tell him it's Daptin, he'll wanna talk to me."

"I'm sorry," said the gleeful, sing-song voice.

"Look, this is a very long-distance call, and I have to talk to him. Page him or something, y'know? It's like really important."

"Chee hee hee!"

"Now wait... who is this? Huh? Let me talk to Diorama or Bliss, or anyone!"

Daptin heard more tittering and the phone being dropped.

In the background, he heard some people talking loudly, but he couldn't make out what they were saying.

"Shoulda known not to call Greatwall at midday," Daptin grumbled to himself as he stood up and walked over to the window.

He surveyed Bright continuing to rise up over the diverse buildings of midtown Agoopish. Far below he saw hordes of denizens going about their mucky lives. Soon he'd be out there too. Mucky too? Not very. He knew this would be a fun day.

"Damn," Daptin muttered.

He walked over to the TV and switched it on, turning the sound all the way down. On the screen was an extreme close-up of a bearded fat guy, making all sorts of goofy faces at the camera. He'd seen the show before—a whole half-hour of this guy's silly expressions, accompanied by cacophonous polka. Another example of Adlai Blankablark's lack of firm footing in reality. Daptin wasn't the only one counting the days till Earth cable TV would be piped into Agoopish. They already had it in the free city of Boltpike, so the only barriers left were political. But he was sure Agoopish would get it before the other god-ruled cities, Ocpadusk, Blamnook, and Felptash.

A commotion like the sound of banging pots and pans came across the phone line, and Daptin was about to hang up and try another Overwhelm Associates number when he heard the phone being picked up.

"Yes. Hello. Hello?" came the voice of Eb Traipse.

"Hello," Daptin said.

"Yes, who is this?"

"It's Daptin! Daptin Gone. Remember me?"

"Oh, yes. Hold on a second, would you?" Eb said. Then, raising his voice, he said, "We can't have this! Tell them to keep it under control! I'm not kidding! Mr. Fife will not be happy! ...Daptin?"

"Yeah."

"How kind of you to call. We half thought you were dead or working for Thewsike by now."

"No. I'm fine. But, like first, what the hell is happening over there?"

"Oh. Well, don't spread it around but we have a faery problem here. A lot of them are running amuck all around here. You know we can't have this."

"How the hell'd they get there?"

"I'm afraid Ms. Arcomany is to blame. She uncovered a

faeryland on Barley Sine Earth and a troop of the buggers stowed away in her cloak.”

“That was a faery on the phone before?”

“My god they’re answering the phones now! Letevs will have my head!”

“I’m sure Treyess will own up to it.”

“That’s not what I’m worried about. It’s been a few hours and none of our anti-faery protocols are succeeding. This breed is respectably robust.”

“Hmm. Well, I’m glad I’m not there.”

“Where are you, by the way, my dear boy?” Eb said.

“Um. I, uh, I’m around, y’know, around the Alley, the general Red Alley area kind of place, y’know.”

“You sound like you’re calling from right next door.”

“I, uh, wouldn’t go that far, Eb.”

“Heh heh. So what do you have to say for yourself? You’re in violation of about a baker’s dozen company policies. You’re not working for Thewsike, are you? Please tell me you’re not.”

“No, I’m definitely not like anywhere near working for the Unreal Sixty-Four.”

“So what are you up to?”

“I, uh, I’ve just been hanging out on the Alley. I’ve been pretty fed up with Overwhelm lately. I mean, I know scheduling’s a thing, but almost twenty months and I still don’t have bridging? I mean, huh, I’m convinced you guys just didn’t want to see me able to bridge. And I mean, if you don’t want to teach me, fine, but just come out and say it. And all the bullshit coming out of Greatwall is just, like, really weird. No one believes you guys anymore. What the hell is Fife’s problem? We all know Overwhelm is military, so why’s he trying to hide it so much, from his own warriors?”

“Daptin, I know where you’re coming from, but you know I don’t make the decisions around here. You could learn to bridge anytime if you took the initiative. Now, let’s cut to the chase, now. Are you coming back or not? And are you working for anyone else? Bestroystraw? Rogues?”

“No no no, none of that. I’m just taking a break, whether you guys like it or not.”

“Will you be back?”

“Yes! Yes, I will be back. Just, it won’t be for a while. That’s why I called. I don’t know if I’ll be welcome, but I will be back, but not for a while.”

“Like how long a while?”

“Like, I don’t know. Like a few more weeks, a month. I don’t know.”

“Okay Daptin. We don’t want any trouble. Our main concern is loyalty. We understand if you need a break, but you could have called sooner. But if you have had another offer or any contact from another company, I advise you to tell me now, since I’ll find out sooner or later anyway.”

“No Eb, it’s just a break, and I haven’t called cuz I’ve been pretty pissed-off, that’s all. I will be back, but I don’t know exactly when. But it might be like a month or at most like two. Okay?”

“Alright Daptin. You know where I stand. I hope to see you back here soon. You’re not the only one feeling the strain around here. And Daptin, do you have a number where I can reach you?”

“Um... I’m not sure if I can give you this number—hold on.”

“Well do you have a number of someone who can then get in touch with you? In case of emergency, you know.”

“I know, I know. Um, I guess I can give you this number. It’s the switchboard at a hotel I’m staying at. I uh...”

“Which hotel on the Alley is it?”

“Um, it’s like not exactly on the Alley, but real near it, um.”

“Which Earth is it on?”

“Look, I better not give the number out. You have the number at my apartment and I have a machine there. Just call there if you have to.”

“Okay Daptin. I hope to see you soon. You are okay, aren’t you?”

“Yes! I’m fine. No problem.”

“Well, take care.”

“Bye bye,” Daptin said as he hung up the phone and looked over the buildingtops at the distant Agoopi hinterland.

Eb wasn’t such a bad guy, but Overwhelm Associates was a really annoying company to work for. Daptin totally wanted to quit, but he had the legitimate fear of losing contact with all the friends he had in Aconck. Maybe this was why they never taught him bridging—the art of travelling between Earths—to keep up the pressure to remain loyal, to keep him needing the bridging services the company could provide. It made some kind of sense, that the ability to cross over into an alternate Earth was not something they’d be overly eager to share.



# THREE

“A year?” Lemon screeched, an abstract cosmic wonderland drifting by outside the window behind her.

“Please,” Chamomile said, cringing and holding her finger to her ear. “There’s no need to shout. You’ll burst all our eardrums.”

“Okay! I’ll be quiet! But a year! We have to hang out in here for an entire fucking year?” Lemon said, not much quieter than before.

“Okay,” Chamomile said, turning to an information screen. “As you know, Kimberly only gave me an overview of Yellowhaus’s systems, but from what I’m seeing here, our flight time, or whatever you want to call it, will be something like 410 days.”

“Great,” Sulfur said. “You gave us the impression we’d be instantly transported to another world, and now this? Talk about a letdown!”

“Sulfur!” Chamomile said. “Would you rather be dead like everyone else? Wake up! I don’t think you’ve absorbed this yet—the world is destroyed. Everyone is dead.”

“Yeah but still, five minutes into our journey and we find out this. What’s next? I mean, do we even have enough food? Oxygen? Supplies?” Sulfur said.

“You underestimate Yellowhaus,” Chamomile said. “That kind of stuff is no problem. All you guys getting along for a year—now that’s a problem.”

“Hey! We can spend some quality time together!” Canary said.

“Shut up,” Lemon said.

Suddenly, Colonia the Sword moaned.

“What’s wrong, Colonia?” Chamomile asked.

“Oh dear—this is not good,” Colonia said, looking very pale. “This is not very good at all.”

“What is it?” Buff asked.

“I was afraid of this,” Colonia said, a look of panic beginning to spread across his face. “The god who granted me my humanity, Crinim—he’s gone. It was his power that allowed me to assume human form. I never worried about it, huh, you know—Crinim was immortal. He was never supposed to die. Now this—”

There was a loud cracking noise and Colonia jolted backwards, his hands moving to a position straight against his body, and a blank look appearing on his face.

Chamomile jumped forward and grabbed Colonia before he fell backwards. But it was no good—she could feel Colonia shrinking and hardening with every passing moment.

“Someone help me!” she yelled.

Buff approached Chamomile.

“What can I do?” he asked.

Chamomile felt a sharp pain in her hands and reflexively let go of Colonia, now halfway back to being a sword. He fell to the ground with a dull clang.

“We can’t do anything,” Chamomile said. “He’s just another casualty of O’Riley’s madness.”

“Well—he’ll still be conscious, won’t he?” Sulfur asked. “I mean—he was conscious as a sword, no?”

“Who knows!” Canary yelled. “I like it how he’s transforming! It’s cool!”

“Shut up, you heartless idiot!” Buff yelled at Canary. “If it was you, you wouldn’t think it was cool!”

“I agree with Canary,” Lemon said, putting her arm around Canary’s shoulders. “It’s cool.”

“Don’t listen to them,” Buff said. “They’re just trying to annoy us.”

“They’re succeeding!” Sulfur quipped.

At this point, Colonia was in the final stages of returning to sword-form.

“Let’s just hope he retains his mind,” Buff said gently.

The five members of Yellowhaus watched helplessly as the transformation became complete, and Colonia was a sword once again.

“At least he’s a nice-looking sword,” Lemon commented.

“You’re such a monster!” Chamomile yelled at Lemon. “Why did I ever let you join this team in the first place?”

“Cause I’m so cute!” Lemon said.

“Yeah. That was it,” Chamomile said sarcastically.

They waited silently for a moment, all staring at the sword.

“Should we—I don’t know—pick him up?” Buff asked.

No one answered.

“Can he talk, do you think? As a sword?” Chamomile said.

“As far as I know, from the legends,” Sulfur said, “those intelligent swords and spears and stuff could only communicate if someone was holding them. You know—telepathically or something. I don’t know.”

“Well, I guess I’ll touch him and see if he can talk to me. Sound good?” Chamomile asked.

“I guess it’s all we can do,” Buff said sadly.

Slowly, Chamomile knelt down and touched her right hand to Colonia’s hilt. She had a look of intense concentration for a moment, then spoke.

“He’s definitely here. His thoughts are jumbled—I guess from the shock of the transformation—but he seems okay. Wait—I’m getting something—’sorry, need time to recover, give me time’.”

No one spoke.

Chamomile closed her eyes and concentrated.

“Okay,” she said. “I told him we’d let him rest and recover. Let me ask him if it’s okay to move him... Yes... He says it’s okay. Alright. I’ll put him on the counter here.”

With this, she gingerly took Colonia by the hilt and lifted him to the countertop, keeping him parallel to the ground at all times. When she set him down, she breathed a sigh of relief.

“At least he’s still with us,” Buff said.

“Thank goodness,” Chamomile said, frowning in thought, narrowing her eyes, and carefully examining Colonia. He was a most exquisitely-crafted weapon, she thought. She had a flash vision of the thrill of using such a sword in battle, contemplating the notion of adopting him as her primary weapon. But she pushed back these thoughts. Too selfish...

“That was cool!” Canary yelped.

Buff strode over to Canary and grabbed the mad dog guy, holding him up in his massive paws.

“Shut up, man!” Buff boomed. “You’re such a stupid jerk! I’ll tear you apart!”

Canary thrashed about wildly, white froth foaming out of his mouth.

“Put him down!” Chamomile yelled. “We’re in for a long

ride! We have to learn to get along! Please Buff—you're the one I was depending on to keep the peace."

Buff dropped Canary down roughly. Canary's body was limp, and he laid there with his eyes staring into nothingness and his tongue stuck out.

"Oh no," Buff said quietly, stepping back.

"You killed him!" Lemon yelled, pointing her pitchfork at Buff.

"Oh come on!" Chamomile moaned. "He's just faking it! He always does that!"

They all looked at Canary for a few more moments, then the madman burst out laughing.

"You fucking jerk," Buff said, turning away.

"Okay, come on people!" Chamomile said. "We have to get our act together! Sulfur, Buff—come with me—we have to go down—way down—into the depths of Yellowhaus. I want to corroborate this 410 day reading. Okay? Lemon—you keep an eye on Canary. Keep him away from Colonia! I mean it!"

"No sweat, chief," Lemon said, saluting.

"I hope not," Chamomile said, descending a spiral staircase with Buff and Sulfur.

Lemon smiled and nodded, and Chamomile looked back one more time to check on things.

"Man, I'm so tired," Canary said, still on the ground. "I'm gonna take a nap, wake up from this crummy dream. Grumble, grumble."

Canary then curled up into a fetal position and smacked his lips a few times.

"Pleasant dreams, doggy," Lemon said, a sly smile crossing her face. "And while those party poopers are gone, I have a nice little spell which might help Swordie here. What a nice devil I am—always saving the day!"

Lemon then walked over to the counter, grabbed Colonia, and lifted him up before her.

"Okay there fella!" Lemon said, sensing Colonia's confused thoughts. "You'll be all better in a minute—thanks to Doctor Lemon!"

The devil girl set her pitchfork aside, and lifted Colonia up higher with both hands. Then she began uttering a spell in her native Infernal tongue. Almost instantly, Colonia was surrounded with a shower of jittery, multicolored sparks.

Chuckling with glee, Lemon set Colonia on the ground and backed away.

“Lemon!” Chamomile yelled from the stairway. “What are you doing?”

Lemon turned, surprised, wearing a mock-innocent, “uh-oh” look.

“Oh hi Chamomile! I thought you were...”

Chamomile did not look happy.

“...uh,” Lemon continued, “you know! Going downstairs with the boys, uh...”

“What did you do!” Chamomile yelled, jumping forward.

“Just, y’know, trying to help!”

Just then, the shower of sparks grew into a spectacular storm, swirling and filling half the room. A deep, resonant, bass rumble began to rhythmically beat.

Lemon backed away, then turned and ran to the stairway, kneeling beside Chamomile.

“I know this looks bad, but believe me—I did it with the best intentions!” the devil girl said.

Chamomile said nothing, but watched, transfixed, as the maelstrom of sparks slowly began to coalesce. Soon Sulfur and Buff were back, running up the stairs.

“What is it?” Buff yelled.

Chamomile looked down and held up her hand. Then she looked back at the mystical display, where the sparks were now definitely in a human shape.

“See?” Lemon said. “I did it! I did it! I healed Colonia! I brought him back!”

Chamomile looked at the devil girl, wondering whether to thank her or strangle her. She thought again of how cool it would have been to have an intelligent sword, but she put that selfish thought aside.

“Look!” Lemon shouted.

The sparks quickly died down, revealing a supine form, definitely human, but...

“See?” Lemon said. “My spell worked!”

Chamomile stood up and moved forward a little, to get a better view.

“Wait a minute,” Chamomile said under her breath. Then she moved forward a little more. “Wait a goddamn minute!”

“What?” Lemon asked, trying to look innocent.

The sparks and rumblings were totally gone now, as Canary began to snore loudly. Chamomile slowly walked forward.

“Oh come on,” the leader said. “Son of a bitch.”

Lemon got up, and started toward Colonia also.

“You gotta be kidding!” Chamomile said.

“What is it? What is it?” Lemon asked, walking forward.

“Look for yourself!” Chamomile said.

Lemon looked at Colonia, who while still unconscious, turned over and faced the two.

“Crap,” Lemon said.

Colonia was now a cute devil girl—horns, fangs, voluptuous body, pointed tail—the works. The former sword looked vaguely similar to her previous human manifestation—black hair, tattoo on cheek, etc. But that was pretty much where the comparisons ended.

Chamomile gave Lemon a look—a look which said more than words can say. Lemon smiled innocently, revealing those dangerous fangs.

“Um—at least he—uh—she—isn’t a sword anymore!”

Chamomile didn’t say anything.

“I didn’t know! My ‘grant humanity’ spell always worked fine on other things! How did I know he’d decide to go and look like he could be one of my sisters?”

Chamomile still didn’t speak.

“Oh it’s not that bad! You know one of me isn’t enough!”

“Lemon,” Chamomile said, striving to remain calm. “You should have consulted me first. Does the fact that I’m the leader of this team mean anything to you or Canary?”

“Um, yeah. To me at least. I don’t know about Canary,” Lemon said, then in a more animated manner, “But I just couldn’t wait! I had to try my spell! All I wanted to do was save the day!”

Chamomile sighed.

“Okay Lemon. You will be the one to explain to Colonia exactly what has happened to him—er—her.”

“No way! Not me!”

“Lemon—that’s an order,” Chamomile said, then turned away. “If my orders mean anything to you anymore.”

Lemon was silent for a moment, but then she spoke.

“Oh, okay. Aye aye, captain. I’ll do it.”

Chamomile looked back at Lemon.

“Thank you.”

Lemon waited a few moments, then asked, “Why’d you come back, anyway?”

“Because, I had to write down some information from the main screen. Which I guess I’ll do while you explain your little stunt to Colonia—it looks like... she is coming to!”

Colonia moaned and opened her eyes.

“Dear goodness, what is this?” she said, holding her hands up in front of her face and sitting up a little. They were slender female hands, with wicked sharp fingernails.

“Lemon?” Chamomile said, looking over from the screen.

“Oh okay!” Lemon said, kneeling down beside Colonia. “Um—Colonia? Um—there’s something, I, uh, have to tell you. You know how you—well, how you turned back into a sword? Well, I mean, I know you’re gonna be upset, but when, uh, when the others went downstairs, I, uh, I tried a little spell on you, you know, to bring you back to being human? Well it worked—pretty much. I mean, you’re back, but, you know, the way these things go...”

Colonia looked down at her gorgeous female body with a puzzled expression on her face, then she stared right at Lemon.

“Um,” Lemon said. “I kind of cast the spell on you and you kind of, um, took on, um, some of my physical, um, characteristics.”

“Some?” Colonia said, in her new, sultry, devil girl voice.

“Well, maybe more than some. Maybe a lot.”

“Maybe all,” Colonia said.

“Hey, at least you’re not a carbon copy of me!” Lemon said brightly.

Colonia stared at Lemon.

Lemon bit her lip. “I’m sorry. I can try and reverse the spell if you want.”

“No,” Colonia said, easing her expression a little. “I’d rather be this than a blind, deaf, and dumb hunk of metal any day.”

Lemon sighed and laughed a little, and Colonia sat up. Buff and Sulfur exchanged glances, at a loss for words.

“You don’t know what it was like, being a sword again,” Colonia said, tears welling up in her eyes. “It was the most horrible pain. I couldn’t bear it. I hated being a sword! I swore to never go back! And now—and now—you’ve saved me!”

With this, Colonia embraced a shocked Lemon.

“Thank you so much,” Colonia said.

“Uh, no problem! Glad to be of assistance!” Lemon said, sticking her tongue out at Chamomile across the room.

Colonia eased her embrace and backed away from Lemon.

“You really saved my life,” Colonia said. Then she gave Lemon a little kiss on the lips. “I’ll get used to this body.”

Lemon smiled and sat back.

“Hear that everybody? I saved the day! Me, Lemon! I did it! What would you all do without me?”

Buff and Sulfur didn't answer, but continued staring at the stunning beauty of this new Colonia, disturbing and dangerously delightful thoughts running through their minds.



# FOUR

Ah, the wavy day today, the day of lust in the breezy hills and woods, the rain before and the bus ride after. Steamy talk and amazing car crashes in the dull evening, the formula for happiness tested in weird ways. Never before such a meandering of the emotions, never again the fragile entity of a simple drizzle. The slam in the face of an air conditioned room, a couch and a television cauterizing the vulnerable opening moves of a flower of earthy innocence.

She looked down.

The confusion of the good day, she sighed. Wonderful incision ignition, but stunted. Stunted under the swift heavy thumb of the matter-of-fact. A glimpse into a remarkable existence, but snuffed and abandoned.

Tavmatey Numblem was the girl here, and she was on the couch and the TV was warming up. She had just returned from a little sojourn into the country, a little excursion with her friends. And there were so many new feelings and so many expectations, that now, back here, she felt robbed, even violated. That the promise of the pungent day was smashed was a sorrowful and stunning complication.

Solace? Solace in fantasy?

No. Not this time. It had been too close. All of her dreams and desires revealed chessboardlike on the hilly terrain—this was no passage. This was a sign, an indication. This vision, having fallen apart so enthusiastically, must contain more meaning.

A bad TV show came into view. Tavmatey pounced upon the set and shut the damn thing off. But not like a cat—rather, like a great clumsy moron. She crouched, holding the TV set for a moment, and regretted her ungainly private motion.

So the time was at hand to decide. So it would only be a few moments until she passed into the next sequential state, until she put the picnic out of her mind enough to go on to another subject. But in that instant—how could another subject be as urgent and delightful as this?

So she got up and grabbed a lamp from the table and turned it upside down. This, she declared to herself, was the symbol of the meaning of the picnic. As long as it was inverted, she would have to mull over the significance of the outing.

So she lounged on the couch in the invert light, and she bathed in the angles of force of her seething intelligence.

Now Tavmatey was not exaggerating things. No, today was certainly a day of great import. Her past visions of lust and ecstasy, of the spiritual and physical merging with mud and the grass, of the ideals of intellectual freedom and artistic flights of genius. All of these were there at the picnic, and now it was ended, but she needed to continue it. The only problem was, that while the group as a whole seemed to work in terms of her ideal vision, she could not see any of the individuals really grasping or representing her design. What was to be designed to craft a good continuance? She wondered.

The day was gone. It was night.

As a gnat flies into the corner of your eye in the summer, and your blink annihilates it, and you feel its cold corpse clinging to the edge of your eyelid, and you wipe it away, and you're momentarily away from where you are, having dealt with the gnat, that was in a way what she felt the day had done to her. Obliterated her.

Now it was sex. The lust of earthy sex that excited her mind. But the sex she'd had up till now was anything but lusty and lurid. It was drunken and tense and with stupid boys. Dummies, emotional midgets, true bastards and bastards in the making. Shallow coreless automatons, who were just about worthless.

She bemoaned the fact that she had to judge some people without value. Indeed, her ideals spoke of all people being equal and having equal worth. But in reality, and quite honestly, this was not the case. Some people were very excellent, with all sorts of value, but others were stupid and childish, and not on the way to getting any better. So Tavmatey had to admit that her ideals of pure equality were indeed hogwash.

No, she thought, most people are not very excellent. Most people are jerk-offs. But there were the cool people. People

who really felt and really thought and really experienced life and who really interacted with the roller coastings of existence. But these were few and far between. But this was not the main problem.

No, such cool people could indeed be sought out, and relationships with them nurtured. But the problem was that the picnic was gone, and Tavmatey knew not how to resurrect it at 10 PM on Sunday night.

We hate bad people and we like good people and we love those people who aren't really good or bad. Don't be busy being clever, experience life. But this maxim sucks, see, this credo to experience life is a lot of bull. You need lots of money to experience life. And a job drains your life from under you. So not that many people can experience life.

That notion that you can do anything you want as long as you put your mind to it—that was also a false statement. You can't do anything you want. Most dreams are unattainable, no matter how hard you try. For most people, they're simply unqualified and unable to achieve, so they put their energy into adaptation and resignation, so that their failure doesn't taste so bitter. So that they can live with the Arctic stings of a life's defeat. And Tavmatey knew she was headed there herself. And she knew that naught but dumb luck could save her. So the phone rang.

It was the bastard dumb luck calling, to deliver that which she so yearned after. The delivery would be quite massive and complete, and she would be thankful, yet screwed, but would gain wisdom in the long run. For what was to be delivered was not so much pure as it was gritty and dirty, as was life. But it was better than most other courses available that month. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

"Hello?" Tavmatey answered.

"Hi," answered the awesome sex kitten Sleep. "I have the coffee."



# FIVE

“Now Canary, tell me more about your home life.”

The luscious devil girl Lemon sat in a chair, legs crossed, hair done up in a bun, with glasses on, and writing notes down in a little pad.

The wild dog fellow Canary was lying down on a little couch next to Lemon.

“Mommy spoiled me doc, what can I say?”

“Don’t you have any gruesome, shocking, nightmarish memories to tell your doctor now, Canary?”

“Um... nope!”

“Now how do you expect me to psychoanalyze you if you had a good childhood! Hah?”

Canary sneezed a nasty sneeze.

“You’re the doc, you tell me. Arr arr arr!”

Lemon lifted the glasses off her nose a little and stared at her patient.

“Well now! Finally some progress! An unexpected burst of animal aggression!”

Just then, Chamomile came into the room. Colonia the Sword, in her new devil girl form, followed.

“Oh, now what the hell are you doing now?” Chamomile said impatiently.

“Psychoanalyzing Canary to find out why he’s so crazy,” Lemon said with a smile.

Chamomile looked away, took a sharp intake of air, and bit her lip. “Lord, give me patience.”

Lemon’s eyes locked with Colonia’s and there was a vital spark between them. Colonia smiled and motioned with her head and eyebrows toward another part of Yellowhaus.

“Lemon,” Chamomile said, bending over to pick up a mess

of scattered magazines on the floor, “we still have well over a year before we reach our destination—could you please try and have some consideration for the rest of us?”

Lemon eyed Chamomile’s athletic, graceful form. Adorned with her loose yellow martial arts clothing, Lemon appreciated the contrast between the beauty and the deadliness of Chamomile. She liked Chamomile, even if she did so enjoy taunting her.

“If I cure Canary from his craziness, that’ll help us all, boss,” the psychoanalyst devil girl said.

Canary yowled wildly.

Chamomile stood up and threw the magazine back on the ground.

“I mean it! Please make an effort to clean up after yourself and make yourself useful! “Chamomile said. “I know you want to help people, and that’s commendable, but don’t do it at the expense of others!”

Lemon gave Chamomile a salute.

Chamomile gave Lemon a grimace, and then turned and left.

Lemon turned to Colonia.

“What a grouch! She has to learn to calm down!”

“Maybe you can psychoanalyze her, too,” Colonia said with a sexy smirk.

“I wish.”

“So when you’re done with Canary there, think you can help me out? There are a lot of peculiarities, being a devil girl. I never imagined. I don’t know how you deal with it.”

“Oh, I’ll be more than glad to assist you—just let me finish up with the carpet here.”

Canary went limp, his tongue hanging out of his mouth, panting.

“He sure is nuts,” Colonia said.

“Yup. And that’s what I aim to fix!”

Just then, a big snore came from Canary.

“Asleep again!” Lemon exclaimed. “Is it narcolepsy, or just plain laziness? I must investigate further! But all in good time.”

Lemon got up and crossed the room to Colonia.

“Come on sister. We have much to discuss.”

Lemon led Colonia by the hand. Soon they came to Lemon’s room. It was an eclectic mix of cushions, gold and brass decorations, paintings from Hell, and a few torture devices.

“Like it?” Lemon asked.

“You know, I think I do,” Colonia said slowly, sitting down on a sofa. Lemon sat down next to her.

“Now Colonia, I know what you must be going through. Being a devil girl is a tough business. But you’re lucky—I’m here to help!”

“Yeah—it seems like being a devil girl might be rather great, it’s just these feelings, these images, these urges...”

Lemon held her fingers to Colonia’s lips.

“Shush. First things first.”

Colonia nodded.

“Now,” Lemon said. “The first thing we have to work on is your name. ‘Colonia the Sword’ just won’t do. Too dull. What other names have you been known by?”

Colonia frowned in thought and looked away.

“You know—I don’t know. I guess I’ve been called a few things in my time. I was forged as Colonia, but one of my owners called me Becamman the Stordred.”

Lemon shook her head.

“He said I was his insurance against marauders from the hills. Huh. That was a long time ago,” Colonia said.

Lemon smiled.

“Insurance... his insurance... that’s it! Insurance! That’s a fine devil girl name! How ‘bout it, sister?”

“What—to change my name to ‘Insurance’?”

“Yeah—isn’t it great! Has a real nice feel to it! Very sinister, yet very alluring at the same time—exactly as you want it to be!”

“Hmm...”

“Give it some thought. Give yourself a minute.”

Colonia nodded and thought about it.

“Well?” Lemon said after a few seconds. “Whattaya think? Is it you, or is it you?”

“Um, I think it could work...”

“Yeah! There you go! I, Lemon, Princess of Hell, hereby dub thee ‘Insurance’! Congratulations!”

Insurance raised her eyebrows and gave Lemon a sarcastic look.

“Well, I guess I can live with that. Insurance. Huh. At least it’ll help me get farther away from my past, from being a cold shaft of steel, from the pain of living like that.”

“That’s the spirit, Insurance! Get into your new life! Oh sister, we’re going to have such a wonderful year together in

Yellowhaus as we near our destination! I have big plans for you!”

“I hope I can live up to your expectations.”

“You will, Insurance. You will.”



# SIX

Keepy came into computer center. The warmth of the place was a little euphoric in contrast to the snowstorm seen through big windows. And the smell of distant fireplace fires recent to her, her hair pure white, the college was almost empty.

A funny-looking guy with long hair was talking on the phone. He was the only other person in computer center, and he was at the admin desk.

“I think feBDA beta 4 came closest to replicating that function,” he said. “No, no man, I don’t know what they’re thinking with beta 5, it’s way too ambitious. Yeah they’re never, never... yeah they’re never gonna keep at it long enough. No. I mean even the substances routines, wood types, and fruit... and the basic shapes... shopping...”

Keepy was sad and felt some computers. The other her was miles away, the one from yesterday. And she knew there were snowflakes that wouldn’t hit the ground tomorrow.

“Yeah Vipe, yeah let me go. I got a customer. And yeah, I totally agree about the stop-motion characters, there’s like no way, y’know? Later.”

Keepy looked at the guy and kinda smiled. His T-shirt had silly cartoon characters on it, faded. She would have had the goth look except she never wore black. Her heart was heavy, and almost crying she took a deep breath and shut her eyes for a few seconds.

“Computer center seems weird, so empty,” she said.

“I know, but that’s the way I like it. I got a lot of projects I want to work on while it’s still Jan Term, and just look at all the free computing cycles all around us! I think I’m gonna try and make the longest number ever, using like every single

computer. Well, the longest number to have arithmetic functions performed on it, that is.”

“It sounds cool.”

“Yeah well anyway, is there anything I can help you with? Didn’t you... didn’t you used to come in here a lot, like back in September, October?”

“Yeah. A lot of my friends were into some of the games here.”

“Did you ever play bgBDA? I thought I saw you playing it a couple of times. That’s my version of BDA. BG, Burchard Gnake, my initials. I don’t even know how it started, but everyone names their BGA clones with their initials.”

“So you’re a programmer?”

“Well yeah, y’know, I do spend a lot of my time with that. I’ve actually been working on my BDA again over the past few weeks, but I think I’m gonna kinda lay off it for awhile. It’s just a pointless obsession.”

Keepy cocked her head.

“What’s the deal with the whole BDA thing anyway? I heard that a couple guys programmed it like 12 or 13 years ago, but they lost the original program? And what does it stand for... something disaster something?”

“Beautiful Disaster Area. It was like the best game ever. I actually got to play the original, in my freshman year. But then the summer between my freshman year and sophomore year the Froc-E4 that it was on finally gave up the ghost. And that was that. And then it was that next year that everyone started to really try and remake it, to remake it perfectly. But I really don’t think it’s ever gonna happen.”

“So what, that was it? The only copy of it was on that computer, and the computer just broke?” Keepy asked.

“Yeah, I wish it was that easy. No, the uh, the way the original programmers made it, it was a kind of self-modifying code. It was like, every time someone played it, the actual program itself changed. That’s what was so great about it. But over the course of time, the program became so radically different that there would have been no way to derive the original from the modified. And that’s what was so cool about it. Just such a primitive computer, and like you’d play these characters going through these worlds, and there would always be new things, new discoveries. I remember when I was playing it, I got into this whole fairy tale, nursery rhyme kind of place, and everybody said that in ten years, no one else had found it.

And I have the transcripts to prove it.”

“Transcripts, huh?”

“Yeah. Anyway I mean, can I help you with anything? Did you want to get onto one of the computers?”

“Nah, I don’t want to take computing time away from your giant number.”

“Ah come on, one computer’s not gonna matter.”

“Well, okay... Burchard was it?”

“Yeah y’know, Burchard, Burch, B, whatever.”

“Well hello Burch,” Keepy said, and shook hands with him. “I’m Keepy Hawkfossil. And I think maybe I want to take another stab at that game of yours. If I remember correctly, I think I liked it.”

Burchard regarded Keepy. She seemed so sad, she seemed on the verge of tears again. They locked stares and Burchard was honestly compassionate.

“Or maybe,” Keepy said, accepting the compassion, “I just need to... I just, I just have to talk to someone.”

“Well, sure,” Burchard said after a pause. “I mean, definitely. You want to go over to the lounge, like over there, y’know, we could talk... not like I have a lot to do here.”

But Keepy hesitated, a complex expression on her face.

“Are you okay?” Burchard asked.

“I’m okay. Let’s go sit down.”

They walked over to the lounge, with some comfy orange couches, and a good view of the snow coming down.

“Gotta love that snow,” Burchard said.

“Burchard I... I have to ask you something before we start talking. I just want to know what you... what you think about your future. How do you feel about it?”

“My future? Well, I mean, I’m a senior, and I’ll be outta this place in a few months. I’ll probably be heading home and... look for a job. I’m really excited about computers, y’know, a career in computers, because they’re advancing at such a geometric rate. In a few years the computers are just gonna... dwarf... dwarf all the computers of today. So I really want to get into a good place, work on all the cutting edge stuff. I don’t know, that’s what I really want.”

“And Burchard, do you... do you have a girlfriend? Here, or back home? Anyone special to you? Are you close with your family? Do you have really good friends here that you think you’ll keep in touch with? Or friends from home that you have kept in touch with?”

Burchard's eyes widened as he considered the question.

"Uh, that's... I don't know. I do have a girlfriend, but I don't know if I want to spend the rest of my life with her. My family's okay. And I have friends. But what is this all about?"

"Look Burchard, I want... I want to be very honest with you about this. I have a story, my personal story, to tell you. But by telling you I'm going to be putting you in a terrible position. I don't know. I don't know if it's terrible but... but I just have to talk to somebody about all this. It's driving me crazy."

Burchard reached out and touched Keepy on the arm. It was a compassionate touch, not a sexual advance type touch, and he made sure his body language conveyed that.

"What is it, what's driving you crazy? Come on, how bad could it be? Just tell me... I give you permission, whatever bad situation it'll put me in. Come on."

She looked up at him. Definitely a goth thing going on. She was short and slim and tragic. Young face, but not-so-young eyes. The eyes made Burchard slightly scared for the first time in the encounter.

She put her index finger sideways between her lips and squeezed, looking intensely toward computer center. She finally shook her head and sighed and faced Burchard.

"Okay, I'll tell you. I know I'm gonna tell someone eventually, so I might as well get it over with. Burchard, you are looking at a time traveller. A time traveller who's not very happy."

"What?"

"A time traveller. I'm a time traveller. You don't have to believe me, I could easily demonstrate it to you. But I'd rather not. So just, just hear me out. I just want to tell someone what I'm going through."

"Look, hey, I'm open to new ideas. I'm really, I've been really into time travel kind of ideas and all that. Don't worry. Just go ahead, it's no problem. I'm glad to help."

"Okay. Okay, I'll tell you. The world is going to end at 4:22 PM and 32 seconds. That's less than 5 hours from now. At that time, the world will just disappear. I know, cuz I've seen it happen. I've seen it twice. The first time, it turned my hair white. White all over. The second time wasn't as bad. I guess I just knew what to expect."

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. How could you know when the world was gonna end? If you were there, if you saw it, why weren't you destroyed too?"

"That's not the way it was. I... can feel time... it's hard to

explain, but I can feel forward and back, future and past. And soon after I got my power, I realized there was a problem. Because I realized that I didn't feel anything past 4:22 PM on this date, Monday, January 12, 1687."

"So you... time travelled to investigate?"

"Yes. I did. The, y'know, ending was about 8 years in the future from where I was. I had perfected a way of being in two times at once. Just two times superimposed. I practiced a lot. I figured, if I passed into the nothingness, or whatever it is, I'd still be anchored to that other time, so I could pull back. So that's what I did. And that other me, who I was over 30 years ago, will be performing that experiment in five hours, about 200 miles from here."

"What, here?" Burchard asked.

"Yes. Here. This time. I did it. I waited... I was so scared. And then, the clock at 4:22:31... and right when it should have gone to 32, it happened. Void. Nothingness. Cold. Emptiness. Loss. I was there for less than a second. But it took me weeks to recover. And my hair turned white, just like that."

"So wait a minute. You're saying that this event is going to occur... today?"

"Yes! That's what I'm saying. That's why I'm so sorry I told you."

She reached forward and held his upper arms, and started to cry. He awkwardly and slowly moved into a hugging position.

"It's... okay," he said.

"No it's not. If I hadn't told you, you would have just disappeared and never knew it. Or maybe you'd just keep going, maybe it's just me who can't get past that point. I don't know, I just don't know. I'm so lonely... and I have to go back in time again... set up a new life for myself again..."

"Now wait, wait," Burchard said, and broke the hug, pushing her gently away. "What do you mean, set up a new life? If you're a time traveller, why not just travel through time forever. There's gotta be more than enough to, y'know, explore."

"I do! I do do that. But a lot of stuff about past times is disturbing. Violence and bad smells, and lots and lots of fucking assholes. I'm telling you, people are real assholes in the past. Don't get me wrong, I like visiting the past. But I like living in the present, in these days, the eighties. But once 4:22 finally came the first time, for real, I had to say goodbye to everyone I loved. All my friends, my family, everyone. I couldn't just go back to my life in the past, because I was already there. If I

went back, there would be another me there. And I'll do anything not to be around another me. It's creepy, it's just wrong. I wouldn't do that to myself, to my family. So I had to go back, start a new life for myself. New friends, new loves. But I stay close to 4:22. I stay close. I should go back farther, but I don't like living in those times. I like these times."

Burchard's mind was racing.

"But why not... why not bring everyone back with you? I mean, can you transport other people?"

"Yes, yes. One at a time, but I can do it. But that's not the problem. The problem is, I have no idea if the world ends for everyone at 4:22, or if it just ends for me. There's no way I can know. I cannot personally get past 4:22 PM on January 12, 1687. But I can't say for sure that the world is ending for everyone else. So to tell people about it, take them back in time... it may be depriving them of a true, rich future."

"Wow, I see what you meant when you said it would put me in a bad situation."

"I'm so sorry."

"No... you know, it's weird. I remember reading that with BDA, if it was played every day, it would inevitably crash in mid-January this year. Yeah like, every time the program self-modified, it writes to a portion of the disk. So when it inevitably ran out of room, the disk would crash and the program would be completely destroyed. But they said it would be around this time, mid-January. Of course, the computer died three years ago, from other causes. But that is just too weird. Unless..."

"Unless I'm making all this up. I know, I know."

"No no no, no, I'm not saying..."

"I tell you, I don't know," Keepey said. "I'm 52 years old, and I still don't know. I don't know if it's just me."

"52? What the hell are you talking about? You're not 52. There's no way."

She smiled at him, tears streaming down her face.

"I didn't expect that it would happen like this. But time itself, maybe, is repulsed by the thought of time travellers. Won't touch people like me maybe. I haven't aged a day physically since I started time travelling. And you know what? I'm not a 52-year-old woman. I'm a 22-year-old woman, who's just happened to experience 52 years. And, I assume, hundreds and hundreds of more years to come. Wow. I can't wait."

"I can't really process this," Burchard said. "How exactly

do you do this time travel? How did you get this power?"

"I really don't want to talk about that now. I just want to say that... I'm tempted to face the end again. Try and hold on for more time. Maybe it's just a few seconds of void that I need to get through! There's no way to know. But if I could get through it... I'd get back not just one, but four separate lives, one of them being here at Thatterine College. But I have to get past 4:22..."

"Keepy, let me tell you something. If you really are a time traveller, I have to say that all my life I have wanted to travel through time. If you want someone to go with you, to help you, I would go without any hesitation, even if it meant throwing away my entire future, I would go. I mean I think you might know this, I mean... my game... it deals with time travel a lot. Is that why... is that why you chose me to talk to?"

She breathed heavily and stared at him and was thinking deep.

"Keepy," Burchard said, "if this is true, the whole time travel and everything, it's like what I always wanted. If it's not true, then you're just misguided and everything will be fine. But the worst thing would be if you don't take me with you, and I flash out of existence knowing I could have been a time traveller."

"I'll be honest. I was looking for someone like you, maybe subconsciously... but someone smart, someone who could help me, potentially. Help me get past 4:22."

"Keepy, if you can take me back in time, let's do it. Let's just do it right now. I'm ready, willing, and able. Let's just do it."

"Okay," Keepy said, and she touched Burchard's hand, and in an instant it was 40 years earlier.





# SEVEN

Sleep sat at her new desk figuring out her new signature. At the top of the sheet of paper she had done a number of her old “Sleep Drassy” signatures, and now at the bottom she was trying to figure out how to make “Sleep Jankels” look good. She couldn’t. No matter how she tried it, it never even looked remotely correct.

She’d just gotten married to Jean two weeks earlier, and had returned from their dizzying honeymoon that morning. She thought of Jean, who was taking a shower, as she kept writing “Sleep Jankels” over and over again. What was she doing with her life? It didn’t matter, she thought. At this point, you have to go along with it for a few years, you made the choice, you said yes, you have to give it a chance. The doubts seemed perfectly natural to her. They didn’t bother her.

But Jean Jankels—there was something about him, a side of himself he revealed on the honeymoon, that...

**BASH! BASH! BASH!**

Sleep looked up, shocked. Someone was bashing the door down. She started to get up, but stopped, thinking better of it.

**BASH! BASH!**

Her mind was racing.

**KERASH!**

The door was down. She should run to Jean, warn him. Did he still have the gun from the honeymoon? She didn’t know.

She heard a man yelling orders. The door next to her was almost closed—she gently pushed it shut.

She could hear the voices distinctly now.

“The Helloid scanner’s goin’ nuts!” a husky voice roared.

“In there!” a man with a deep voice yelled.

“That’s it!” a woman said. “It’s in there!”

She heard the bathroom door being kicked open.

"It's in the shower! Babel, the Exorsault better be ready!" the husky voice yelled.

"It is!" the woman yelled back.

"Here goes!" the guy with the deep voice said.

Then a sound came to Sleep ears which blew her mind apart. A shrieking wail, that made fingernails on a blackboard seem like a church bell. It was pure pain, pure horror.

The shriek continued but it was joined by a weird sort of deep bubbling noise, eerie and pronounced. She couldn't believe that at some level she found these sounds enjoyable.

After a few moments of these noises, which seemed really like forever, there was a dull pop, followed by the sound of liquid splattering on the bathroom floor.

"One less demon," the husky voice said.

What had happened? Was Jean being attacked by a monster and these people saved him? It seemed the logical explanation. Slowly, Sleep opened the door and peered out. An Asian man covered in equipment and reddish gooey stuff looked over at her.

"Miss?" he said in his deep voice.

Sleep stared at him, unable to move or speak.

"What a mess!" she heard the husky voice say from the bathroom.

"Better this one mess than the multitudes this guy would've slaughtered," the woman said.

"You said it," the husky voice mumbled.

The Asian man looked from his cohorts, back to Sleep, then back to his cohorts again.

"Uh, guys. There's a lady out here."

"Huh?" said the husky voice, as its owner came out of the bathroom, a large man with a full beard and mustache, likewise covered in equipment and gore. He regarded Sleep.

"How were you related to that thing in the shower?"

"What thing?" she asked.

"The demon."

"What about my husband?"

The large man looked down. The woman came into view behind him.

"The only thing in that shower was a demon," the woman said, a grim expression on her cute face, her long black hair fouled up with red junk.

Sleep looked over at her desk and slowly nodded her head.

“That would explain a lot,” Sleaf said dreamily.

“Ma’am, we’re sorry,” the Asian man said.

Sleaf just looked at them, a complex expression on her face.

Suddenly, a beeping sound started going off, and the large man looked at something on his wrist.

“Demon attack at the Farzound Shopping Center!” he exclaimed.

“Oh no!” the Asian man said. “How could they have found out? What if they...”

“Come on! We have to get there fast!” the large man said, and the two men started running out.

The woman started after them, then paused, and turned to face Sleaf.

“I know this must be terrible for you, and I wish we could stay, but the fate of the whole continent is at stake!”

Sleaf made a “yeah, right” kind of confused sneer.

“Here—take our card. Give us a call if you need any help!”

Sleaf took the business card and nodded.

“Have to get to that shopping center!” the woman said.

Then the woman ran out, and the stench of the pile of demon remains started wafting across Sleaf’s nostrils.

She looked down at the card.

“Demonbane, Inc.” it read. “There’s no demonic problem we don’t have the solution to!”

Huh.

Jean was a demon. She had married a demon. Now he was a pile of smelly guts on the bathroom floor. How did those jerks expect her to clean it up? Did she have to call the police? What about Jean’s family—did he really have any? Or were they all demons too?

Before she would think any more of the consequences of this event, she moved back to her desk and wrote her signature, “Sleaf Drassy” in a large and undeniable manner across all the little attempts at “Sleaf Jankels”.

Suddenly, a blast of hot air hit Sleaf, and she looked over into her new bedroom. It was now full of smoke and lightning, with a horrible orange light visible in the distance. Slowly, three figures could be seen approaching through the mist.

Somehow, Sleaf was unfazed by this. Her apathy shocked her, as she stoically glanced at the approaching figures. Then a thought shot across her mind—act normal. Act like you should. Don’t let them know. Don’t let them know you’re unimpressed.

So she started acting. She got up and put her hands to her mouth in fear, as if she were trying to let out a scream but was too scared to. She moved toward the door, but it immediately slammed shut. Big surprise, she thought.

The three figures were getting closer now. She regretted that she couldn't get a better look at them, as she was trying her best to seem panicked, banging on the door and crying for help.

"Heretic," a cold, haywire, monstrous, calm voice shot out.

She turned and sank to the floor, her back to the door, trying her best to sob uncontrollably.

The three figures were in the room now. The main figure was a tall humanoid being, covered in levels of leather and chains, but a few openings around the face and hands suggested deerlike origins. The other two figures wore brown cloaks, and had deformed pitch-black faces partially visible.

The three were still hovering as they approached Sleep.

Don't let them know!, she continued to think. This is fantastic! What fun! At some level, she wondered why this should seem enjoyable. Really, it shouldn't.

The central figure raised its hand and pointed a leather-clad finger toward Sleep.

"Filthmate. I accuse you of heresy."

Sleep looked up at the ridiculous creature, biting her tongue to keep herself from laughing.

"Who... who are you?" she said, wishing it sounded more convincing.

"I am Infernal Accuser Zefzec. You will accompany Infernal Hosts Slarb and Winti to Hell."

"No!" she wailed out.

But she let the Infernal Hosts approach her, each taking an arm. They lifted her up, and they all started hovering back into the rotten orange light. She felt exhilarated.

As they drifted lightward, one of the hosts looked over at her. Yeah, maybe she had stopped her "being-frightened" act too soon, but it was too late for them. And she could have just gone into shock or something, that could explain to them her lack of fright. Going to Hell would be somewhat overwhelming for a normal person. But wasn't she normal? No.

The special effects of the transfer to Hell were pretty good. Horrible sights, smells, and feelings. Pretty bad. Meant to beat even the most stalwart humans into senselessness and submissiveness. Sleep hardly batted an eyelash. To her, it was pathetic.

Finally, they approached a plateau, where Infernal Jailors were waiting to take her into custody. She only had to be transferred into their hands and she could stop the charade. But she had to remain convincing until then, because the Hosts still had the power to take her back. Once in the hands of the Jailors, though, she could cut loose.

This was a part of her that had been suppressed for a long time. But it felt good to have her true nature back. And she knew she'd enjoy her stay in Hell.

The Accuser drifted to the Jailor and began conversing with him in an Infernal tongue. The hosts stopped well back, waiting for the sign. After a minute of two, the Accuser wiggled his thumb, and the Hosts approached.

The Accuser turned.

"Filthmate, you are hereby placed into the custody of Infernal Jailor Hamt."

The Accuser drifted away, and the Hosts took Sleaf forward to face the Jailor.

The Jailor, a huge, horned monstrosity, grabbed Sleaf's arms with two hands and slapped on restraints with two more. The hosts drifted away.

Sleaf was looking down, and felt the gaze of the Jailor upon her. Suddenly without warning, she looked up at the creature—a crazy, intense smile on her face.

"Hey there Jailor Hamt! How ya doin' today!"

The Jailor grunted and moved back.

"Oh no ya don't!" Sleaf said, walking forward, her bonds dropping to the ground with a clank. "I'm your charge. You're responsible for me. Right, boy?"

"Emergency!" the Jailor bellowed.

Sleaf gestured with her right hand and the Jailor doubled over in pain.

"You're correct, you little shit. I am a Looter. And I intend to suck this Hell dry before I'm done!"

"E... emer... emergency..." the Jailor wailed with some effort.

Sleaf stretched her arms out and yawned a satisfying sigh. She thought of how glorious it would be dismantling this Hell piece by piece, packing it up, and selling it to the highest bidders.

"Damn, this is fun!" she yelled.

Forty-eight devils surrounded Sleaf Drassy, forming the dread Unknowable Curse, a force beyond all reckoning. Sleaf

was bored. There was work to be done.

“Don’t feel bad,” she said. “I’ve done a lot of Hells, and your powers are pretty impressive. You should be proud of yourselves.”

Suddenly, 18 satans hovered in a chaos-drive above Sleep, attempting to cut away her identity from 804 levels of existence deep. She felt it, but barely. This got her mad.

“You fellows are quite talented, but this isn’t a contest, it’s a slaughter. Now be good little farm animals and learn!”

With this, Sleep swung her left arm upward. Immediately, beyond-grotesque wails of the suffering Infernals filled the stale air. The devils were writhing in unbelievable pain on the ground, soon followed by a rain of falling satans.

“Just come here!” Sleep said, annoyed.

After a few moments, a Lord appeared a few yards in front of Sleep—a huge, stately, antlered beast—the number one guy—Lord Ac. He stared calmly at Sleep, smoke and little black balls pouring from his several sets of nostrils, a dull gray flame pulsating around his form.

“Hi guy,” Sleep said.

Ac raised his huge arms, then folded them across his chest.

“I assume you want my cooperation,” the Lord said, sounding like distant thunder.

“It would be nice. Taking your Hell apart and packing it up would be a lot quicker with the help of your sad little minions.”

Ac stared at Sleep, then blew a huge blast of smoke and balls.

“You’re so sure of yourself. So vastly more powerful than I. Proud Looter. Already planning to take our Heaven too, I assume.”

“I don’t do Heavens. Too much whining.”

Ac stood still and silent. Sleep rolled her eyes.

“Okay look!” she said, impatiently. “If you help, you’re free. If not, you’ll be sold into slavery like the rest. And I hope a Lord of your stature knows enough about us Looters to realize we keep our promises.”

“Oh yes,” Ac said, a smile starting to form on his massive, crooked mouth. “I know about you. So cool—to prey on the predators. Put us in our place.”

Sleep frowned.

“If the next two words out of your mouth aren’t ‘I accept’, you’re history. Though you’d fetch a high price as a slave, I’ll

obliterate you right here and now.”

“I...” Ac said, his smile widening.

“Come on big boy. You can do it. And think, once you’re free you can start building again—who knows—you could have a few good millennia before another Looter comes this way.”

“...will fuck you into ground meat and keep you alive like that for a hundred years—after that, I’ll just be getting started!”

“Like, wrong answer,” Slep said, making a fist, and fully expecting Ac to be a smoldering smear of protoplasm the next instant. It didn’t happen.

“Hahaha—prey on the predator—so cool,” the Lord rumbled. “I know how it feels to be so much bigger, and now so much smaller, compared to the glory of you. Maybe you might feel small sometime. Maybe that sometime is...”

Slep’s expression turned to worried, as the hot Hell all around her silently shattered away, replaced by a featureless white void.

“You are now the prey, Looter,” she heard the voice of Lord Ac say. “When you chose my Hell to ravage, you chose the wrong Hell. For I am in contact with the Infernal Voc-4-Iopa-9den.”

“Huh?”

“You, my friend,” Ac said, “will be a fine addition to the Infernal Voc-4-Iopa-9den’s Looter Zoo. And here the one is.”

Slep got a sinking feeling. She had long had suspicions of entities more powerful than her kind, but she never expected to encounter one. Now...

Voc-4-Iopa-9den came into view, all around Slep as she floated in the white void, coming from at least 14 dimensions at once. At first Slep was absolutely dizzied and zonked by the sight, but soon, a familiar feeling came to her. She was unimpressed. She yawned.

And yet again, she became aware of more and more of herself. She had plans for this Voc-4-Iopa-9den, and the ultimate prize was at hand. But she had to act normal—act like a Looter facing the impossibility of a massively more powerful thing. So she expressed her force, emanating energies which could easily have annihilated the grandest of gods, rising ever more, beyond the point any of her kind would ever have dared, for fear of erasing all of everything. But still she was getting nowhere.

Voc-4-Iopa-9den was coagulating into something vaguely understandable, but to Sleaf, the hyper-ultra-inconceivable thing before her was laughable.

Ac spoke.

“Perceive the impossible, Looter!”

Voc-4-Iopa-9den, definitely more violet than not, somewhat tall and vertical, maybe an arm, maybe a face somewhere, communicated.

“Precious little Looter, you made the bad choice in Ac’s Hell, you see.”

“I’ve lived by the sword, so now I’ll die by the sword. Fair is fair.”

“Spoken like a true Looter. Like all the others in my Looter Zoo. Kmy-7zy-holp3a has a place for you.”

Sleaf felt energies moving her way, tearing her apart across innumerable axes, transporting her in unlikely ways. It kind of tickled.

Suddenly, she was in a cage in a strangely-lit void. She could maybe see some more cages in the distance.

“Your friend Ac has been rewarded,” Sleaf heard Voc-4-Iopa-9den say, though the entity wasn’t visible. “You, little Sleaf, are quite a prize. The four quintillionth Looter in Zoo. Now I can sell Zoo and get that which I desire.”

“Whatever,” Sleaf said. She was slowly getting some idea of what this was all about. She was after something. Voc-4-Iopa-9den would trade her, along with the other 3,999,999,999,999,999,999 Looters, to some other entity, and it was there that she would find what she desired. What a plan, what a fucking plan. It was just dawning on her how much time she’d spent planning this.

“Trade-ingo,” Voc-4-Iopa-9den said, coming into view briefly. What followed was a timeless period of hemi-reality, followed by several ages of confusion and anti-nothingness. Finally, there was some semblance of graspable reality, and Sleaf found she was still in the cage, but with nothing visible outside. No blackness, no whiteness, nothing. Her eyes were open, but absolutely nothing could be seen beyond her cage.

She made the heart and rose into her fullness. Resplendent to be full again. And here, in this place. Plan, yeah it was about 900,000 years in the making, so what. She was herself and here in this place, where a Zoo of 4 quintillion Looters was a minor artifact. And out of the 222 octillion artifacts here, but one interested her. She grasped it.



The other entity here, Kmy-7zy-holp3a, screamed in a way only such a thing could scream. She communicated with it as best she could. To her now, it was as a barking dog, this entity so high a Looterkin could have never imagined. She held it at bay without as much as a thought. And she took the object.

She had it. Finally. After so long. She had it. Everything was so clear, of course, everything was laid out before her. And she understood. Oh yes—she understood. And she was happy. And she returned to Earth.

Back in her apartment, Sleaf briefly regarded the putrid remains of Jean Jankels, and then snapped her fingers, going back in time a few years. And she strode triumphantly into the living room, setting her prize on a little table. She picked up the phone and dialed it. It rang a few times.

“Hello?” Tavmatey Numblem said from the other end of the line.

“Hi,” answered Sleaf. “I have the coffee.”



# EIGHT

“You doin’ that mission today, man?” the long-haired Minion Van Hall said as he entered the room.

“Hm?” Daptin said.

“Weren’t you gonna do a mission for Cursive Caxopy? Like a secret assignment?”

“Yup. Today’s the day. Have to prove our mettle as mortals. You know Fake’s coming with me.”

“Yeah I heard. So how’d you get in with that Caxopy chick so soon? Me ‘n’ Martin ‘n’ Tanner’ve been busting our balls to start this whole mortal thing going. Y’know man?”

“Well, you guys haven’t stayed in Agoopish the whole time like me and Fake have. You have to make a commitment to get things up and running.”

“I know. Fake’s like totally abandoned her life on Earth.”

“I sort of have too,” Daptin said with a shrug.

“Yeah. At least there’re phones here. If not, it’d be tough.”

“Uh-huh.”

Minion sat down on a low couch and Daptin walked across the room and opened a closet.

“So Daptin man, I hear you found it with Spanking New Sarah?”

Daptin turned, holding a jacket in his hands.

“What, does everyone know about this now?”

“No man, just like, y’know, all of us. Hear your friend El was pissed.”

“She was. Very.”

“Were you like going out with her?” Minion asked.

“I spent like a week-and-a-half hanging out with her,” Daptin said, “day-in and day-out. It’s like, she’s a goddess man. Maybe she’s not the most gorgeous goddess, but she’s

pretty damn nice. I was like in torture in wanting her so bad, y'know man? I tried to, y'know, let her know in little ways and stuff. And she seemed into me and stuff, but I dunno. She was just—like she said after she found out—that she wanted to get to know me before getting physical, but I was like, I didn't think it would ever get that far."

"So what happened?" Minion asked, cocking his head and resting his index finger on his temple.

"I, y'know, I started to like not spend so much time with El and sort of met a different group of gods, and me and Sarah hit it off right away, y'know, and she was like totally into it and I was in no mood to resist or anything. So, like, we did it."

"Man! You're the first to find it with a goddess! Man, I'm like—it's like I'm pissed-off man! I gotta do it. I gotta do it."

"It's definitely an experience. Well worth the effort," Daptin said.

"So what the fuck's it like? Are they different? Is it like, y'know... what's the basic situation with it?"

"Uh... it's like being in another world," Daptin said. "I mean, I know we are in another world already, but it's like, I don't know, total bliss, total astral. Like an energy, total ecstasy. Nothing dirty—totally transcendal. It was like the most amazing thing. It's almost... almost like, I dunno, it's so fantastic, but like, it's so great that it's not like sex at all. I mean, it's too involved. I don't know. I'm not saying it's not the best or anything, just that it's not like totally better than with a normal human, y'know, like a regular girl."

"I don't know man. It sounds totally excellent. I don't know. I think I'm getting pretty close with a few of 'em. You know like Holly Scroll Bonnie? She's like so cool."

"Yeah."

"So what's the deal with you and El Flactor Floor? Are you still, like, seeing her?" Minion asked.

"Nah," said Daptin. "When she found out about me and Sarah, she said she didn't want to see me for a while. She said she understood, but that she was still hurt by it. I mean, like, what did she expect?"

"And Sarah?"

"I'm like, y'know, I'm a little burnt from doing it with her. I mean, like I said, it's totally different. I mean, I feel like I almost need a rest. Y'know?"

"Yeah. But like, couldn't it be just her? I mean, couldn't her power mantle have something to do with it? I mean, might it

be, y'know, different with different goddesses?"

"I guess. I guess that makes sense."

"I hope I find out. Like I hope I can do like a research paper on it, and like compare all of them," Minion said, chuckling.

"Well there're only a couple of hundred, you know."

"Yeah, but there are three more cities with the goddesses, don't forget," Minion said.

"I know, but we're definitely Agoopi mortals, and the other pantheons probably wouldn't view us with much favor."

"I don't know man. I've heard about mortals who work for gods in all four cities, you know, just to who pays the most."

"Yeah, but no one can trust 'em. It's like, I think you totally have to choose a city. Y'know? It makes sense. So that the gods and goddesses trust you. Y'know?"

"Yeah," Minion said.

Daptin put the blue jacket on and looked at himself in the mirror, running his fingers through his full head of dark green hair.

"I look like a total dummy. I have to look cool to be a cool mortal who goes on cool missions. Right?"

"You look about as good as an Arctican can, Gone."

"Hah hah. Very funny. I thought the Arctican jokes would stop once I gained all this power, but I guess that was too much to hope for."

"And c'mon man, we're not all that powerful yet. Let's not get ahead of ourselves, dude. Now we have to know our place in the scheme of things."

"Oh shut up."

"Just trying to be helpful."

"Well, all I'll say is, I'm no stranger to power, that's all."

"Okay man. We'll see. We'll see how well you do on this mission."

"I'm sure I'll do just fine."

"I don't know. What's the mission all about, anyway?" Minion asked.

"We don't know yet. But they say it will involve going over to Boltpike."

"I was over there before. It's pretty cool."

"Yeah I know. I never went there yet. I see it on TV a lot. I guess I'll be there in a few hours."

"Yeah."

As they said this, Fake Cerquaine walked into the room, a short-haired, keen-looking girl from Spoin 5th, the dorm floor

at Thatterine College where Tanner Loblolly, Martin Fovea, and Minion Van Hall also currently lived. Daptin had lived there several years earlier.

“Ready ready ready for the mission, Daptin?” she asked.

“I’m as ready as I’ll ever be,” Daptin said, looking back into the mirror and fussing with his hair again.

“You look fine. We’re supposed to be able to blend in, remember? No notoriety, no outrageous features. That’s why we’re valuable to the Caxopys.”

“Uh-huh,” Daptin said.

“So come on, let’s go, it’s getting late, and we’re supposed to stop by that store on the way there to get some stuff,” Fake said.

“I know I know,” Daptin said. “I guess we may as well go now.”

“Gonna say bye-bye to Sarah?” Fake asked.

“I can’t like—this is y’know—I can’t believe how everyone is like so into my life. I mean, it is sort of personal, y’know?”

“Daptin,” Fake said, “you found it with a goddess. And not just any goddess, but Spanking New Sarah. You know how everyone lusts after her? And you, you go right in and score on the first try.”

“What, you lust after her too?” Minion said.

“No stupid, but I know a lot of guys around here who do. And I guess a few women, too.”

“Well you said everyone.”

“Don’t take everything so literally, Minion. I mean, when I call you a total retard I don’t mean it like you’re really retarded, just that you act like it a lot. Get it?”

“Got it.”

“Good.”

“Yeah,” Daptin said with a sigh.

“You can tell me all about her on the way to The Caxopy Group. Now let us go,” Fake said, bouncing up and down a few times and turning toward the door.

“Yeah,” Daptin said, following Fake to the door. “I just hope the salespeople at the store don’t like start asking me about Sarah and stuff.”

“You knew it would be like this, dude, before you even did it,” Minion chided. “You went where no Thatter ever went before.”

“We don’t know that,” Daptin said.

“Well, we’ll just have to ask Cursive Caxopy to check her

records and see if any Thatterine College student ever had sex with Spanking New Sarah,” Fake said, opening the door and stepping into the hallway, followed by Daptin.

“I meant any goddess, not just Sarah the Spanker,” Minion yelled after them.

“She doesn’t spank, Minion. And I should know,” Daptin yelled back.

“She’s just ‘spanking new!’” Fake said derisively.

“Whatever,” Daptin said as he shut the door behind him.

The two walked down to the elevator bay and Daptin pressed the down button.

“Let’s do it,” Daptin said, nodding. “This mission is gonna be wild.”

The elevator came and they took it down to the lobby of the Supbam Hotel.

“Oh look, isn’t that Well Doctarca over there?” Fake said as they stepped out of the elevator.

“Yeah, that’s him.”

The god Well Doctarca approached the two on his way to the elevators.

“Hello Daptin,” said Well, looking dark and preoccupied in his armor as usual.

“Hi Well,” Daptin responded.

Well turned away from the two and faced closed elevator doors.

“What’s the matter, Well?” Daptin asked after several moments of silence.

“I’ve no desire to converse with you,” Well said.

“Huh?” Daptin said, surprised. “What’s up? I mean—”

“—come on Daptin. We have a mission to go on, remember?” Fake said, pulling Daptin away.

“Uh, yeah. Well, bye-bye Well. Yeah. Well well well, let’s not be too rude, shall we? Have a nice day, uh, y’know, like being friendly and all,” Daptin said in a clumsy manner as Fake dragged him away.

Well didn’t flinch.

Fake and Daptin left the hotel and headed for the store.

“What was that all about?” Fake asked.

“I don’t know,” Daptin replied. “I know he got pissed off when I asked him a lot of questions at a party I went to with El the other day, but he was civil after that at the party. I mean—maybe it’s this whole Sarah thing. That’s probably it.”

“You think it was wise to tell him off like you just did?”

“Frankly, I’m not afraid of these goons. They’re not all that powerful, in the scheme of things.”

“Goons? I think you’re getting carried away with yourself. Even the most experienced mortals aren’t as powerful as the gods. You know that.”

“Well, maybe I’m not just a mortal—or something—y’know?”

“You’re full of it,” Fake said.

“So what if I am?”

“You have the directions to the store or what?”

“Yeah,” Daptin said, reaching into his pocket. “Right here.”

After a fifteen-minute walk they arrived at Basement-Wall-Thursday Mortal Supply.

Inside the store, Nashin-Yogo said “I wonder when those two Caxopy whelps will show up.”

“Oh, I think they’re here now,” his assistant Confetti Plura remarked.

And the two walked into the ancient store from the weedy street outside.

Nashin-Yogo, the tall, long-haired, mustached owner of the store addressed the two.

“Hello. You must be the two come to equip for your first assignment for the Caxopys. I’m Nashin-Yogo and this is Confetti Plura.”

Confetti, a woman with short, curly dark hair and a large pair of glasses nodded at Daptin and Fake.

“Yeah hi,” Daptin said. “We’re uh, Elaine, uh, Elaine Caxopy told us to come over here to get like the stuff we would need for the mission and stuff, but uh—”

“—she said you’d know what we would need and stuff. I mean, we never shopped at a place like this before,” Fake said.

“Hmm,” Nashin-Yogo said.

“But we certainly heard about this sort of place,” Fake added.

“Yeah,” Daptin said.

“Well, since Elaine didn’t tell me anything about the mission, I can’t tell you what to get. Just browse around and see what you like,” Nashin-Yogo said.

“And don’t be afraid to ask for help,” Confetti added.

Daptin and Fake looked around at the huge variety of things and were a little bewildered.

“Could you, uh, like show us some good stuff?” Daptin



said. "I mean, we're running a little late as it is and there's much too much stuff in here to check out right now."

"Yeah," Fake agreed.

"Well, that shouldn't be any problem. Let's see what we have around here," Nashin-Yogo said as he began to rummage around behind the counter.

"Come on up!" Confetti said, and Daptin and Fake climbed the short flight of stairs to the main counter. As they did, they noticed a weird, cloaked figure at the other end of the counter, who they hadn't been able to see before. The stranger looked over at them for a moment, and then went back to browsing.

"Now, I hope you two have some idea of what being a mortal involves. We have to deal with some very, very dangerous things," Nashin-Yogo said dramatically.

"We have some idea of it, but we're not totally familiar with it," Fake said.

Nashin-Yogo nodded as he continued rummaging behind the counter.

"Here's something good!" Confetti said suddenly, holding up a little uninflated green balloon.

"Well, you take care of 'em, Plura, I have to go help you-know-who," Nashin-Yogo said as he walked away toward the strange individual at the other end of the counter.

"What's so good about that balloon?" Daptin asked.

"It's not just any balloon," Confetti said. "It's a slay balloon. Much, much better than an average balloon."

"In what way?" Fake asked.

"Blow it up and pop it, and everything around you will be annihilated."

"Wouldn't that kill you, too?" Fake asked.

"Not at all. There's a safe area in the immediate vicinity of the slay balloon. And as an added feature, the destructive wave is proportional to the degree the balloon is inflated."

"So does it like kill people?" Daptin asked.

"Well, it'll kill killable people, certainly. No problem."

"Well Fake, whattaya think? Pretty useful, eh?" Daptin said.

"Definitely. How much?"

"Oh, you can get whatever you want and put it on the Caxopys' account," Confetti said.

"Cool! We'll take a lot of 'em," Daptin said.

"One great gross enough?" Confetti asked, holding up a

large black box.

“How many is that?” Fake asked.

“I dunno. A lot,” Confetti replied.

“Sounds good to me,” Fake said.

“Sold!”

“What else?” Daptin asked.

“Let’s see... oh, here’s something good,” Confetti said as she knelt down. Then she lifted a cinder block to the countertop. It was gray, with two large holes in it, looking a little like the Roman number III, viewed from the side.

“A brick?” Fake asked.

“A cinder block,” Confetti replied.

“Does it have any special powers or is it just normal?” Daptin asked.

“Now come on,” Confetti said, “at Basement-Wall-Thursday we don’t sell regular cinder blocks. No, it’s about as intelligent as a dog, and it can fly. Want one?”

“Let me see,” Fake said.

“Okay—cinder block, fly around the room, knock over the green vase, and return to the counter,” Confetti commanded.

With this, the cinder block flipped wildly into the air, knocked over a green plastic vase, swung around the interior of the store, and returned deftly to the countertop.

“Whew! I’ll take it!” Fake said.

“Sold!”

“I want one too!” Daptin said.

“Sorry, last one.”

“Oh!” Daptin whined.

“Don’t worry, I have something for you,” Confetti said, reaching under the counter and pulling something out to show him.

“Swizzle sticks?” Daptin queried.

“No! They’re fucking morons, silly!”

“Fucking what?” Daptin asked.

“Fucking morons! When you break one of the sticks, a stupid fucking idiot will soon show up and befriend you for a few days. Very useful.”

“Huh? What good is a fucking moron? And where do they come from?” Daptin asked.

“They can be helpful. They carry things, confuse enemies, test food for poison, y’know. And they’re extremely amusing.”

“Oh man,” Daptin said.

“But they don’t like,” Fake interjected, “they don’t like

fuck—like, they aren't called fucking morons cuz they like, y'know, have sex with people, right?"

"Now that's sick. You have a sick mind, girl. Of course not," Confetti said.

"Well I had to ask, this stuff is so whacked."

"No, they don't fuck but they're quite delightful otherwise. You want 'em?"

"Okay what the hell," Daptin said.

"Sold to the enthusiastic Arctican," Confetti said, pointing to Daptin with a handful of the colorful plastic sticks.

"Thank you," Daptin said.

"What else? What else?" Fake said excitedly.

"Hmm—oh yes. Yes. How could I forget these... these... these..." Confetti said as she rummaged.

"These what?" Daptin asked.

"These... socks!" Confetti said, producing two pairs of yellow socks covered with lavender polka dots.

"Oh, beautiful," Daptin commented.

"Not only beautiful, but distinctive!" Confetti said.

"Huh?" Daptin asked.

"Distinctive time socks. Very, very useful. You know how a clock goes to 59 and then back to zero? Well—not with these socks on. You get to 99 with these."

"What?" Fake asked, examining her cinder block.

"You get to 59, just like normal," Confetti explained. "But then, with the socks on, instead of going back to zero, you get to 60. You have a whole 40 minutes to yourself—no one else around. Distinctive time. Get it?"

"What do you mean no one else? What happens to 'em?" Daptin asked.

"They all go back to zero, while you, if you're wearing the socks, go right on to 60."

"But where are the other people, physically?" Daptin said.

"Every living thing goes right to zero like I said, but inanimate objects all have that extra 40 minutes. And with these socks on, you can too," Confetti explained.

"So it's like time stops?" Daptin asked.

"Sort of, in terms of everyone else. But everything is normal, except that nothing living is there, except sock-wearers."

"Sounds pretty damn good to me! We'll take 'em," Daptin said.

"Cinder block, fly around," Fake said, and with these words the cinder block arose and began to fly haphazardly

around the store.

“Pretty cool,” Daptin said. “I wish I had one.”

“Well now—uh—what’s your name again?” Confetti asked Daptin.

“Daptin. Uh, Daptin Gone.”

“Oh! You’re the one who slept with Spanking New Sarah!” Confetti said.

“That’s him. My name is Fake, by the way,” Fake said, jumping down the stairs to chase her cinder block.

“This is, like, nuts. How can everyone know about this so soon? If I’d known, I’d have had second thoughts.”

“Yeah right. Come land gently in my hands, cinder block!” Fake said, and the block swung around and landed gracefully into her outstretched hands.

“Whoah! You’re pretty heavy!” she said as she took on the weight of the block.

“Look Confetti, forget about this Sarah thing. I want something as cool as the cinder block,” Daptin said.

“The socks are pretty cool,” Confetti responded.

“Yeah, but there’re two pairs. I want something cool and unique, just like the block.”

“Daptin, cinder blocks are pretty common, it’s just that that’s our last one for awhile,” Confetti said.

“Well.”

“Okay, let me see what I can dig up,” Confetti said as she turned around and started looking around on some shelves. After a few moments, she sighed and began to climb up the shelves.

“I—uh—don’t go out of your way on my account...” Daptin said in a worried tone.

“Well, I have to find you something good, don’t I?”

“Yeah but...”

Confetti clung onto the shelves and peered into a dark corner of a high shelf.

“Aha! What’s this?”

She reached out, grabbed something, and then half fell and half jumped back to the ground.

“Oonf!”

“Are you okay?” Daptin asked.

From the other end of the store, Fake said “Do ballet, cinder block!”

“Yes Daptin. Just a little shaken. Now let’s see what I got.”

“What is it?”

“Oh goodness,” Confetti said, looking at what appeared to be a magic marker. “Goodness.”

“What is it? What is it? Is it good?” Daptin said.

“Uh...” Confetti began slowly. “I don’t know if...”

“What is it? A pen?”

“Well I’ll tell you,” Confetti said with a sigh. “It’s a geometric weight marker, but I thought we’d seen the last of these.”

“Cool!”

“But Daptin, these markers are very, very dangerous. Maybe I should ask Nashin-Yogo if—”

“—just hold on a second. What does it do, first of all?”

“Well the idea is pretty simple. The ink from the marker, once dry, begins to get heavier and heavier at a geometric rate, until it eventually bores into the ground.”

“That sounds pretty good!”

“Yeah, but if you get even a little bit on your skin, it’ll rip your skin right off eventually—and there’s no way to stop it.”

“Ouch.”

Across the store, the cinder block was clumsily spinning and stumbling around.

“Ballet! Ballet!” Fake said.

“What if you wash it off right away?”

“It works if you do it real quick, but you need the right solvent. And we’ve been out of solvent for decades.”

“Hmm. I think I can handle it. I’ll take it.”

“Okay Daptin,” Confetti said, “but I think you should get some situation grenades with it, just in case you get some on your skin.”

“Uh—you expect me to know what that is?”

“No, so I’ll tell you. They’re grenades that demolish local situation and force it to reravel. So if you got geometrically marked, you could detonate a situation grenade and totally get out of the situation.”

“That sounds like the best thing yet! I want a lot of them!”

“Sold,” Confetti said.

“Follow me, cinder block,” Fake said as she came back up to the counter. “Now land on the counter.”

The cinder block landed on the counter, carefully avoiding a cup of soda Confetti had been drinking.

“I think that thing’s a little more intelligent than a dog,” Daptin said.

“I think it’s even smarter than you, Daptin,” Fake said with

a grin.

“Haha,” Daptin said.

“What else can we get?” Fake asked.

“Well?” Daptin asked of Confetti.

“How ‘bout the books in that case over there?” Fake asked, pointing.

“Oh no,” Confetti said. “Skoobs are for very experienced mortals only. Don’t even think of getting any.”

“Why not?” Daptin asked.

“Because, they’re extremely unstable. Just imagine a book carried between worlds in totally the wrong way. They’re backward, inside-out, unreal, destroyed, infinite, brooding, wonderful—and they’re totally off limits.”

“Not even one?” Daptin asked.

“Forget it,” Confetti said. “Try these.”

Confetti reached under the counter and produced a canister, opened it, and poured a few dried peas into her hand.”

“Conductor voice peas,” she said.

“Come again?” Daptin said.

“Eat ‘em and you’ll sound like a train conductor over a distorted train loudspeaker. Very fun.”

“What good are they?” Daptin said.

“I don’t know. Be creative.”

“Okay! Why not! I’ll take ‘em.”

“Heh heh. Won’t Cursive and Elaine be surprised when they see their bill.”

“Well, let’s not worry about that now,” Daptin said. “We just have to get all the stuff we need and get over there to The Caxopy Group.”

“Oh Daptin, there’s no rush,” Fake said. “What else, Confetti?”

The three heard a loud moaning from somewhere in the store, but it quickly subsided.

“Well Fake,” Confetti said, lugging a big cardboard box up to the counter, “how about some huge tin clocks?”

The box was neatly packed with little tin cuckoo clocks the size of cigarette packs.

“They don’t look very huge to me,” Daptin said.

“Aha, but if you throw one up in the air, it’ll become an immense clock in the sky—much to the horror of all who view it.”

“This stuff is just right over the edge, like, I mean, I don’t know. I mean, I’ll take it. Whatever,” Daptin said, shaking his

head.

“Great!” Confetti said.

“What’s that popcorn over there?” Fake asked, pointing.

“Goodbye popcorn. Eat it, and you can say goodbye to existence for a few hours.”

“Is it dangerous?” Fake asked.

“Not at all. It just makes you not exist for awhile, that’s all.”

“Wow, I could use some of that!” Fake said.

“Sold.”

“Like, what do you mean out of existence? Where do you go?” Daptin asked.

“Nowhere. You wanna try it?” Confetti said, grabbing a bag of goodbye popcorn.

“No way!”

“Go ahead. If you just eat a tiny bit you’ll be gone for less than a minute. Try it. It’s fun.” Confetti said, opening the bag.

“Oh go ahead and do it,” Fake said.

“I don’t know.”

Confetti took a piece of popcorn out of the bag and carefully broke off a tiny bit, handing it to Daptin.

“Don’t be afraid of it! It won’t do anything if you don’t eat it!” Confetti said, smiling.

Daptin hesitantly took the small piece of goodbye popcorn and examined it.

“Just eat it, Daptin. You’ll be back before you know it,” Confetti said.

Daptin looked back and forth at Confetti and Fake.

“Oh come on, don’t be a chicken,” Fake jeered. “If you can do it with Spanking New Sarah, you can eat a little goodbye popcorn.”

“That’s it—I can’t stand talking about that any more. Here goes!” Daptin said as he tossed the piece of popcorn into his mouth. He began to chew it briefly, and then quickly vanished.

“Wha!” Fake exclaimed.

“He should be back in less than a minute,” Confetti said.

“How does it work?” Fake asked.

“Now that’s a question to be answered another day. Not that anyone really knows, but people certainly have their ideas.”

“But like, where does all this stuff come from? Who makes it?” Fake asked.

“I can’t get into that with you right now. Sorry,” Confetti

said.

“Whatever.”

“Well, while we’re waiting for Daptin, let’s see what else you need. Hmm,” Confetti said, looking around. “Ah yes—no mortal is happy without an infinite-ammo submachinegun. Here ya go.”

Confetti reached under the counter and produced a two different-looking submachineguns.

“Like, guns, like, to kill people?” Fake asked.

“Yeah. And to destroy stuff, propel boats, signal cohorts, open doors, whatever. If you need metal, you have a never-ending supply in one of these babies. The bullets make good ballast, if you find yourself in need of ballast, that is.”

“Well yeah, but I’m not sure about the killing people part.”

“Hey, it’s your gun—kill or don’t kill as you choose, y’know?”

“Yeah.”

“This is,” the two heard Daptin say off to the right.

“Oh you’re back,” Fake said.

“This is what,” Daptin said, approaching the two.

“He’ll be dazed for a few seconds. You always are upon hatching back into reality,” Confetti said.

“This... I am back, I... I, the popcorn, I... oh man.”

“See Daptin, it works. And here, have a machinegun,” Fake said, handing Daptin one of the infinite-ammo submachineguns.

“Thanks,” Daptin said, taking the gun. “Y’know, I don’t remember anything. How long was I gone?”

“Only about thirty or forty seconds,” Fake said.

“Huh. Some trip,” Daptin said, examining his machinegun. “What’s so good about this?”

“Infinite ammo,” Confetti said.

“Cool,” Daptin replied.

“Oh—” Confetti said. “While you were gone I found the perfect item for you. You’re from Arctica right? Am I right?”

“Yes I’m from Arctica. Not like the green hair gives it away or anything,” Daptin said.

“Well Daptin, just look at this,” Confetti said as she produced what appeared to be a brown vest engulfed in a blue-gray fire.

“Ah—what the hell is that?” Daptin asked.

“It’s a frost flame delimiter, silly! Just got it in. I thought it would be perfect for you, like a wintry cold sort of theme,



y'know?"

"Yeah, well I'm certainly familiar with the cold. But that thing's like on fire—isn't it just the opposite—hot?"

"Frost flame, it's frost flame. A fire which burns cold. Nothing like it on Earth. This delimiter preserves it from wherever it came from. But you wear it like a vest, and you can wield the flame to do a lot of useful stuff."

"Won't I freeze?" Daptin asked.

"No—you'll assimilate to it soon enough. The wearer doesn't get very cold, and you can regulate the flame. The best part is you can shoot it out, extend it, y'know, basically wield it. I figured since Fake got the cinder block I'd give you this. Lucky I found it before someone else bought it."

"Well, what the hell. I dislocated myself from the world with popcorn, why not don a cold-burning vest?" Daptin said as he took the frost flame delimiter from Confetti and put it on over his blue jacket. The gray flame danced all about him.

"Ooh, cold!" Daptin said.

"It'll always feel cold when you first put it on, but you'll feel normal soon enough. Here—do a test," Confetti said, holding out her half-full cup of soda. "Extend the flame to engulf the cup, to chill my soda."

Daptin pointed his hand toward the soda and willed the flame to reach outward. Jerkily, the frost flame licked the cup and quickly chilled it.

"That's all there is to it. If you can will the flame to do that, you can eventually learn to will it to do anything," Confetti said, taking a sip of her chilled beverage.

"Hmm. Now this I like. It's getting comfortable already."

"Well now we have a lot of stuff. I wonder if we can even carry it all," Fake said.

"Yeah. We have more than enough stuff for the mission. I guess we should get going soon," Daptin said.

"Well here, before you go, take some caviar," Confetti said, placing several glass containers of caviar on the countertop.

"Okay Confetti, what special properties does the caviar have?" Daptin asked. "Does it turn you into a finch? Teleport barrels? Do sky writing?"

"No, it's just ordinary caviar, compliments of the house. We always have lots of it around. Nothing weird," Confetti said.

"Hmm. Interesting," Fake commented.

"But if you ever do want to turn into a finch, or teleport barrels, or do sky writing, stop by again and I'm sure we'll be

able to accommodate you,” Confetti said with a smile.

“I’ll remember that,” Daptin said. “But the clocks—they’re sort of like sky writing. Y’know?”

“A little. I guess you could carve writing into one. I never saw it done before, but it’s certainly possible,” Confetti said.

“Well—so how do we pack all this stuff up?” Fake asked.

“Okay, let me add this up,” Confetti said. “There’s the cinder block, which I can see you’re very happy with, Fake. Then there’s the socks, and the fucking morons, and the great gross of slay balloons. Okay. And the marker—now Daptin, be extremely careful with that thing—they’ve been known to topple office buildings, so just be cool with it. Alright? Okay—the situation grenades of course, the huge tin clocks, the free caviar, the frost flame delimiter you’re wearing, the submachineguns. Now what am I forgetting? Oh yeah—three bags of goodbye popcorn, and—what else? I know there’s one more thing...”

“Yeah, the special peas. Right?” Daptin said.

“Oh yes—one canister of conductor voice peas. These are great fun.”

“Life of the party,” Daptin said.

Confetti looked over the bill she had been writing.

“Okay, everything looks to be in order!” Confetti said with an approving expression.

“Yeah, but how’re we gonna carry the stuff all the way over to the Caxopys?” Daptin asked.

“And how much does it all cost?” Fake queried.

“Don’t worry about it,” Came a voice from behind them. They turned to see the leather-clad Cursive Caxopy with a lit cigarette in her hand.

“Oh hi Cursive,” Confetti said. “Just finished equipping your proteges.”

“I see. I see,” Cursive said.

“I’m glad you’re here. You can help us carry all this stuff back to your place,” Daptin said.

“Oh, no need. We can use my disappear simulator to disappear over there,” Cursive said.

“You can disappear like the gods?” Fake asked.

“Of course I can—can’t you, Fake?”

“No.”

“Well, gather all your junk up and let’s go. I came by because you’re late. This mission is time-sensitive, and we have to get it started. Come on you two.”

“Hey okay,” Daptin said.

“One pile of junk coming right up,” Fake said.

Just then, Elaine Caxopy, Cursive’s sister and business partner, walked into Basement-Wall-Thursday Mortal Supply. She wore a pretty, light-blue dress—the antithesis of Cursive’s hard attire.

“Oh, you’re here. I was just coming by to see if our two recruits are all set,” Elaine said.

“They’re done,” Cursive said, taking a drag on her cigarette. “We were about to disappear over in my simulator.”

“Well,” Elaine said, looking a little hesitant, “okay. But my truck’s outside. You’ll take care of it, won’t you Confetti?”

“Of course,” Confetti said, and Elaine tossed her the keys to the truck.

“No need to gather ‘round—I’m good at this,” Cursive said.

The next moment, Cursive, Elaine, Daptin and Fake were in the offices of The Caxopy Group.

“Nice simulation,” Elaine said.

Cursive didn’t reply.

“Well you two, come on. We have a cup of coffee to show you,” Elaine said urgently.



# NINE

“Notice the strange glyphs on the styrofoam—we haven’t been able to match these to any known form of writing,” Elaine Caxopy said to Daptin Gone and Fake Cerquaine, gingerly holding a twenty-ounce styrofoam coffee cup with a plastic lid.

“Probably just a silly corporate logo,” Cursive Caxopy said with a sneer.

“So this is our mission?” Daptin asked. “Buying coffee?”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Cursive said tersely.

“I just thought—” Daptin started.

“Would we need all these supplies just to buy coffee, Daptin?” Fake said.

“I mean—maybe there’re some weird, super weird coffee shops or delis in Boltpike. I mean I don’t know,” Daptin said.

“You can see the coffee’s still hot—you can see the steam. They must’ve just got it—and without our help,” Fake said.

“You’re both very, very, very mistaken,” Elaine said. “Open your minds and listen. This is the Cup of Coffee. And we didn’t just get it—in fact, by our estimates it’s well over 40,000 years old. Now just wait—there’s more. Hold on a second.”

With this, Elaine placed the cup carefully on her desk.

“Tavmatey—are you with us?” Elaine asked, facing the cup. Silence.

“Tavmatey Numblem—if you can hear me, please respond. Please. We have two new friends here.”

“Well I don’t—” Daptin began.

“Quiet!” Elaine snapped as she held out her arm.

Then a small voice emerged from deep within the cup.

“Hi Elaine,” said the distant yet distinctly husky female voice.

“Hi Tav. The two are here, the two we told you about last time we talked. Remember?” Elaine said, staring distantly at the cup.

After a pause, Tavmatey said “I remember. The rescue team.”

“That’s right. They’re off to Boltpike to retrieve you,” Elaine said.

“Oh boy, I can’t wait to get out of here,” Tavmatey said.

“Now is she in the cup in some way,” Faked asked, “or is it just a means of communicating?”

“Good question,” Cursive said. “We’re not entirely sure, but we know one thing—the sound of the girl’s voice gets louder in some places and softer in others. And by mapping our various readings, we’ve determined that she must be somewhere in Boltpike.”

“So there it is,” Elaine said. “You have to go into Boltpike with the cup and find where the voice is the loudest. Your relative anonymity will be of great help—if one of us were seen wandering about Boltpike listening to a cup of coffee, there’d be trouble for sure.”

“Yeah, but like—when we get there, to where the voice is loudest, then what?” Daptin asked, staring at the cup.

“At that point things will be getting clearer for you,” Elaine said. “You should be able to perceive some sort of entryway—a door, a hatch, a curtain, a window—something. This will likely be a one-way portal of some class. So remember—and this is vitally important—do not go all the way through the portal. No. Just go halfway, and you should be able to see Tavmatey. At this point, she can come back to The Avert Cities with you. But be careful—we don’t want you getting stuck too.”

Daptin’s stomach growled loudly.

“Hungry, Daptin?” Cursive asked.

“Um yeah,” Daptin replied. “The only thing I ate today was a Twix.”

“Twix?” Cursive asked. “Isn’t that a candy bar from the future?”

“Uh, no. As far as I know, Twix has been around for a few years. Maybe you’re thinking of a new flavor they’re working on?”

“No...” Cursive said, looking down. “I guess it was some other candy bar from the future I was thinking of.”

“Do you time travel?” Fake asked.

“Yeah,” Cursive said distantly. “Sometimes.”

“Cool,” Daptin said, nodding.

“I’d like a Twix,” came Tavmatey’s little voice from the cup. “I think I remember it. Caramel cookie treats?”

“With chocolate,” Fake said.

Tavmatey didn’t reply, so Fake looked around and then moved her face closer to the cup.

“With chocolate,” she repeated.

“Yeah,” Tavmatey said.

“I’ll order out for the briefing,” Cursive said. “Any preferences you two, foodwise?”

“Pasta beverage and crullers might be good,” Fake suggested.

“Um—maybe some eight eggs with filberts or something? Or custard grain?” Daptin said.

“You can have pizza, pizza, pizza, pizza, pizza, pizza, or pizza,” Cursive said.

“Some selection,” Fake said.

“Could you repeat the list, Cursive?” Daptin asked.

“Pizza. Wow,” came Tavmatey’s voice.

“Well I’m ordering from Xould Pete’s Camera. And they have pizza,” Cursive said, almost belligerently.

“Fine! Like why’d ya ask then?” Daptin wondered.

“To see what foods you like. You can tell a lot about a guy from what he eats,” Cursive said.

“What about a gal?” Fake asked.

“Why, are you a gal, Fake?” Cursive asked, taking her cigarette from her lips.

“You could say that,” Fake said.

“Well,” Cursive said, looking from Fake to Daptin, “what will we have to drink?”

“Pepsi, Pepsi, Pepsi, Pepsi or Pepsi?” Daptin asked.

“What, are you funny? Xould Pete’s Camera is a great restaurant. They have every drink ever,” Cursive said shaking her head back and forth in a flippant manner.

“Well then I suppose I’ll have a Mr. Pibb. They do have that, I trust?” Daptin said.

“Of fucking course!” Cursive said. “And you, gal?”

“Hmm... how about... Diet Cool Ranch Tempura Honeysuckle Nectar Beer Classic?” Fake asked.

“You made it up,” Cursive said.

“I drink that all the time here,” came Tavmatey’s voice.

“Come on, don’t make up stories,” Elaine said toward the

cup.

“Just trying to make conversation. So I never drank it. But it sounds good,” Tavmatey said.

“Now something real,” Cursive said.

“It is real—from the future,” Fake said. “As a mortal, I’ll be fabulously wealthy, and I’ll eventually bottle my delectable drink. So it exists somewhere in superreality—and if they have everything, they should have the cool ranch honeysuckle whatever I said.”

“You’re a little wise ass, but I like you,” Cursive said to Fake. “For you, antimatter iced espresso.”

“Fine,” Fake said, a bit irritated.

“And I’ll take a camera, too,” Daptin said.

“Cool your jets, tiger. I can take just so much dead-on sarcastic wit in a day,” Cursive said as she got up to walk out of the room. “Food’ll be here in fifteen.”

“Okay,” Elaine said.

A quarter hour later Cursive arrived back with the food, and the four entered a conference room on the third floor of The Caxopy Group, along with the Cup of Coffee.

“So I wanna discuss this whole killing thing,” Daptin said.

“What do you mean?” Elaine asked.

“I mean, a lot of the stuff we got at Basement-Wall-Thursday seems designed with killing people in mind. And I know, I mean, there was a light atmosphere there, but like, are we really gonna be expected to kill people?” Daptin wondered.

“Whereas this line of work might seem silly and fun to the uninitiated,” Cursive said, “we still speak the universal language—violence. One branching of violence is killing. When one bars your path, he can resist all reasoning, but he cannot resist superior force, by definition. The gentle is myth. While it might seem snuggly to harmlessly tranquilize all opponents, the truth is that when dealing in violence, serious injury and murder is unavoidable.”

“I have something which might help you with this moral queasiness,” Elaine said as she walked over to a desk, opened a drawer, and took out a black metal coin, a little bigger than a silver dollar.

“What is it?” Fake asked.

“Have a look,” Elaine said as she handed the coin to Fake.

Fake took the coin and examined it. On the front it had the face of an angry looking fellow wearing circle-framed glasses



with wind blowing through his hair. Below the portrait were the words “Him: Scientist”. On the back was a rendition of a sort of huge pillar with some people at its base staring up at it. Several eight-digit numbers also adorned the back.

“Cool,” Fake said. “My Dad would love this. He’s big into numismatics.”

“No one on Earth would recognize it,” Cursive said.

“Let me see,” Daptin said.

Fake handed the coin to Daptin across the big table, as Cursive smiled at Elaine.

“Pretty neat. What is he, a famous scientist around here?” Daptin said.

Elaine smiled but said nothing.

“What’s wrong?” Daptin said.

“Feel any different?” asked Cursive.

“No—should I?” Daptin said.

“Not too different,” Elaine said, smiling. “But you are changed.”

“Am I changed too?” asked Fake.

“Yes,” Cursive said.

“What is it?” asked Daptin, placing the coin carefully onto the table.

“That’s a killable coin. By touching it, you’re no longer killable. Congratulations,” Cursive said.

“What?” Daptin asked, contorting his face in confusion.

“You can’t be killed anymore,” Elaine said.

“Me too?” Fake asked.

“Yup,” Cursive replied.

“But,” Daptin said, “we’re like, we’re mortals, right? Mortal means we’re going to die, right? So what—”

“—as mortals we will eventually die, unlike the gods, who live forever,” Elaine said. “But with this technique, we can prevent premature death.”

“So how long do we live?” Fake asked.

“Hundreds, thousands, even tens of thousands of years,” Cursive said. “A drop in the bucket of a god’s lifetime. But enough of this dark talk—let’s eat! Lots of pizza for all, and beverages galore.”

Cursive took a number of cups and cans out of a bag.

“Where’s my Mr. Pibb?” Daptin asked.

“All out. I got you Blueberry Mello Yello instead,” Cursive said, handing him a blue and yellow can.

“Never heard of blueberry-flavored Mello Yello,” Daptin

said, examining the can.

"Now you have. And here's your antimatter iced espresso, Fake, my dear," Cursive said, handing Fake a black and bright-orange bottle.

"There isn't real antimatter in here, is there?" Fake asked, taking the bottle.

"A trace amount of antineutrons. Gives it a fruity flavor," Cursive replied.

"Well, it says on the bottle that it's completely safe, so I'll take their word for it," Fake said.

"What'd you get?" Daptin asked Cursive.

"Oh," Cursive said, holding up a colorful can, "I got a can of Diet Cool Ranch Tempura Honeysuckle Nectar Beer Classic. They had it after all."

"Hey that's mine!" Fake exclaimed.

"Hey babe, you agreed on the espresso. Get your own DCRTHNBC," Cursive replied.

"Oooh!" Fake said angrily.

"And here's your Cotton Anti, Elaine," Cursive said, handing Elaine a large boxed beverage.

"Antimatter cotton drink. Now this is good stuff," Elaine said.

"Antimatter drinks are big these days in Agoopish, if you two hadn't noticed," Cursive said.

"Hey, why is my Blueberry Mello Yello green?" Daptin asked, pouring his drink into a clear plastic cup.

"Blue and yellow is green. Q.E.D.," Cursive said.

"Maybe I could have some water? Some distilled, chemically pure water?" Daptin asked.

"Come on—drink it. It's good for you!" Cursive said.

"Let me see that Cool Ranch Nectar whatever can!" Fake said loudly to Cursive.

Just then, a buzzer went off.

"Jerald's here," Elaine said.

"Jerald will be helping you on your mission," Cursive said with a smile.

"Can!" Fake yelled.

Cursive placed the can on the table and left the room. Fake reached across the table and grabbed the can.

"Wow. It's just what I said. So they did have it," Fake said, bewildered.

"So they have an algorithmic beverage generator—so what," Elaine said.

“Are you guys gonna retrieve me,” Tavmatey said from within the Cup of Coffee, “or are you gonna talk about drinks all day long?”

“We’ll get to you,” Elaine said.

“I hope so,” said Tavmatey.

“Here’s Jerald,” Cursive said as she entered the room with heavysset fellow with short, straight blond hair.

“Jerald Hapal Hatch,” Elaine said, “meet Fake Cerquaine and Daptin Gone.”

“Hullo,” Jerald said.

“Hi,” said Daptin and Fake.

“Jerald’s from Fiestarkoon. Found Agoopish a few weeks ago just like you guys,” Cursive said.

“You guys are from Baskonontana, right?” Jerald asked.

“Well, I live there now, but I’m originally from Arctica,” Daptin said.

“I’m a native Powerssippian myself,” added Fake. “The best area in Baskonontana, if I do say so myself.”

“Huh,” Jerald said.

“Have a seat, Jerald. We have a lot to discuss,” Elaine said.

“Pizza?” Jerald asked.

“All in good time,” Cursive responded.



# TEN

The TV flickered on and the tape began.

It was an awkward moment—very, very awkward. Seen from a distance through an open door, President Emmerdine remained sitting behind his desk, but looked as if he might jump up at any moment. Granticaine Chug Perion had burst into the room moments before—pausing a second to catch his breath—even with the object of his mayhemmed advance right in front of him.

Then the three-man TV crew bounded in, the crew which had been following Granticaine throughout his horrifying assault.

A small TV set, barely visible, embedded in the President's desk, showed that he was acutely aware that Captain Perion had, in the past few hours, not only verified rumors of his supernatural strength, but had easily surpassed even the most outlandish whisperings.

Emmerdine glanced down at his TV and noticed that he, himself, was now on worldwide broadcast. He flicked a glance over to the camera, then back to his TV.

"I suppose," he said, slowly turning back to face the camera, "I ought to make a statement."

Out of the corner of his eye, Emmerdine could see Granticaine smiling broadly, but he tried his best to ignore it.

"These are difficult times for my people," Emmerdine said, holding his hands out in front of him as if pleading. Then, standing up, he said "Our struggle against the tyranny of Dramptica unites us."

In the next instant, an object dropped from the ceiling neatly into Emmerdine's hand—a pistol.

"We judge our strength by the strength of our enemies!"

Emmerdine yelled, and then began firing the pistol at Granticaine—shot after shot—spent shells clinking onto the wood floor. But Granticaine stood firm, wearing a calm expression as he took bullet after bullet into his chest, apparently unaffected.

Emmerdine's eyes widened, and he continued to fire. After all 30 rounds were spent, the President clicked the gun half a dozen more times before giving up.

The smile returned to Granticaine's lips.

Emmerdine dropped the gun and looked straight into the camera.

"My fellow Rovlanlampians, we are defeated. Surrender peacefully, for now," the leader said, holding his hands out again. "There will be time to continue the struggle—oonf!"

Granticaine sprang forward and shoved Emmerdine just as another gun was dropping from the ceiling. The gun clanged onto the floor as Grant spun Emmerdine around and easily ripped his arm off. He shoved the President forward, and brandished the arm like a baseball bat.

In the next instant, Grant savagely bashed Emmerdine in his head with the arm.

Emmerdine fell backwards over his desk and disappeared from view behind it. A moment later he emerged, a bloody mess, struggling to prop himself on the edge of the desk. Grant leapt forward and grabbed Emmerdine, lifting him partially up onto the desk.

Emmerdine's lips were moving, and his bloodshot eyes seemed to be pleading with Grant to listen. Grant turned his ear toward Emmerdine's lips, and nodded several times.

Then, still nodding, Grant made a sudden motion, and a look of surprise, then of death, passed over Emmerdine's face.

Grant heaved the President onto the desk, sans the lower half of his body.

The bloody mess landed clumsily on the desk and then rolled onto the floor with a splat. Grant then grabbed the side of the desk and shoved it aside with such tremendous force that it was propelled through a large window, resulting in a hail of broken glass. Viewers worldwide saw the camera shake as the crew tried to shield themselves from the flying shards.

Granticaine knelt down, raised his fist, and then brought it down hard onto Emmerdine's dead face. He propelled his fist through the head and into the floor, splintering the wood into a gory mess.

Then the soldier hero lowered his head and paused a moment. The cameraman stood up and backed away a little, trying to get a good shot of the enemy leader's destroyed face. Then Grant looked up into the camera, an unearthly fire burning in his eyes.

"Next," was the word heard round the world, a word that would soon be the latest catch phrase and T-shirt favorite.

The reporters dropped the camera and sound equipment and bolted away. The sideways image of Grant kneeling over Emmerdine's ruined form remained for a few moments, then sputtered into snow and static.

Granticaine clicked his remote and shut off the TV. The words Emmerdine had spoken to him—the words of a man who knew he'd be dead in seconds, were "Strip mine the blue hill in True, god." His tone had been almost mocking, challenging.

Grant wasn't sure why, but he'd lied about what those words were. He told the press and his superiors that the enemy President had said simply, "My family is no part of this—do not punish them." And oddly enough, this lie of Grant's almost certainly saved the life of Emmerdine's son, a military leader.

"Oh, again Grant!" said Joy, one of the naked girls at either side of the war hero.

"Yeah man, it really turns me on, to see you savage—so savage like that!" the other girl, Tapha, said.

"I was a different person," Grant said. "I can't imagine doing that now."

He was eager to discuss the matter, as the whole episode was so disturbing to him.

"How did you—y'know—like rip that guy in half like that?" Joy asked.

"I—I made a very quick, powerful motion. I did it very quickly... It seemed like the thing to do at the time."

"Hey," Tapha said, "we were already like, beginning to accept our defeat when your campaign began. We were all watching. Everyone was watching. You were the only hope. And a guy like Emmerdine—the only safe way to deal with him is to kill him. You are Dramptica, dude!."

"I am Dramptica," Granticaine repeated thoughtfully.

"My three brothers were killed in the war," Joy said. "When you killed that creep, I felt good. You did what everyone would have loved to do. And when you looked at him—after

you ripped him in half, and saw that fucking face of his still there, you splattered it into nowhere.”

“I felt that he wouldn’t really be dead until his face was demolished. As I said, I wasn’t myself.”

He’d met the girls at a party. He’d been in a hotel, in bed with them, for over a day-and-a-half now. It was a wild little orgy, and the most amazing sexual experience Grant had ever enjoyed. But the menage-a-trois and the repeated viewings of his bloody campaign started to make Grant feel very dark and very powerful. At the same time he realized that he was very uncomfortable with all of this—at least at some level.

And the thing Emmerdine whispered to him, “Strip mine the blue hill in True, god.” Emmerdine had said it as if he were calling Grant “god”. And he was saying it with contempt, as if he were challenging Grant.

Just then, the phone next to the bed rang, and Grant answered.

“Hello?”

Immediately, a voice like that of a documentary narrator said “There’s a machine out there which just might change your life. If the phrase ‘it’s your lucky day’ has been overused in your life, no more. Again Jake, this is very—”

The voice cut off, and there was what felt like a dump truck slamming into the side of the hotel—and all of a sudden the darkness of night outside was replaced by a sunny mid-afternoon.

Grant moved the phone away from his ear and looked down at his companions—the one to his left was looking up dreamily at him, but she was different, and older. A quick glance to the right revealed the other girl, also changed—apparently an identical twin to the one on his left. Both stared at him with a dreamy expression.

Grant forced himself to remain calm.

“What madness is this?” he asked, leaning forward cautiously, feeling the same surge of supernatural force flow through him as he had felt during the end of the war.

The naked individuals on either side of him didn’t move, but continued to stare. Then, he saw a twinkle of intent in the eyes of the twin to his right, and before she even began to move, Grant propelled himself backward with tremendous force, demolishing the wall behind the bed, and thrusting his body halfway into the next room. He pulled himself through the hole the rest of the way and got himself into a tentative



crouch, blinking and spitting dust and debris from his lips, wishing he had some clothes on.

He looked around to see if there was anyone in this suite, but he saw no one. He felt confused and noticeably dizzy as he cursed the vulnerability of his nakedness.

But there was something so... wrong... about the phone call and the twin strangers. And it was definitely the middle of the night, not daytime.

He stood up, ripped the sheets off the freshly made bed of this new room, and opened the door to the hallway. Immediately, he noticed that the hallway was wider than it had been before—about twice as wide.

With the sheets draped around his massive form, Grant set off for where he remembered the stairs had been.

Granticaine passed by his former suite, and saw the door was open. Glancing inside, he saw the twin naked strangers up and about—one rummaging in a desk, and the other writing in a notebook. The one at the desk looked up, paused a second, and then held up a piece of stationery from the drawer.

“Is this where you were before? In this hotel?” the woman said, then looked at the sheet herself. “The, uh, Haybelcord Landovaj? 1151 Main?”

Grant paused in surprise.

“Before?” he said.

“This isn’t Earth,” the other twin said, looking up from her writing.

“A dream, then?”

“Not at all,” the first twin said, looking at the door. “Suite 2102—is that the right number?”

Grant looked at the door.

“No—it was 3103. But it was certainly the Landovaj,” Grant said suspiciously, trying to figure things out.

“Common,” the second twin said.

“When you get back, wait for my phone call,” the first twin said. “My name is Supple Jake, and today is without a doubt your lucky day.”

“What’s your sister’s name?”

The two were lost for words.

“We’re, uh, we’re both the same person,” the second Jake said. “I hadn’t considered you might be having such a wild party.”

Grant looked up and down the hallway. It was all so real, so lucid, so calm.

"What exactly is the situation here?" he asked.

"We'll talk in person back on Earth. Depending on your decisions, you'll be told everything."

Grant thought about that, looking at the wall he had destroyed.

"Sorry about my abrupt exit before—but I felt it the most prudent course of action."

"Not at all. It merely confirms what the process has discovered."

"Um, we're shutting down," the other said.

"Okay," the first Jake said. "But I just want to verify—you are Granticaine Chug Perion? The war hero in all the magazines?"

"I am."

"Good," the first one said, pausing as if listening to an unheard voice, then looking up. "So you'll return to where you were, but remember—you will have been physically absent. We'll call as soon as we can—under an hour for sure. Anything else?"

"What happened to Joy and Tapha? Are they okay?"

"Your lovers? They are unaffected. But remember—they'll have seen you disappear and then reappear. If you're been using drugs or anything, use that as an explanation. Otherwise—well, who cares. No one would believe them anyway."

"I don't know—the tabloids are looking for anything bizarre to say about me, after what happened. They want to make me into some sort of freak."

"Shutting down—now," the second Jake said.

And in the next instant Grant was standing on his bed, head brushing the ceiling, facing the no-longer-demolished wall, the sheets still draping off his shoulders. He looked down to see Joy and Tapha staring up at him in disbelief.

"Where did you go?" Joy asked.

"What happened?" Tapha added.

Grant looked at the lovelies, and then slowly sat down.

"Tell me exactly what you two remember. We were watching the tape, and then the phone rang," Grant said calmly, but with an edge of rage.

"You answered the phone, and then all of a sudden, you were gone. I saw it myself—I saw you vanish!" Joy said.

"My leg was on top of your leg," Tapha said. "I felt it drop. My leg dropped!"

Grant noticed the two were keeping their distance, whereas before, they had been all over him. Fear of the unknown, he supposed.

He sat motionless for a few moments, then clapped his hands.

“Okay team, the party’s over,” he said, looking at each of them in turn. They looked up at him dumbly.

“Get up and get dressed,” he said, finding himself getting angry. “And go home.”

“Huh?” Tapha asked.

“I said get out!” Grant boomed, and the girls got moving.

“What’s happening?” Joy said, crying.

“I don’t wanna go home! I hate it there!” Tapha whined.

Grant stood up, letting the sheets drop off of him.

“These matters are beyond your capacities to grasp,” he said, rage boiling within him, though he wasn’t quite sure why. And, walking towards the bathroom, he said, “If you’re not both gone by the time I come out, well—”

Grant paused, putting an evil expression on his face and taking a step forward.

“You’ll find out who’s next!” he boomed.

The girls panicked and redoubled their effort to find all their clothes. Satisfied, Grant went into the bathroom and shut the door.

“What the fuck is going on?” Tapha asked Joy.

“I don’t know,” Joy said, finally locating her undergarments. “But I don’t plan to stick around to find out.”

“The two continued scrambling, but then Joy stopped.

“Tapha—I have an idea. Get anything you can—we can sell it to people. Just think—his clothes—his towels—the sheets we fucked around in—you know there’s gotta be some sicko willing to pay big bucks for stuff like that.”

“Okay,” Tapha said. “But not his clothes—he’ll really kill us then.”

“Yeah alright—but everything else—c’mon!”

Grant finished his brief shower and stepped back into the room. Indeed the girls were gone—along with all the sheets, pillowcases, drinking glasses, and the like.

“Bitches,” Grant muttered, thankful his clothes were still there.

Just as he was getting finished dressing, the phone rang. His heart raced wildly and adrenaline surged. The phone rang again. He picked it up.

“Yeah?”

“Hi,” a male voice said. “I’m an associate of Supple Jake.”

“Yes?”

“Is this Granticaine Perion?”

“Speaking.”

“I assume you’ve recovered from your little journey?”

“I’m fine—but I’d appreciate it if you’d get to the point. What the hell happened and who in the hell are you people?”

“We are an organization which is interested in hiring you, and I’d like to personally set up a meeting. Beyond that, I can’t tell you much else.”

Grant sighed.

“Fine, let’s meet.”

“It will be in a public place, of course.”

“My personal safety is the least of my concerns. I was in some other world before—nothing like that has ever happened to me.”

“I understand your position, Captain Perion, but believe me, once you’ve had a chance to hear my offer, everything will become clear. And I think you might like it. A lot.”

“That would be great.”

“So—we can be in Haybelcord in—uh—I guess if we take the train we can be there in about—ten or eleven hours. That’d make it...”

“Around 2:00 or 3:00 AM. I’ll see you at three at the Thing Ping at Lianthene Station. They’re open 24 hours,” Grant said. “Does that sound good?”

“There won’t be many people around. Are you sure you’re comfortable with that?”

“There’ll be people around. There are always people around me now that I’m famous.”

“Good point. And we may be able to help you with that problem.”

“How—by making me unfamous?”

“Something like that.”

“Whatever. One thing though—do you know the color of the—uh—oh never mind.”

“What?”

“Nothing. What’s your name, by the way?”

“Oh sorry. It’s Letevs Fife.”

“How will I know you?”

“Jake will be with me—I think.”

“If she’s not, I’m sure you’ll recognize me. Everyone does.”

“I will. So I have to leave now if I’m to get there on time.”

“Okay.”

“I hope this is the beginning of a good relationship.”

“Me too.”

“Alright then, see you at three.”

“Goodbye,” Grant said.

Granticaine was restless waiting for 3:00 AM to arrive. He didn’t have real freedom to move around, since it was almost impossible to disguise his huge form. What had he planned on doing tonight, anyway? Having more sex with Joy and her friend, drinking more booze, taking more hallway. Yeah... that narcotic, hallway... Joy had introduced him to it...

Now that the orgy was over, Grant felt uncomfortable—in more ways than one. His war performance forever cast him as a freak. Maybe a hero, maybe a savior of the nation, but also someone who could shrug off high-caliber bullets without an armor-vest. Someone who could tear a man limb from limb with his bare hands.

And the girls’ reaction to his teleportation was the same—keeping their distance, afraid, rejecting.

Emmerdine’s last words, wherein he referred to Grant as a “god”, struck a chord. More than a few times in his life, Grant had wondered if indeed he was a god. But it didn’t ring true. His gut reaction was that he was something more than man, but less than a god. Demigod? Something like that, maybe.

Grant wanted to get away from the hotel, so he walked around, through several parks, and took the ferry across the river. There in Aizcland he went to a bookstore and browsed around, hovering near the religion and mythology section. If this whole thing with the other world was related to his true origins, then he felt a random browsing might indeed bring him to some useful information.

After not having much luck, Grant came upon a computer terminal which could search through a huge database for subjects, names, places, events, etc. He typed in BLUE HILL and began the search.

Several references were found, all pointing to a passage in “Dalcoyn Hightime”, an ancient text on Dalcoyn mythology.

He called up the passage: “And did Lemoadus cross through a queer land very high, and he’d have explored it if he wasn’t for Ooed bound, and he saw a great tree, and a web of yellow metal, and a deep blue hill, and the purest waterway, and the Lights.”

A deep blue hill. Well, it was something. He bought several versions of “Dalcoyn Hightime”, with varying levels and sorts of annotation.

He crossed back to Haybelcord, and had more uncomfortable encounters with strangers—all with that same attitude at once adoring and aloof. He’d been trying to read the Dalcoyn Hightime on the boat, but was interrupted too many times by autograph and conversation seekers.

Grant was incredibly uncomfortable just wandering around the city like this, never able to escape his glassy-eyed public. He wondered how he would deal with the rest of his life being like this. He hoped that Letevs Fife’s offer would turn out to be as good as it sounded it might be.

Granticaine had to hope, because the life he was currently living was nowhere near acceptable.

Finally, it was 2:50 AM and Granticaine sat at a booth in the Thing Ping, sipping a cup of good tar and waiting. His thoughts were a dark swirl, and he felt that no matter what transpired here, change was inevitable.

Sooner than Grant had expected, a man entered the Thing Ping, a short man with short brown hair and a carefully-trimmed mustache. He had a weird look about him, and he carried a briefcase. He glanced around the restaurant/store and caught sight of Grant immediately.

The man approached.

“I’m Letevs Fife.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Grant said, motioning for Fife to sit.

“Jake couldn’t make it.”

“I see.”

“She couldn’t make it because there’s a problem. A pretty big problem, really,” Fife said, looking worried.

“How so?”

“Well—I was hoping you could help me. It was in your—”

“—I’d be happy to help.”

“Yes, well, it was in your Prime Vestibule where the situation developed.”

“My Prime Vestibule.”

“Yes, Captain Perion. Your P-Vest is the place the Primate protocol-settler machine takes you when it—”

“Wait—I want some simple answers before we get into the details.”

Fife nodded, and Grant continued.

“I was teleported into a different universe earlier today. So

why not begin with that.”

Fife looked down.

“Okay,” Fife said, looking up. “I’ll give you the basics—and please—let me get through it before you start asking questions—cuz I’m sure you’ll have plenty.”

“Sounds good to me.”

“Okay. This is Earth, but there are many different editions, or versions, of Earth. Each is somewhat different, but there are major similarities. They coexist in some way—we’re not quite sure how.”

Fife paused, gauging Grant’s expression, which was stony.

“So,” he continued, “a method was developed about 12 years ago on my home Earth—Red Alley Earth—by a former colleague of mine—a method of building bridges between these different Earths. Now, once you know how to do it—building a bridge is pretty easy—but from any given point on one Earth, only one other Earth is available—and location is analogous. The thing is—if you bridge and then travel a ways—and then bridge again—you may find yourself in a different edition of Earth from where you started. There are areas of limit, you see.”

Grant nodded, eyes narrowed.

“So, to make a long story short, we began exploring, and a few years ago I struck out on my own and discovered the Primate Algorithm.”

Fife eyed Grant, obviously worried as to the other’s acceptance of his spiel.

“Primate Algorithm?” Grant asked.

“Yes. You see, we discovered, quite by accident, that every Earth has a Primate—an individual who is currently the most important, interesting, powerful, or whatever, on an Earth. See, we discovered a way to find each Earth’s Primate. It involves stimulating reality on an Earth in the proper way, resulting in the Primate being brought to the Earth’s P-Vest. This is a weird subdivision in an Earth’s reality system. And we can send an agent in at the same time to ascertain the identity and location of the Primate.”

“Jake.”

“Yes—she is the main agent we use in P-Vest missions.”

Grant took a sip of good tar, and a waitress came over. They both ordered, and the waitress left. They were silent for a little while.

“So what do you think?” Fife asked at last.

“I know you’re telling the truth.”

“How do you know that?”

“It’s plainly obvious.”

“How? Most Primates I tell this to are a bit more skeptical than you.”

“So I am this world’s Primate?”

“You are.”

Grant considered this.

“So what exactly is a Primate again? Not the monkey sort, I assume.”

“No, not at all. What it appears to be, is that in each Earth’s reality system, a single person is required to be Prime—to be first—to be apart.”

“Why?”

“We don’t know. There is something of a trend among our Primates, but also a great variety.”

“How many?”

“Primates? Right now there are 45. You would be 46.”

“Would?”

“If you decide to join my organization.”

“So I have a choice.”

“You do. If you decide not to join, however, we respectfully request that you keep all the information about us secret.”

“Fair enough.”

Fife looked down into his cup of good tar.

“What the hell is this stuff, anyway?”

“Good tar? You mean you don’t have it on your world?”

“No,” Fife said. He drank a little, and was struck with the strong flavors of smoke, licorice, and a hint of caramel. “Not bad, though.”

“So I am Primate here.”

“Yes you are. And the most high-profile Primate yet. Never before has the Primate been the most famous person on the Earth.”

“But doesn’t that follow?”

“You might think,” Fife said. “But it hasn’t really been the case.”

“What would joining entail?”

“Uh, well,” Fife said, “you will agree to join Overwhelm Associates and pledge your allegiance to it. You will swear to keep all our secrets, and promise never to stray away. You will be given assignments, but as time goes by, you will have more and more of your own command. You’ll also have to make up



an excuse for those here as to why you'll be disappearing for long periods of time."

"All this is acceptable to me, but I need proof and I need it now."

"I thought you said you believed me."

"I said you were telling the truth, as you know it. You could be mistaken."

"Well, I—"

"—I'll be frank. Mr. Fife. In analyzing the situation, I've determined that if you stall in proving your claim, the likelihood increases that you—or those controlling you—mean me harm."

Fife looked out the window, at the empty streets, and then back to Grant.

"I can bridge us out of here, but we'll need a boat. The next Earth over in this exact area is ocean, here in Haybelcord."

"Come again?"

"If I were to build a bridge right here, we'd wind up in an ocean, on the next Earth over."

"It would be proof, though."

"Yeah, but it would also be suicide."

"This booth can float."

"Huh?"

"The booths here—they're designed to float in a flood."

Fife began looking around.

"This is crazy."

"Yes it is," Grant replied.

"And it'll draw a lot of attention."

"I do that already."

"But you don't understand," Fife said. "It's not like teleportation—you walk to move through the bridge—a couple of times, usually. So we'd have to move this booth into and out of the space I build the bridge in."

"I can move it."

"Yes, but think of the consequences. 'Captain Perion, war hero, seen rearranging restaurant furniture and then disappearing, only to reappear later soaked from head to toe.' Don't you want to avoid that sort of publicity?"

"I don't really care. I'm tired of pussyfooting around. I hate it! Let's do this. You do what you have to do, and I'll get rid of the people in the immediate vicinity."

"Oh no, don't—"

"—come on! I'm not gonna hurt them—I'm just gonna

bribe them!”

“Shew! You had me scared there.”

“So do what you have to do—build the bridge—and let’s get the show on the road.”

“You really have to get the people out of here first.”

“Okay.”

Grant went over to the manager of the Thing Ping at the register, and made some sort of transaction. Soon, the manager announced the place was closing, and the few customers that had been there were on their way out anyway.

Soon, the manager turned out the lights, shut the door, and locked it, with a strange glance at Fife and Grant.

“What did you tell her?” Fife asked.

“Nothing perverted, if that’s what you mean.”

“Good. So look—this is crazy—but we need to clear a space large enough to hold the both of us and the booth—which I really hope floats—and space to move it in and out of the bridge.”

Grant heaved a number of tables and booths into a messy pile. Fife was impressed at his natural superstrength.

“Okay, there you go—the space you need,” Grant said.

“Okay, now stand beside me as I build the bridge.”

Grant stood back and watched Letevs as he stared intently in front of him, a wild and intent look on his face. Granticaine looked around, but saw nothing visibly different. Suddenly, however, Grant felt a weird sort of soft jolt and a little rush of air. A feeling something like electricity was in the air.

“Got it,” Fife said. “You may be able to see it a little—only a tiny fraction of photons get through, outside the bridge, but there should be a little bit of a shimmer.”

“Can you see it?” Grant asked.

“Yes—but I’m used to it. Can you see it?”

“A little. I think I see something. Now what?”

“Well, we have to move inside of the bridge, and then we have to exit the bridge. At that point, we have a fifty-fifty chance of bridging. If it doesn’t work the first time, we have to keep doing it.”

“Okay—so I’ll just shove the booth over there?”

“Yes—and we have to go in too.”

“Okay,” Grant said, shoving the booth into the bridge. As soon as he entered the space, he saw the image of an ocean twinkling in the moonlight, superimposed over the darkened Thing Ping. “Now what?”

“Well—I’ll sit in the booth and you push it—but be ready to be in the water!”

“Okay,” Grant said, taking a deep breath. “Here goes.”

And he pushed the booth hard out of the bridge, but he was still in the Thing Ping.

“Don’t worry,” Fife said. “Like I said, it’s fifty-fifty every time. Just like flipping a coin.”

“Okay,” Grant said, getting around to the other side of the booth and shoving it back into the bridge.

“So I can try again?” Grant asked.

“Yup. You just gotta keep doing it till you get through.”

Grant took a deep breath and pushed the booth again. This time, they went through, and they fell with a splash into a chilly ocean.

Grant struggled to keep his grip on the booth as he fell under the surface of the water.

Luckily, the booth did float, and Fife managed to stay relatively dry. Grant spit water out of his mouth as he clambered up into the booth.

“I—I guess you’re legitimate,” Grant said, laughing a little. Fife also laughed.

“I’m glad I could satisfy you.”

Grant sighed as the two were overcome by the silence and calm of the place. Nothing but the ocean and the light of the moon and the lapping of water against the booth...

After a while, Fife spoke.

“So what do you think?”

“Let me ask you about Jake first. What was the problem with her that you mentioned before?”

“Well—when she departed there was one of her, but when she returned, there were two of her. Apparently you had been having some sort of wild party.”

“I was with two girls, yes.”

“So somehow, when the process inserted Jake into your P-Vest, it wanted put her where your lover was—only thing is, there were two lovers, and hence, two Jakes.”

“So she remained split when she returned?”

“Yes. It’s pretty scary. One of her was more than enough!”

Grant laughed, but then got serious again.

“What is she going to do? Are both copies the same person, totally?” Grant asked.

“I don’t know. We’re doing some tests, but both of them feel that they are the real Jake, and as far as I know, they are. But

only one can continue on in her P-Vest capacity. So I'm afraid we're in for some difficult times with her—or rather, them.”

“It's weird.”

“Yeah. And I wanted to ask you—was there anything strange about the girls you were with? Also, I'd really like to meet them and—if it's possible—test them.”

“Well, they were definitely into fun. Booze and drugs and sex, every which way. But beyond their hedonistic character, they didn't seem particularly interesting.”

“I see.”

“Sorry for causing all this mess,” Grant said.

“No, no. After saving your nation from almost certain defeat, you're entitled to some fun. Heck, I've done it—had orgies I mean. When you have the power, you make it happen. But you just gotta remember to keep it under control, only do it occasionally, or else you'll start sliding down that slippery slope where it takes more and more to get you off. I've seen it happen, and it's not pretty. When you combine the hypernatural nature of Aconck with sexual perversity, you can find yourself in some pretty horrific situations.”

“Huh, yeah. And what is Aconck—another Earth?”

“Oh no—it's the overall name we use for the universe composed of all the different editions of Earth we can visit.”

“I see.”

The two were silent for a few moments, then Granticaine spoke.

“So what happens when I leave? Am I still the Primate, or does the Earth choose someone else?”

Fife nodded.

“We've been looking into that. It seems that different Earths deal with it differently. On a few Earths, we have gotten others into a P-Vest, but on most, the P-Vest is gonna be empty—or just pull our Primate back if he's on that Earth. It's an interesting field of study.”

Granticaine nodded.

“It's nice here,” Grant said.

“Well, it's not so nice in certain parts of this Earth, but right here it's nice. But are you okay? Aren't you freezing?”

“I'll be fine. I'm made of pretty tough stuff.”

Fife nodded. They drifted some more.

“So Granticaine—what do you think—does Aconck seem like a place for you?”

“Yes. I do agree to join your organization, pursuant to all

the details being as you've represented them, and no other details getting in the way."

"Agreed. So do you want to get back, or just hang out here for a while?"

"It's nice here," Grant repeated. "I'd just like to drift for a little while more. It feels so good, after the life I've been leading since the end of the war."

"Fine with me," Fife said. "Just remember, as we drift here, we're tracking an analogous location back on your Earth. So when we bridge back, we could wind up anywhere in the vicinity—a building, a busy highway, more water, railroad tracks, you name it."

"I'll be able to deal with it, whatever it is."

"I can see you're going to be an essential addition to my company."

"Indeed," Grant said, and they continued drifting.



# ELEVEN

Several hours after their meeting at The Caxopy Group, Jerald, Fake, and Daptin were on Earth. They stood in a service corridor in the Fozsapple Circle Mall in Plutomiana, Baskonontana. Daptin was wearing his frost flame delimiter, a vest which burned with a cold blue-gray flame. Fake's intelligent cinder block hovered a few feet above her. Jerald wore a cowboy hat.

"Why'd we have to come back to Earth and ride in Cursive's dumb station wagon for 45 minutes?" Jerald asked. "Couldn't we get to Boltpike directly from Agoopish?"

"Get the shit outta your ears, Hatch," Fake said. "You know this is a much more obscure entrance to Boltpike, and therefore, a safer one."

"Yeah," Daptin said, kneeling down, placing the Cup of Coffee on the ground, and adjusting his infinite-ammo submachinegun on its strap around his shoulder. "I just hope we can get over to that record store and over the bridge before mall security begins to hassle us."

"Who cares?" Jerald said. "We can smoke 'em no problem with our weapons."

"Jerald!" Fake said, turning around and pointing her finger in his face. "We cannot afford any incidents here on Earth! And I for one am not prepared to hurt anybody unless we absolutely have to, whether or not we're invulnerable."

"Who says we're invulnerable?" Jerald asked, stroking his infinite-ammo submachinegun.

"The coin, dummy," Fake said.

"What coin?" Jerald asked.

"The black coin, the killable one. Didn't you touch it?" Daptin asked, carefully picking the Cup of Coffee back up and

standing.

“What are you talking about? I never saw any coin,” Jerald said.

“Well, just forget it then,” Daptin said, opening the door leading into the mall proper a little to peer out.

“What do you mean forget it? They gave you a power and forgot to give it to me?” Jerald asked, upset.

“I guess they did,” Fake said, annoyed. “Maybe they didn’t feel you deserved it.”

“I deserve it! Hey, I deserve it! Let’s go back and let me get it!” Jerald moaned.

“Listen, you ass-backward Fiestarkoon idiot—this mission will go forward as planned. Get it?” Fake said angrily.

“I’m not prepared to go any further with you elitist Baskonontanans. I’m going back to Agoopish and get my coin,” Jerald whined.

Daptin turned to face Jerald, his hands inches from his gun.

“This mission will go forward as we’ve been instructed,” Daptin said. “Don’t second guess the Caxopys—they’ve been doing this since before our parents had sex to conceive us. For whatever reason, they appointed Fake as group leader for this mission—so her word is final.”

“Don’t threaten me,” Jerald said. “You’re threatening me, just cuz I can be killed and you can’t. I won’t have it.”

“Jerald!” Fake yelled. “If you hadn’t noticed, we’re all on the same team. We’re not threatening you. Elaine showed us the coin for a reason—because we were concerned about the possibility of killing. She thought if we were invulnerable, it might desensitize us a little. And reluctant as I am to admit it, I do feel less sensitive on the matter now that my own death is precluded.”

“And you, Jerald,” Daptin said. “You didn’t need such a treatment, with your gung ho, ‘let’s kill some innocent mall security guards’ attitude. Get some brains, man. Just because we have the power doesn’t mean we have the right to abuse it. I mean, did you ever kill anyone? Do you know what it is to live the rest of your life with that memory?”

“No,” Jerald said. “But if it’s kill or be killed, I know what to do.”

“Excuse me,” came Tavmatey’s voice from the Cup, much fainter now than at The Caxopy Group. “Excuse me, Daptin?”

“Hold on—yes?” Daptin said, holding the Cup near his ear.



“Now that we’re away from Elaine and Cursive I can tell you a few things,” Tavmatey said. “First of all, as they said, the mission is time-sensitive. But I didn’t tell them everything. If I don’t get out of here soon, I don’t know if I’ll last. So please, for goodness sakes, stop bickering and save my sorry ass!”

“Jerald?” Daptin said.

Jerald paused, and then relaxed.

“Okay,” Jerald said. “I’ll try to handle the unfairness internally. I do want a coin, though, and I hope you two will back me up when we get back.”

“You only have to touch it,” Fake said. “You don’t get to keep it.”

“Oh,” Jerald said.

“Okay—I think I see the record store,” Daptin said. “Now let’s walk over there calmly. Chances are, if we act normal, any security folks who see us’ll be confused enough that we can get over the bridge before they react. Okay?”

“Well I thought I was the leader here, but okay,” Fake said.

“Sorry—it’s just that you heard what Tavmatey said—we’re in a hurry,” Daptin said.

“No harm done. Let’s go. Cinder block—follow close behind us,” Fake said.

Daptin opened the door and the three of them stepped out into the mall. They walked briskly, one after the other.

“Break it up!” Daptin said. “Don’t walk right behind me—it looks suspicious.”

“Like your vest isn’t the most suspicious thing ever!” Jerald said.

“I’m keeping the flames as low as I can,” Daptin said through clenched teeth.

“The cinder block’s not helping either,” Jerald said.

Fake didn’t respond.

Then Fake and Jerald came up beside Daptin as they headed for an escalator. Though the mall was crowded, few people noticed the three with their guns and grenades and such.

“Daptin,” Tavmatey’s tiny voice came. “Daptin, we can talk freely now. How’ve you been?”

“Huh?” Daptin said, holding the Cup up to his ear, looking around to make sure this wasn’t attracting attention.

“You can stop pretending you don’t know me,” Tavmatey said.

“I don’t know you. I mean, I just met you today,” Daptin

said as they started walking up the escalator.

“Daptin, are you afraid they’re still monitoring you somehow?” Tavmatey asked.

“No!” Daptin said. “I just don’t know what you’re talking about. Did I know you in school or something?”

“Daptin! We were going out—don’t you remember?” Tavmatey said.

“Hold on,” Daptin said.

They got to the top of the escalator and spotted a few mall security guards nearby, looking in their direction. Though the guards glanced at the three, they didn’t react.

“Daptin—I’m serious,” Tavmatey said. “Remember, when you transferred to Shirt University as a Junior? That’s when we met.”

“Listen—I never went to Shirt University. I went to Thatterine College all four years—Fake will attest to that,” Daptin said.

“Huh?” Fake said, as they approached the record store, ‘Bithopa Rocken’.

“Nothing,” Daptin replied. “This is it—Bithopa Rocken.”

“Let’s just hope we can find the bridge,” Jerald said.

“Shut up!” Fake yelled.

“Keep it down! Keep it down,” Daptin said.

They entered the store and looked around.

“Where’s the balcony?” Jerald said loudly.

“Will you keep it down?” Daptin said.

“There is no balcony here,” Fake said. “I’m gonna ask the cashier what’s going on.”

“Don’t—” Daptin said, but Fake was already cutting into the line of customers at the register.

“Excuse me!” Fake yelled. “Excuse me!”

The cashier, who had been talking with a customer, looked over.

“Where is the balcony?” Fake yelled, over the loud music.

The cashier, a scrawny little guy, eyed Fake’s gun and said “We have one at the other store downstairs. Why do you ask?”

Fake didn’t answer, but motioned for the other two to follow her out of the store. Once out, she noticed a few guards in the distance pointing toward the three, apparently concerned at the floating cinder block.

“Shit! We have to go to the Bithopa Rocken downstairs, wherever the hell it might be,” Fake said, jogging back to the

escalator.

“Wait!” Daptin said. “Not so fast—it looks suspicious!”

The three got to the escalator and bounded down it, Daptin matching the pace of the other two. The cinder block zoomed along behind them.

“Daptin!” Tavmatey yelled from the Cup.

“Not now, Tavmatey. We have some trouble!” said Daptin.

“I think I see a map over there,” Fake said as she began jogging toward one of the mall’s several atriums.

“Goddammit slow down!” Daptin yelled, following Fake and Jerald.

“Here it is. It’s here,” Fake said, finding a large map of the mall.

“So where’s our store?” Daptin asked, looking around for guards.

“Hmmm—let’s see,” Fake said, examining the map.

“Women’s apparel. Jewelry. Sporting goods. Children’s—” Jerald said.

“Shut up man!” Daptin said. “Just find the damn store, how hard can it—”

“—here it is—Haxelbong’s wing on the right—over this way!” Fake said, pointing.

“Okay, but slow down!” Daptin said.

They walked briskly toward Haxelbong’s department store, Daptin looking around nervously the whole way. They passed a little ferris wheel, then spotted the second Bithopa Rocken.

“Come on!” Fake exclaimed, breaking into a run.

“Shit!” Daptin exclaimed.

They entered the store, spotted the balcony, strode up the stairs, and stopped to get their bearings.

“Okay,” Daptin said, “behind a record rack, right?”

“Yeah,” Fake said.

“Look! Down there!” Jerald said loudly.

Down in the store, they saw two security guards talking with a cashier, who then pointed toward the three mortals.

“They have guns,” the cashier, a heavy-set woman, said.

The guards looked up and saw the three.

“I don’t get it,” one of the guards said.

“Come on—they’re confused. We should be able to cross the bridge before they come up,” Fake said, looking behind a record rack.

“Here it is!” Jerald yelled, as he slid in between a rack and the back wall.

“Okay that must be it,” Daptin said, as he and Fake followed Jerald.

The security guards were just getting up the stairs.

“Okay what’s the problem?” one of the guards said lethargically.

“Hey you jerks!” Jerald yelled at the guards. “Ha ha! Forget it!”

With this, Jerald pointed his submachine upward and began firing, spraying bullets back and forth into the ceiling.

“Don’t mess with us—it’s not worth it!” Jerald yelled.

“You fucking little dork!” Daptin yelled, shoving Jerald hard.

Jerald and Daptin fell down, followed by Fake. Jerald had stopped firing, but bits of the ceiling could still be heard raining down on the record store.

“You’re dead, man. That’s it,” Daptin said as he spied an opening in the floor underneath the record rack.

“Come on—into the hole. They shouldn’t be able to follow us if this is a bridge,” Fake said.

“I’m in charge now!” Jerald said. “We have to seal the bridge behind us so they don’t follow.”

Daptin slapped Jerald hard on the back of his head.

“Shut up!” Daptin said in a loud whisper. “They won’t be able to bring themselves to look back here unless they’re mortals—which I highly doubt.”

“But I just shot—” Jerald said.

Daptin put his hand over Jerald’s mouth, squeezing hard.

“Shut the fuck up! Don’t you understand anything? They can’t look behind here if it’s a bridge—they just fucking can’t,” Daptin whispered harshly at Jerald.

Fake, who had scooted past the sparring two, lowered herself into the square hole in the floor. Her cinder block floated carefully beside her and then descended after her into the space below.

“Hand me the Cup of Coffee, Daptin, and then get the hell down here!” Fake said.

Daptin handed her the Cup of Coffee and let go of Jerald.

“I’ll deal with you once we’re in Boltpike,” Daptin said, as he began to lower himself down into the hole.

“Come on,” Fake said from below.

Daptin arrived at what seemed to be a space above the ceiling of the store below. He had to crouch down as he looked around into the darkness. The frost flame from Daptin’s vest

faintly lit the area.

“Is he coming?” Fake asked from nearby.

“No—he’s getting up—” Daptin said.

“Just grab him and pull him down,” Fake said, losing patience.

Daptin’s hand shot up and grabbed Jerald’s ankle.

“Hey!” Jerald yelled.

Daptin pulled Jerald down into the crawlspace with a loud thud. After he landed, Daptin grabbed Jerald’s collar and pulled him up so the two were face to face.

“Listen you turd,” Daptin said, slapping Jerald across the face. “I’ll freeze your ass if you don’t shape up!”

With this, Daptin willed his frost flame to flare up, sending a chilly blast of cold air through the crawlspace.

“Understand?” Daptin demanded.

Jerald closed his eyes and coughed hoarsely.

“Understand?” Daptin asked again, shaking his fellow mortal.

“Yes,” Jerald said, coughing. “I understand. Now quit it.”

Daptin let Jerald go and diminished the intensity of his frost flame.

From above, they heard someone say “Well they got away. No use looking for them around here.”

“See Hatch?” Daptin said. “In their minds, we just got away—even though it makes no sense. Their minds refuse to think about or grasp the back of this record rack in any way. That’s the way it works. See, idiot?”

“I found the direction,” Fake said. “Off this way.”

“Get up,” Daptin said to Jerald, who complied. The two then followed Fake through an air vent into a corridor that was larger than the crawlspace.

Daptin’s frost flame provided a flickery illumination as the three continued down the hallway that was lined with wooden planks.

“I don’t think we’re in Plutomiana anymore,” Fake said distantly.

“Are you guys finally in Boltpike?” Tavmatey asked, her voice definitely louder than it had been in the mall.

“I guess we’re almost there,” Daptin said.

“I’m through with this mission,” Jerald said. “I thought you’d be more professional. I can’t work with people like you.”

Daptin turned to face Jerald.

“Do you understand that we can’t afford to have an incident on Earth?” Daptin said. “Didn’t Elaine make that very, very clear?”

“So?” Jerald asked, taking off his cowboy hat.

“So—why the hell did you fire your gun back there? I can’t fucking believe you did that! Are you totally out of your tiny mind?” Daptin said.

“Look Gone, they were about to apprehend us—I had to give them some pause,” Jerald said as he turned his hat upside down and reached his hand into it.

“There was no reason to do it. You knew it was a bridge, and you knew they wouldn’t follow,” Daptin said.

“We weren’t into the bridge at that point,” Jerald said, his arm elbow-deep into the hat, defying normal physics.

“Behind the rack was the start of the bridge,” Daptin said, eyeing the hat. “And you better not try anything with that magic hat of yours.”

“I’m just getting some licorice,” Jerald said, pulling his arm out of the hat with a little package of licorice sticks. “Snack hat.”

“Gimme a break,” Daptin said. “Just remember—if you pull any more shit—you’re dead.”

Fake stopped in her tracks and spun around. The cinder block came to a clumsy halt and then floated to Fake’s side.

“Okay—time out,” Fake said. “Let’s get something straight—I’m the leader here, for better or for worse. And I say you two stop fighting right now. We have a mission, and we’re on a tight schedule. Jerald, you were wrong to fire back there, but we’re all entitled to one mistake, right?”

“I didn’t hurt anyone,” Jerald said, biting into a piece of licorice.

“That’s beside the point,” Fake said. “Just promise me that you’ll see this mission through to the end, Jerald.”

Jerald paused, chewing his licorice.

“Okay,” he finally said. “But tell Daptin to stop bossing me around.”

“Look,” Daptin said. “We’ll be in Boltpike soon, and we won’t be walking on eggshells like we were back on Earth. There’s a difference, Jerald. A big difference.”

“I know,” Jerald said. “Want some licorice?”

“Not from your gross hat,” Daptin said.

“No thanks,” Fake said. “Now come on.”

“Everything’s cool,” Daptin said.

“Check those swizzle sticks,” Fake said under her breath to Daptin, “I think you might have broken one by accident.”

Daptin glanced at Jerald and snickered softly, but Jerald didn't seem to notice.

They continued down the hallway, which soon came to an abrupt halt. A ladder attached to the wall led upward.

“I'll go,” Daptin said.

“Are we there yet?” Tavmatey asked, her voice louder than the last time she spoke.

“Not quite,” Fake said. “But this might be it.”

Daptin climbed up the ladder and found the underside of a metal manhole, very heavy.

“I got it—a manhole,” Daptin said, pushing on it.

“Open it,” Fake said.

“Uhn. Jammed pretty good,” Daptin said.

“Push harder,” Jerald said.

“Super!” Daptin yelled. “Hoop!”

With this, Daptin pushed the manhole open with a cacophony of crashes. The ladder got bent in the process, but it was still usable.

“What the hell...” Fake said.

Daptin climbed out of the hole to find himself in what appeared to be an abandoned store, with the wreckage of a huge couch nearby, which had apparently been covering the manhole. Out a large window, he saw a bleak streetlight-lit street.

“Come on up, folks. The weather's fine,” Daptin said.

The other two climbed up the ladder, followed by Fake's cinder block.

“My goodness,” Fake said, looking at the ruined couch.

“How did you do that? That couch looks like it weighed a ton.”

“It probably did,” Daptin said.

“Do you have some power I don't know about?” Fake asked. “I didn't know you were that strong.”

“I'm not,” Daptin said.

“But—” Fake began.

“—just forget it for now, alright? It's too involved to explain.”

“Okay,” Fake said, looking out the window. “This is Boltpike, alright. Hear that Tavmatey? We're here.”

“Goody,” Tavmatey said.

“It's always dark here, right?” Daptin asked.

"More or less," Fake said.

"Sort of reminds me of home," Daptin said.

"Daptin," Tavmatey said from within the Cup, "I think we should talk."

"Here," Fake said, handing Daptin the Cup.

"Well?" Daptin asked.

"Well. How about telling the truth?" Tavmatey said.

"The truth is, I never met anyone named Tavmatey, and I never went to Shirt University. Ask Fake."

"What?" Fake asked.

"Tell Tavmatey where I went to college all four years," Daptin said.

"Um, you went to Thatterine as far as I know. I mean, I knew you there. I'm pretty sure you never went to Shirt," Fake said.

"I'm not crazy," Tavmatey said. "I know you. I've—y'know—been with you, in that way. I know you."

"This isn't true," Daptin said, shaking his head.

"I'll prove it. Shall I do that? How about your birthmark? You have a birthmark on your scrotum—in the shape of a pine tree. How would I know this?" Tavmatey said.

"Come on! That's getting personal," Daptin said.

"You really have a birthmark like that?" Fake asked.

"If you have to know, yes. Nothing I can help. I mean, I was born with it. It's not a tattoo or anything."

"So how does Tavmatey know?" Fake asked.

"Who cares?" Jerald said from across the room.

"Well?" Fake asked.

"I don't know. Maybe someone who knew me told her."

"Who would tell me that?" Tavmatey said. "And I can tell you more things. Your personal number, your parents' address in Arctica, both your grandmothers' maiden names, your favorite foods, your deepest secrets."

"Okay. Okay, enough. Let's be reasonable here. You're probably from an Earth alternate to ours. Although I've never encountered two Earths with duplicate people living on them, I suppose it's possible. Whatever, I'm not the Daptin you knew."

"Fair enough," Tavmatey said.

"Earths?" Fake asked.

Daptin shook his head and swatted his hand at Fake and said "Forget it. Later. Later."

Fake raised her eyebrows.



“And uh, Tavmatey,” Daptin said, “while we’re on the subject of secrets, just how did you go from being a Shirt coed to getting trapped inside a 40,000-year-old cup of coffee?”

“It’s a long story.”

“What year do you think it is?” Daptin asked.

“1692, as far as I know.”

“It’s 1687 to us,” Daptin said, staring at the Cup. “I was a Junior about three years ago, in 1684. Are you saying you met me eight years ago, in your experience?”

“Um—yeah, that’s about right,” Tavmatey said.

“It is 1687,” Fake said. “There’s no denying that.”

“Is she from the future?” Jerald asked.

“I guess she is,” Daptin responded. “An alternate future, if anything.”

“Anyway,” Tavmatey said, “I’m sorry. I guess you’re not my Daptin. But you’re similar enough to have the same pine tree birthmark.”

“It doesn’t look all that much like a pine tree.”

“Oh yes it does. I’ve seen it close up. Closer than you could ever have seen it.”

“Okay, fine. Very cute. That’s great.”

“It’s true.”

“Great.”

“So are you gonna get me outta here soon? I think I like you a lot better now, knowing that you’re not the same Daptin I knew.”

“Why? What did he do wrong?”

“Plenty. But you’re not him.”

“Well, you can tell me all about it when we finally meet.”

Jerald walked over to Daptin and talked into the Cup.

“Watch out Miss Tavmatey—Daptin’s girlfriend is a goddess named Spanking New Sarah. She’s a very—”

“—cut the shit,” Daptin said. “Come on, let’s get on with it.”

Daptin tried to open the door, but found it locked.

“Damn!” Daptin said.

“May I?” Jerald said, pointing his gun toward the large window.

“Go ahead,” Daptin said with a sigh.

“Ha ha!” Jerald said as he shot the window with a burst of bullets, shattering it immediately.

“Okay Jerald—that’s enough. Stop!” Daptin yelled.

Jerald stopped firing, but then saw that some glass in a

corner of the windowframe was still intact, so he shot at it.

"Stop it! That's not a toy," Daptin said.

"You sound like my uncle," Jerald said, stepping through the windowframe.

Daptin and Fake followed, finding themselves on a deserted street, with a lot of lights visible in the distance over to the right.

"Tell me about this Spanking New Sarah," Tavmatey said.

"For godsake, not now," Daptin said.

"Which way?" Fake asked.

"Well," Daptin said. "We have to see which direction Tav here is louder in. Tell you what—let's test it at one end of this block, and then the other. Maybe we'll be able to hear a difference."

"Um—actually, Elaine told me that I was somewhere in the downtown area of Boltpike. So why don't you head that way? Maybe you see the lights?" Tavmatey said.

"Um—okay," Daptin said. "We can see downtown from here, but it's a few miles off. How did you know?"

"Elaine briefed me on your route. She knew where this bridge came out."

"I wish she'd have told us that," Fake said.

"Just keep moving," Tavmatey said. "Remember, I don't know how much longer I've got."

"Whatever that means," Daptin said.

"What?" Tavmatey asked.

"Nothing," Daptin responded.

"So let's go!" Fake said.

The three began walking toward downtown Boltpike. About a minute later, however, everything went wrong. It felt like the street dropped out from under them, and what seemed to be a bright sun was darting about relentlessly in the sky above them. A sound like a thousand touch tone dialings came to their ears. They all lost their balance and fell to the sidewalk under them.

"What's happening?" Jerald yelled.

"I don't know!" Fake yelled back.

"Super! Super!" Daptin yelled, attempting unsuccessfully to stand up.

"What went wrong?" Fake asked.

"I don't think this—" Daptin began, but then everything turned red.

All they could see was red. They smelled a citrusy odor and

heard distant windchimes.

“Don’t stop,” Tavmatey said, much louder now. “Don’t stop now.”

Before any of them could respond, they lost consciousness.



# TWELVE

Daptin awoke to find himself on a hill covered with freshly cut grass. He heard the sound of a distant lawnmower, but couldn't see where it came from. A light breeze blew, and a very normal sun shone down from a cloudless sky. Nearby, he could see a wooded area.

The other two began to stir.

"Well, we managed to fuck our mission up royally," Daptin said, not fully awake yet.

"Was I dreaming?" Fake asked, rising.

"I'm scared," Jerald said.

"Oh, you're back," Tavmatey said from the Cup, sounding almost as if she were right next to them.

"Tav—Tavmatey—how long were we out?" Daptin asked.

"Not long. Maybe five minutes."

"What happened?" Fake asked.

"Beats me," Daptin said. "Any ideas, Tav?"

Tavmatey didn't respond.

"I guess not," Daptin said.

"No I guess..." Tavmatey said, "I guess I might as well tell you that Elaine had to mislead you a little. The actual plan was different than what she told you. Sorry I didn't—"

"—yes!" a booming voice was heard to say nearby.

"What the..." Daptin said, looking around.

"Uh-oh," Fake said, looking down the hill.

"After eighty years it has come to pass," one of the individuals coming up the hill said.

"You led us into a trap!" Daptin yelled.

"No!" Tavmatey said. "No! There shouldn't be anyone else there! It's impossible!"

Daptin looked down at the group approaching him and his

fellows. He didn't recognize any of the approachers.

"Stop!" said the man leading the group. He held a huge saw in his right hand, and a smaller saw in his left hand.

"Look!" said a tall, thin, cloaked figure with no discernible face. "Can it be? Truly?"

"The Cup! The Cup of Coffee!" said a young woman in a red-and-black checkered outfit.

"Let's do 'em before they get smart and run," said a woman in a black T-shirt.

A weird furry monster stared at the Cup and whooped with pleasure.

"Can it be over?" asked a large, stocky, oddly-built fellow with a colorful uniform.

A girl in a blue and brown outfit flew above the others, holding a massive, bizarre rifle.

"Hello," the guy with the saws said. "We are... here seeking that Cup of Coffee. May we, uh, may we just have it?"

Jerald raised his submachinegun.

"Back off," Jerald said loudly.

"Cool it," Daptin said, with his hand raised. Then he turned toward Fake and said "Blow up a balloon."

Fake nodded, took out a green balloon, and started stretching it. Her cinder block, which had been motionless, jumped up and floated in front of her in a protective stance.

"What say thee?" the sawman asked.

"There's no need to fight. We can settle this," Daptin said. "Who are you guys, anyway?"

"I would ask the same of you," the sawman said.

"I asked first," Daptin said.

"Fine," the sawman said. "Some call us Cup's Club, but that is unimportant. What matters is that we've been looking for that Cup of Coffee you have there for almost eighty years. Can you grasp such an effort? We want this to be over."

"Okay," Daptin said. "Here's the deal. I can see you're a fighting force, but so are we. Let me clue you in—we're mortals from Agoopish. I don't think you want to risk fighting us."

"Never heard of Agoopish," the sawman said. "But the force is yet to be found that Coabler the Sawman cannot soundly defeat. What say thee then?"

"Okay, okay," Daptin said. "Tavmatey, what do you know about all this?"

"Nothing!" she responded.

Fake turned around and began blowing up the slay balloon. "Let's talk this over," Daptin said. "If we find you to be a clearly superior force, as you claim to be, then we'll hand the Cup over without a fight."

"We are superior," Coabler the Sawman said. "And we will take the Cup. We have nothing to prove to you."

"If you're so sure, why don't you attack us right now?" Jerald blurted out.

Coabler shrugged.

"I want to try a civilized solution before bashing your foolish heads in."

"That is... certainly admirable," Daptin said, looking over at Fake.

Fake finished inflating the slay balloon. She then pulled a pin from her sleeve and held it inches away from the balloon.

"What's that, then?" the flying girl asked, pointing her gun at Fake.

The sight of the flying girl reminded him of The Tracy Taciturn, but he clenched his fists and suppressed the thought.

"Hit it," Daptin said.

She popped it and it worked. All the three could see was a gray haze all about them, and all they could hear was a clamorous and shrieking thunder.

"I guess we killed them!" Daptin Gone yelled, his voice nearly drowned by the din.

"We had to," said Jerald Hapal Hatch.

"I didn't know it would be this... serious," Fake Cerquaine said.

"What?" Daptin asked.

"The balloon," Fake said.

"Oh."

The three could now see the dark gray destruction swirling about all around, and it was like they were in a glass sphere—the slay balloon's safe area.

The clamor continued with no sign of diminishing.

"Okay wait," Tavmatey Numblem said from within the Cup of Coffee. "Okay what's the matter?"

"Huh?" Daptin said. "Did you say something, Tavmatey?"

"I said, what's the matter!"

"We had to use a slay balloon," Daptin said. "A gang of fighters came upon us, with saws and guns and stuff."

"That's not possible. You're not still in Boltpike, are you?"

"I don't know. Why shouldn't we be?" Daptin asked.

“Elaine deceived you. El Flactor Floor was in on it. The Cup of Coffee—they know more about it than they told you. The situation-to-reality aspect ratio is so tight in Avert that you can’t really transport the Cup more than a few hundred feet.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Daptin asked.

“I’m telling you everything I know—you might be dead soon and all. But no—like I said, the reason for the journey, the mission, was to get you here. They didn’t want the cupslip in their own city, so they had you do it in Boltpike. The thing with the loudness of my voice—all untrue.”

“So hold on—are you really in the Cup or what?”

“Yes! I mean, I’m here in this place. It’s like I have a normal life, but it’s not my own. I live here and stuff. And I have my friends, but it’s just a fancy jail cell, as far as I’m concerned.”

“But Tavmatey—what the hell is your involvement in the Cup?” Daptin asked.

“I—there’s a nearby world—I guess—where me and you were like—I dunno.”

“Tavmatey—we can talk about all this later. Just tell me where we are right now. Okay? Where are we?”

“I’m unsure. My major cupslip was from Earth, with a much looser ratio. Coming from an Avert City like Boltpike, I don’t know. It changes both reality and situation, though. That’s how I got into this current life. Situation just wrapped around me in this way, and here I am.”

“But what sort of place is this?” Daptin asked.

“I don’t know—why don’t you look around and see?” Tavmatey responded.

“I can’t! The balloon’s destruction is still exploding, if you can’t hear it. It was a wilderness area, but with tended grass. I heard a lawnmower, so there must be people nearby—who I guess we just killed, along with that gang. Sorry folks...”

“Now Daptin, this gang—I heard them say something about the Cup?” Tavmatey said.

“They said they were looking for the Cup and had finally found it.”

All of a sudden the clamor died down, and there was a sound not dissimilar to that of a toilet flushing. The gray cloud began to lighten.

“I guess that’s the extent of it,” Fake said, looking down at the unimpressive popped balloon on the ground.

“Heads up!” Jerald said, pointing his submachinegun toward a dark shape looming in the gray cloud.



“What the—” Daptin began.

The shape disappeared, but a moment later, a person appeared a few feet away from Daptin, Fake, and Jerald. It was the girl with the big weird rifle. She wore a blue and brown military uniform, and sported wavy light brown lovely hair. She appeared barely into her twenties.

“Now I can hurt you, but you can’t hurt me. I’m willing to listen to what you might have to say, so save your ammo. This me, Pattern Integrity,” the girl said.

Jerald raised his gun and backed away.

“I’m not fooling around!” Pattern said, pointing her rifle at Jerald.

Jerald continued to back up, passing outside the perimeter of the safe area. A few seconds later, he stumbled back in, coughing, and dropped to his knees.

“Pretty nasty out there, huh?” Pattern asked.

“Look, who the hell are you?” Fake asked.

Pattern swung her rifle around and pointed it at Fake. Fake held up her hands and smiled a nervous smile. Her cinder block hovered warily above her shoulder.

“If it means anything, we can’t be killed either,” Fake said.

“Maybe not, but I could probably injure you,” Pattern said, then she turned her attention to the Cup of Coffee.

Daptin faced her.

“You like it?” Daptin said, holding up the Cup and willing his frost flame to burn with great intensity.

“Yes I like it,” Pattern said. “I haven’t seen it for a long time.”

Jerald, still choking, raised his gun and fired a short burst at Pattern Integrity. It hit her in the chest, and she vanished for a moment, then reappeared, unharmed. She then pointed her rifle at Jerald and shot a small yellow energy burst at him.

Jerald collapsed immediately.

“Now talk about what you did and who you are,” Pattern Integrity said.

“Um—well,” Daptin said, “we’re mortal agents from Agoopish on a special mission. Apparently, we were deceived by our superiors, and we wound up in this place, wherever it is. Our mission was—is—to rescue a woman named Tavmatey Numblem, who we can hear from within the Cup.”

“We were charged to use the Cup and then safely return it,” Fake said. “Your little gang seemed intent upon using force against us, so we decided to use force against you instead. But

I guess you lived, unfortunately.”

“Well,” Pattern said, “I have personal reasons for wanting to rediscover the Cup. I understand your position, but I will have it. Hand it over now, boy.”

Pattern Integrity lowered her gun and approached Daptin, her hand outstretched for the Cup.

“Super!” Daptin yelled, as he brought his right hand up over his left shoulder, then savagely hit Pattern on the side of her head with the back of his hand. Such was the ferocity of the blow that Pattern’s head was half ripped from her neck. For a moment, she was a bloody mess, but she quickly vanished and reappeared in the air above Daptin, with her rifle’s barrel pointed at Daptin’s forehead, lightly touching it.

“That was an interesting sensation,” the floating girl said. “I see you’re quite a strong little brat. Now put down the Cup or I’ll blow your a head off a lot cleaner than you did mine.”

Just then another form approached the safe area. Daptin turned his eyes to the right, without moving his imperiled head, to see a bleary-eyed and raggedly dressed Coabler the Sawman enter the safe area.

“Ho, Integrity,” he said. “Always you to be spared the indignities of disaster. Easy now girl, these fellows are holders of the Cup, do not threaten them.”

Pattern backed off and floated to the ground.

“Look, we don’t want any trouble,” Fake said, looking down at Jerald. “Is he dead?”

“I guess so,” Pattern said matter-of-factly.

Daptin carefully pulled his submachinegun’s strap over his head and dropped the gun to the ground. He then sat down Indian style, holding the Cup of Coffee on his left knee.

“I need a moment to commune with the Cup before you wrest it from me,” Daptin said, reaching into one of the pockets of his vest.

“Just take it from him!” Coabler said to Pattern.

“I tried—he knocked my head off.”

Daptin grabbed a big handful of goodbye popcorn out of his pocket and tossed it into his mouth.

“Don’t commit suicide, you jerk,” Pattern said.

Daptin crunched the popcorn for a few moments, and then disappeared along with the Cup of Coffee.

“Where’d he go, girl!” Pattern yelled at Fake.

“I don’t—he—he’s gone,” Fake said.

Coabler ambled over to Fake and grabbed her by her upper

arms, shaking her.

“Now we’re all a little dazed from that bomb you set off, but you tell me now where the boy went with the Cup or I’ll cut you up into a googol little pieces!”

“He ate some—”

Pattern raised her gun.

“Truth blast,” Pattern said.

Coabler nodded and let go of Fake, who Pattern then shot with a thin blue beam. Fake stumbled around in confusion, finally lying down on her side in the grass, drooling. Coabler knelt down beside her.

“Now that’s better, hey, lass. Now little girl, where is your green-haired compatriot, hey? Tell me now.”

“He ate some goodbye popcorn so he doesn’t exist right now,” Fake gurgled.

“Clarify, check,” Coabler said.

“It’s popcorn which makes you disappear for awhile.”

“How long?”

“Depends on how much you eat. I didn’t see how much he had.”

“It appeared to be a handful.”

“A few hours—definitely less than a day.”

“Where will he reappear?” Coabler asked.

“In this vicinity.”

“Will the Cup also reappear with him?”

“Yes, as far as I know.”

“What’s your name girl?”

“Fake Cerquaine.”

“Okay. Now rest girl. You’ll be okay, lass.”

Coabler got up and faced Pattern. Jerald moaned and rolled over.

“System drain bolt,” Pattern said, gesturing toward Jerald.

“That’s fine. Now see about the others—I’m most worried about Bith and Tickle. Be off!”

Pattern Integrity flew off into the now-dissipating cloud.

“Ye’ll both be down for a time,” Coabler said. “Curse that Pattern for not grabbing the Cup. But still, this is all wrong. I can’t believe it’s the real Cup of Coffee that your friend had.”

Fake’s cinder block was floating around its master, nudging her innocently.

“What have we here? A charmed brick?” Coabler said.

“Yes,” Fake said, still under the effects of the truth blast. “A trained cinder block.”

“A funny toy,” Coabler said.

“That it is,” said the gaunt Kesh the Vector as he approached.

“Ah Kesh, I knew you’d be no worse for wear,” Coabler the Sawman said.

“What was the cause of the explosion?” Kesh the Vector asked.

“Fake?” Coabler said.

“I popped a slay balloon,” Fake said.

“There you go, friend Kesh—we were victims of a balloon.”

“Most strange,” Kesh said. “I guess you have the situation in hand?”

“Two stunned youths is all,” Coabler said, clinking his saws together.

“And the Cup? Was it a false?”

“Unknown. Though the nature of this world points to a cupslip entry, I need physical contact to know for sure.”

“So where is it?” Kesh asked. “Does Pattern have it? I assume she was here.”

“She was here, but she doesn’t have it. The green-top youth who bore it used a novel technique to temporarily set his existence to false. He will be back, though.”

“Any sign of the others?” Kesh asked.

“Not yet,” Coabler said. “Classic and Demolish should be fine, but as the blast tumbled me several miles from here, I assume they’re likewise trying to get back now. Bith may or may not have survived—it depends on his current degree of silliness. As far as Tickle goes, your guess is as good as mine.”

“When the fallout settles, we shall see,” Kesh said, striding toward Fake’s supine form, then kneeling.

Pattern Integrity appeared.

“Coabler, I located Bith. He’s a good ways away, covered with soot, and babbling incoherently,” Pattern said.

“Good,” Coabler said. “That leaves Tickle the only one to be worried about.”

“Are you sure Classic could’ve wielded her logic in time to save herself?” asked Pattern.

“She had a standing theorem that if she’s hurt or killed, she won’t be hurt or killed. At least, that was my impression,” said Coabler.

“Tell me everything you know of the Cup of Coffee, little one,” Kesh said to Fake.

Fake stared into the nothingness of Kesh’s face with an

unconcerned expression.

"We were hired by Elaine Caxopy to rescue Tavmatey. We could hear her inside the Cup. They said her voice was louder in some places and softer in others. They said they plotted it out, and that they thought she was in a space analogous to Boltpike, and if we found the spot, we could rescue her. But apparently they lied. We were only in Boltpike for a few minutes before we wound up here. They told us the Cup was 40,000 years old, that we should guard it with our life."

"She's under a truth blast, Kesh, so you can believe her words," Pattern said.

"Aye," said Coabler. "Now try and locate Tickle, good Pattern Integrity."

"No sooner said than done," Pattern said with a vanish.

"I don't care about the Cup. I wanna go home," Fake said without emotion.

"How about the fat one?" Kesh said, gesturing toward the unconscious Jerald Hapal Hatch.

"Pattern shot him with a system drain bolt. It'll take him awhile to recover," said Coabler.

"Bad choice, hers. I would have liked to question him, also," Kesh said, standing.

"We'll get our answers," Coabler said, holstering his saws.

The cloud of fallout was thinning to the point that the aftermath of the destructive wave began to come into view. Wisps of dust drifted over the four individuals as the safe area ended. A dank gray wasteland stretched as far as the eye could see.

Coabler surveyed the scene, and saw Classic of Logic in the distance. He hailed her and she waved back.

"Tis Classic yonder," Coabler said. "Fetch her."

Kesh didn't respond, but raised a bony gloved finger and extended a vector, a thin black line, to touch Classic. Then without moving, Kesh took hold of Classic and drew her to him. She moved, hovering a few feet off the ground with the vector extending through her abdomen. In a few moments, she was beside Coabler, and Kesh withdrew his vector.

"I could just as easily have walked!" Classic said, holding her stomach. "You know that makes me queasy."

"Complain not. You're here now, no?" said Coabler.

"Ugh!" said Classic with a shiver. "I hate those vectors!"

"Your decree is noted, Classic," Kesh said.

"Any sign of Demolish or Tickle?" Coabler asked.

"Nope," Classic of Logic said.

“Well I’m off to find Tickle,” said Coabler. “Keep an eye on these two, and if the boy reappears, you know what to do, Kesh.”

Kesh nodded, and Coabler jogged off into the desolate once-countryside.

“So are we finally through with this idiotic quest?” Classic asked Kesh.

“Who knows,” Kesh said distantly.

# THIRTEEN

Prince Ferrajalt walked up the stairs, but his mother managed to yell after him as she always did.

“Oh Ferrajalt!” Queen Ibnia said. “The Polants called from the road. They’ll be here in fifteen minutes, no more than twenty.”

Ferrajalt stopped, frustrated.

“So what do I care?”

He was tall, with short, wavy, light brown hair. His nose was slightly crooked from a childhood injury.

“It’s high time you grew up and realized your social responsibilities. You’re not a child anymore.”

“Okay, Mother, I don’t want to argue. Just tell me what I have to do and I’ll do it. Is that fair?”

Ferrajalt squeezed the exquisite banister in restlessness, waiting for the Queen to respond.

“Ferri, that’s an awfully mean attitude to take, don’t you think?”

“I’m just—”

“You are heir to the throne, after all. And it’s high time you started acting like it!”

Ferrajalt waited, a very unhappy look on his face.

“Look Mother, I don’t feel at all like you want me to. Not by a kiffin’ long shot!”

“Ferri, don’t cuss.”

“Just tell me what you want and I’ll do it! I can’t help the way I feel, but I can help the way I act, dammit!”

He waited for a few moments, then continued up the stairs.

“You’re to entertain the Polants, dear. Your father and I have to go to the Capital to meet with the Secretary of Defense,” the Queen said, having walked over to the bottom

of the stairs now, looking up at her son. "Top priority, you know, Ferri. In the national interest. You understand, don't you?"

Ferrajalt had a sinking feeling.

"What exactly am I to do to entertain the Polants?"

"I know it's tough for you dear, with all your siblings off at school."

"Mother, what have you planned for me to do?"

The Queen looked down.

"I promised Edna and Showam you'd take them down to the beach in the Balsativan."

"The Balsativan!" Ferrajalt exclaimed with disbelief.

"Well yes dear. Your father has been teaching you to drive it, hasn't he?"

The Prince looked around, angry as hell, trying to find the words.

"Why does it always come to me, to me, to do all your, your..."

"Now honey, if you can't drive it, the Polants will understand. They'll be a little disappointed, but they'll understand."

"Oh I can drive it. You know I can drive it. It's just, them!"

"Now, now. The Polants are very important people. And they're our friends. You used to be quite fond of their boys when you were young."

"We were all just kids! They didn't have the chance to become little evil clones of their parents yet."

The Queen gave a little face of shock, which implied concordance at some level, as she turned to leave.

"Whatever your problems with them, you will show the Polants a good time. That Balsativan costs us plenty, and I'll be damned if I let it rot out there."

"Don't worry. I'll make sure they're impressed."

"You do that," the Queen said, and she was gone into another room.

Ferrajalt walked slowly up the stairs, a draining wave of dread preying upon him.

As he approached his quarters, he felt something close to panic at the thought of driving the Balsativan by himself. He had no confidence in his ability to drive it, even though he understood all the controls, at least at an academic level. But the thing was so damn big and there were so many sheer dropoffs on the way down from the mountain!

But for the moment, Ferrajalt took solace in his amusement



park studies, in his models, in his blueprints. And he thought, down at the Hay-Hengren Seaside, where he'd take the Polants, he could slip away and meet Martha, his secret girlfriend. He thought of her face and body, and his fear faded a little.

He could do it.



# FOURTEEN

“Daptin, of course this is unprecedented,” said a voice which sounded like trees creaking in a thunderstorm.

“I was...” Daptin said, shaking his head to clear it. “I was okay?”

Looking around, Daptin saw he was standing at the edge of a parking lot overgrown with weeds. It was a chilly, overcast day.

Nearby, Daptin saw the weird dark humanoid void which was the Ultra Occult Entity, Obfuser.

“Do you know where you are?” Obfuser asked, approaching.

Daptin had never seen Obfuser in this form, but he recognized the voice somehow. In his previous encounters, Obfuser took the form of normal-looking person. But now, he seemed to be a great walking vacuum with jack-o-lantern facial features.

“Um, I think I was on some world that... I don’t know.”

“Do you know what it is that you carry?” Obfuser said, looking at the Cup of Coffee.

“This? The Cup of Coffee?” Daptin said, holding up the Cup. “Yeah. It’s some sort of artifact.”

“Yeah,” Obfuser said with what seemed a shudder. “I was surprised to find you here, but even more surprised to find the Cup of Coffee.”

“Isn’t this the same world I was on?”

“Daptin, you’ve been playing with forces far beyond your scope. Your goodbye popcorn works fine in mundane spaces, but disappearing from the cupslipped world you were in, there was no way to return. Anywhere.”

“I didn’t return?”

“No. You were simply erased from all existence. And you would have remained so, else for the Cup you hold.”

“Huh. At least this damn Cup has done something good. I wonder if I can still hear Tavmatey?” Daptin said.

“I wouldn’t think so, friend,” Obfuser responded. “See, the universe is ended. It’s been done with for a long time.”

“So how long was I gone?”

“Hard to say. From the time you left to the end was a few billion years. Afterward time hasn’t meant so much. But quite a while.”

“So that’s it? I’m screwed?”

“Not really. You have me, don’t you? I can put you back over there where you came from. Just realize that you have been but an enormously high-level reference for a great amount of time. That I found you is a miracle.”

“If the world’s ended, the universe, whatever, then where are we?”

“This is a high portion of existence, discreet from the universe. You were essentially dumped here as reality purged it’s high sectors. That is, the universe over, a lot of unfinished business could be taken care of, you being a very small piece of business.”

“Now, uh, Obfuser. Have you like waited like, billion of years since I last saw you?”

“Sort of, Daptin. But it’s not as bad as it seems. You finally get to see me in a more appropriate form. Had I manifested thus in Spoin Hall, I would have demolished not just your planet, but most of your galaxy as well. Now, in this area, I’m free to be who I am. You can even touch me. Here, try it,” Obfuser said, holding out his shadowy black hand.

Daptin reached out carefully and touched Obfuser’s hand.

“I don’t understand,” Daptin said.

“I was wondering how it would feel for a human to touch me in my true form. You seem lost for words.”

“It’s just too much. Like, too much for my senses to even begin to decode.”

“That makes sense. And to me, too, the sensation of touching a human hand in direct manifestation is intriguing. You know, no human could possibly be brought to a place like this. I certainly couldn’t do it. So you being here is a marvelous find.”

“Almost sounds like you wanna keep me here. I mean, not send me back, if there’s no way to get anyone back here.”

“Oh, worry not Daptin! I can reference this area as many times as I want, refinding you each time. Chronologically speaking, this is the first time. Or at least, the second or third. I don’t know how to describe it in your language. It’s very hard for me to speak in your language, but a challenge, since there are so many things to say and so few words to use. But anyway.”

“So like, where can I return to?”

“Oh, anywhere Daptin. From the reference, you were in a bad situation when you left, so perhaps you don’t want to return there?”

“Well, I’m not even sure where there was. I mean, like, okay—can you just tell me all about this damn Cup? I mean, there’s like such mystery about it. Maybe you could lift the curtain?”

Obfuser turned away and looked skyward.

“Daptin, even I, an Ultra Occult Entity, have my limits. The Cup is too deeply referenced. I can only tell you a few things. Like you’ve discovered, displacing the Cup’s spatial state will cause it to move in a direction I can only call ‘cupward’. There is no apparent destination, only a direction.”

“You mean even you don’t understand it?”

“I understand some of what it does, but like I said, it’s too deep to get at. That’s why you survived—the depth of the reference required depositing you and the Cup in a temporary area. “

“And what about Tavmatey? Or the origin of the Cup?” Daptin said, rotating the cup in his hand, and staring at it intently.

“Well Daptin,” Obfuser said, “Tavmatey Numblem was in a line with a version of you, but the thing is, with the Cup, whomever held it like you held it would have been the person she knew. If Jerald had bore the thing, it would have been him, see? A simple construct. Anyway, she is, in your contact with her, stuck in the near future as a high school student in the suburbs of what you know as Honorcora. The cup utterly reshaped situation around her. A funny effect.”

“How could we rescue her?” Daptin asked.

“Hard to say. I would have just used the vocal link to make a full-info fill, bringing her back, but I guess you wouldn’t know how to do that.”

“No,” Daptin said, still a little dazed from disappearing back.

“I mean, it would be inappropriate for me to intervene in such overt ways, don’t you see it that way, Daptin?” Obfuser said, turning around and wearing an extremely frightful expression.

“I can see your position.”

“Good,” Obfuser said, clasping his hands together. “Then shall I try my method of replacing you afall?”

“You mean just send me back to where I was?”

“Now well—you had goodbyed with the popcorn, eh? And you weren’t in a place you could return to. So I figure I should return you to an area in which you could have returned had you eaten the popcorn there. A hypothet construct, very easy to clay. You game?”

“Where?”

“My suggestion would be your apartment at Greatwall, but you might have a better idea.”

“Back at Overwhelm, huh? I guess that might be okay, but what about my friends? At least, what about Fake? I was about to kill that Jerald myself, before that girl killed him.”

“I would suggest drinking some of the Coffee you hold. See, though I know just a little about the Cup, it would allow you to travel cupward and then return to where you left from, since the pattern integrity of the Cup and its contents will manifest separately for a while.”

“But—I mean, actually drinking some of this stuff? Wouldn’t that be—I dunno—sort of a waste of such powerful stuff?”

“Not at all! It’s pattern integritied—no physical harm can come of it, since its pattern is apart from the universe, just like the member of Cup’s Club called Pattern Integrity.”

“Um—should I drink it now?”

“No—go back, prepare yourself, and then drink some. The situation-to-reality aspect ratio is too low at Greatwall, but if you go through an Aconck bridge, that should do it, since they are temporary and a lot tighter than the Avert perms.”

“It makes some sense to me, Great Obfuser,” Daptin said with a sigh.

“Good! Then let us do it.”

The next moment, Daptin found himself in darkness. Lights flicked on, and Daptin saw that he was back in his Greatwall apartment. Near the door, he saw Obfuser with his hand on the light switch, manifest in the same lanky college freshman form he had assumed in his prior visitations.

“And here we are,” Obfuser said, his voice alarmingly mundane in this form. “It worked. Perfectly.”

“I guess I owe you my life.”

“You would if I could be owed anything, but I can’t.”

Obfuser closed his eyes briefly, and then opened them again.

“Can I do anything else before I go away?”

“Um—so all I have to do is drink some of the Coffee—how much?”

“A few mouthfuls. The amount really isn’t important. Enough so there’s definitely some in your stomach, inside of you.”

“Okay—and then go through a bridge?”

“Yeah—but remember you just have something between eight hours and a day to find them. Just stay with them once you find them.”

“What about those goons?”

“Oh yeah—I hadn’t considered that. Uh, bring some of your Overwhelm friends. You will have to dispatch the enemies, won’t you? Well, you can do it.”

“Okay.”

“Okay then? I’ll be off.”

“Just one more thing,” Daptin said.

“Yes?”

“You said the universe was over with. But that it was, like doing something like purging sectors or something. Maybe you’re like using the word ‘universe’ in one way, but... to me, if you were still in existence, the overall universe, the totality of existence, I’d think it was still intact.”

Obfuser narrowed his eyes.

“I don’t quite know how to put it into words, but you are both right and wrong. My kind of existing is vasily deeper than yours, but at the same time we are both bound by the same ultimate borders. Sorry I can’t be more specific. But I hope this answer is helpful to you.”

“Well, I don’t quite understand it, but I think we’re gonna hafta leave it at that for the time being. Thank you, Obfuser.”

“You’re quite welcome, Daptin. This has been most entertaining, in my way.”

The next instant, Obfuser was gone.

“This is so fucked,” Daptin muttered to himself as he shook his head, looking around the apartment he hadn’t seen in months.





# FIFTEEN

“Have you found Tickle, then?” Coabler asked Pattern Integrity.

“Yes, but he’s in an awful state.”

“How so?” Coabler asked.

“Classic has him,” Pattern said, pointing toward Classic of Logic in the distance.

“Fetch ‘er, Kesh,” Coabler said.

Kesh the Vector raised his finger, but in the distance Classic of Logic waved her hand briefly. Kesh projected his vector, but it went far right of the girl.

“Logic is, my vector cannot pass through Classic,” Kesh said.

“Respect her power. Let her come hither as she pleases, then,” Coabler said.

“Is there anything that girl can’t do?” said Pattern Integrity.

“I’d rather not contemplate it,” Coabler said.

Soon Classic of Logic approached the group. She raised her hand and opened it, revealing a little plastic figurine of Tickle the Monster.

“Look what’s happened to him,” Classic said.

“Miniaturized?” Coabler asked.

“No—he’s a plastic toy. See—you can see where his eyes and stuff are painted on,” Classic said, showing Coabler.

“This is most disturbing,” said Coabler.

“As long as we have him, we can cure him eventually,” Kesh said.

“Can’t you just logic the poor fellow?” Pattern asked.

“I could try, but I don’t know what declaration to make. And since his condition could be a lot of things, the wrong shiftinlogic could do great damage to him.”

“Stick him in your pocket for now,” Coabler said. “He’ll be dealt with when the time comes. For now, let us await the return of this fellow Daptin. Then we’ll see if it’s the true Cup he has.”

Kesh the Vector knelt down and touched the ground with his gloved hand, surveying the scene and noting the unmoving forms of Jerald Hapal Hatch and Fake Cerquaine.

“If this Daptin doesn’t return, I wonder what will become of us,” Kesh said. “We can’t move toward the Cup if it doesn’t exist.”

Demolish All, who had been sleeping, stirred and raised herself up a little, her long black hair all mussed up.

“Did I miss anything good?” she asked groggily.

“No, not really, Demolish,” Coabler said. “Everyone’s here except Bith, who’s apparently on his way back now. I trust you’re all rested from the ordeal.”

“Ordeal?” Demolish said. “Oh no—it was fantastic. Such pure destruction and violation of order—blasted intense! My experience was an order of magnitude or two more than an intense and continuous orgasm. What a thrill!”

“Then you definitely ought to get yourself a few of those balloons,” Kesh said dryly.

# SIXTEEN

It was a dusky junkyard world, but the trucks were in good shape.

“Hi. I’m Leon James Hara. Welcome to my Small Universe of Trucks.”

“Um, yeah, hi. I’m Supple Jake.”

Hara, a young Asian man, extended his hand, which Jake shook. Jake was a hippie kind of woman in her forties, not bad looking.

“I don’t get many visitors here,” Hara said.

“Oh?”

“Oh no. So where do you come from?”

“I’m a lost soul with an opportunity. There were two of me, so one of me was offered a chance to go and not come back.”

Hara smiled.

“Well I’m so happy you came.”

“I’m happy to be here. It’s always great to teleport into a new world of some sort. It seems to be what I was born for. Another day, another alternate universe.”

“Well now that’s really something to talk about, now isn’t it?”

“What, travelling to other worlds?” Jake asked.

“Oh yeah! I only know about it because of this one world I have here, but I knew a traveller would eventually come through!”

Jake nodded.

“So you’re part of some organized system of alternate dimensions or something?” she asked.

“Oh no, I don’t have an education for that. I just know my own place in things.”

Jake held up a piece of glass etched with pictures. It was

square, roughly a foot per edge.

"I got here with this piece of Whintillru Glass. Are you familiar with Whintillru Glass?"

"I have to say no."

Jake turned the Whintillru Glass around and regarded it. Then she frowned and gazed at Hara.

"Wait a minute," she said. "Let me ask you something. Is this really a world, or are you just vividly imagining it?"

Hara smiled, laughed, and looked away.

"Of course I am," he said. "And I am imagining you. Let me reveal myself a little to you, here in my world, where no one else can hear. I could love you, make love to you, an imaginary woman, and tell you all my dreams and hopes. But I couldn't face a real woman out in the real world. They all must think I'm gay."

Jake shook her head and looked off to the side, angry.

"Now wait a minute," she said with emphasis, then turned back to face Hara. "I didn't come all this way to play the porno queen in your childish lust fantasies. I'm a real person whether you like it or not. And I have to stay here awhile before I can do anything else with this Whintillru Glass I got here!"

Hara narrowed his eyes.

"I am in bed now," he said. "I'm making this all up. Now let's go into one of my trucks, it has a nice bedroom inside, very high luxury standard. We can make love."

"Look pal, let's get one thing straight. This is a fucked-up situation. I threw away my life to come here."

Hara's eyes widened a little.

"I guess I must really have mental illness. I can't even get you to come with me. I want you to love me and come have sex with me."

"Y'know... god damn that Granticaine Chug Perion for that little menage-a-trois of his! It's all his fault!"

"Look lady. I don't know what this is all about, but I have to get up for work tomorrow, and if you're not going to cooperate and do sex stuff with me, I'll just have to get up and go to the bathroom and jerk off to a magazine."

"Leon... James... whatever your name is... listen to me... I am not a figment of your imagination... I am a real woman..."

But then Hara got transparent, and he walked into a transparent bathroom.

"What are you doing? Talk to me!" Jake said.

Hara took out a porno magazine which had a computer magazine cover on it. Then he started jerking off.

"That's bad luck," a strange little voice then said, coming from the Whiltillru Glass.

Jake looked down to see an etching of a girl in the woods, on the glass. It was moving.

"What's bad luck? Masturbating?" Jake asked.

"No. The place you wound up. The kid's mind. It's a stupid location."

"I have to agree... but now... who are you? I didn't think that the Glass had a mind."

"I don't know who or what I am."

"Can I break the news to you that you're an etching on a piece of extremely supernatural glass?"

"That doesn't sound so bad."

Jake shook her head.

"What's the matter?" the girl in the woods said.

"I may be the copy. I may be the original," Jake said. "Or there might not be a copy and an original. But I was the one who left. From scouting out Primates to chatting with masturbators and glass people..."

"I'm sorry. I lied."

"Huh?"

"I lied about not knowing anything about myself. I do know something."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I know that I was somebody. I know that I have a memory of signing a document with some sort of crazy purple pen saying that this guy The Tiredist Noava could time travel and use a past version of me in making the Whintillru Glass. But I guess he finagled me and used a future version instead."

Jake narrowed her eyes.

"Where do you remember coming from?"

"Oh, it was this wonderful thing, where we were able to go to different Earths. It was called Sweptim. The Tiredist Noava was my lover for a time. He showed me an awful lot of wonderful things."

"Sweptim..." Jake said.

"You know about Sweptim?" the girl in the glass asked.

"I've heard about it. From the writings of a man named Bavler Bestroystraw. It was the Aconck before Aconk," Jake said.

"Aconck?" the glass girl asked.

“Aconck, yeah. The interconnection of Earths. It was based on research Bavler did into a thing which is sometimes referred to as Sweptim.”

“So this is the future then.”

“To you I guess. I mean, the end of Sweptim is estimated to be about 500 years ago.”

“End?”

“Yeah. It didn’t work.”

“No?”

“No,” Jake said. “From the information that survived, it seems that Sweptim became unstable and eventually destroyed most of the Earths it touched.”

The glass girl nodded.

“I bet The Tiredist Noava had something to do with that. The collapse. I remember him talking about something like that. But I didn’t get into the technical side of it all too much.”

Jake raised her eyebrows and nodded.

“Boy I tellya, there are some people back in Aconck who would love to talk to you! Too bad we’re not gonna get back there.”

“No.”

“So what’s your name, kid?” Jake asked.

“Um, Pepperjinc of Clocks, I think.”

“Cool name.”

“I thought so.”

Leon James Hara then had an orgasm and threw the magazine down. He cleaned himself up with some toilet paper, but then stood, toilet paper wad in hand, and stared at the floor, looking very depressed.

“Hey!” Jake said, and waved to him in his superimposed bathroom.

Leon looked up at her.

“I think I have mental illness,” Leon said.

“Why?” asked Jake.

“Because of the situation with you. Because of my need to see those women printed on pages for sex and not a real woman. Those porno girls, pictures on paper, and you, a little more animated maybe, but not real. I hate myself. I wish I could just hold a real woman.”

“Why can’t you?” Jake asked.

“Because no woman will go out with me.”

“Have you tried asking a woman out?”

“I fail in that. Women do not like me.”

“Have you tried hard?”

“Not too hard.”

“So try hard.”

“No I can’t,” Leon said.

Suddenly, a guy appeared. His was tall and solidly built, his skin a dark gray, his hair a deep black. He was burly. And he wore a very sinister-looking pair of sunglasses, a black dress shirt, black pants. and black boots.

“Three people in trouble,” he said in a deep, resonant voice.

“Aw fuck, what now?” Jake said.

“I’m The Carbonize Neighbor. I help people like you,” the man said.

Jake began shaking her head in frustrated resignation.

Then there was a flash with lots of checkerboards in it, and everything changed.

“Now we are four people,” The Carbonize Neighbor said.

They were in some kind of huge appliance and electronics store, standing near a display of cordless phones. All four of them were wearing green, black, and white outfits with green vests and nametags. It was the uniform of an employee of this store.

The Carbonize Neighbor looked particularly funny in the outfit. His nametag said “The Carbonize Neighbor”.

Supple Jake looked down at her nametag and was surprised to see that it read “Jupple Sake”. She turned slowly to look at The Carbonize Neighbor, but he just shrugged with a little grin.

Leon James Hara, whose nametag said only “Leon”, was wide-eyed in shock before he half-sat, half-fell to the ground.

Pepperjinc of Clocks (nametag: “Pepperjinc of Clocks”) cocked her head and looked as if she were in deep thought or trying to remember some vital piece of information. Real now, she was rather average in appearance, somewhat on the heavy side. One long auburn braid hanging down her back. She looked like a girl who might be a loser and loner in high school, getting into witchcraft and science fiction. But in her expression was a calmness and a poise, and you could see that she couldn’t care less about the way she looked, that she was totally comfortable with herself. Smart, and a good person.

“We work at store,” The Carbonize Neighbor then said, with his hands held out in front of him, a gesture of explanation.

“We what?” Sake asked with emphasis and gestication and squinted eyes.

Leon writhed.

"I am... have mental illness... I am... have mental illness... oh mamma oh poppa I am... I am..." he mumbled.

Pepperjinc glanced down at Leon but didn't pay much attention. Then she shot a focused gaze at Sake, and then to The Carbonize Neighbor.

"Why does this seem... familiar?"

The Carbonize Neighbor responded, "What, uh, what seems, uh, familiar about it?"

Sake made a face to express her frustrated displeasure.

"Okay, okay, okay," Sake said, accenting the words with her hands. "Could you—whoever you are—be a little more specific about what the fuck is going on? I mean, 'we work at store'—that much I got. But like, how did we get to store and why are we at store? Huh?"

"Jupple Sake," The Carbonize Neighbor said, "you were... not in a good place... it was, to be blunt, in the masturbatory fantasies of Leon."

He pronounced the name "Sake" like the alcoholic beverage, which rhymes with "jockey".

"Okay wait," Sake said. "First of all, what's with the nametag? Jupple Sake? What, why, is it because I'm the other Supple Jake?"

"It's your name," The Carbonize Neighbor said.

Sake shook her head and said "Fine. Okay. I'm Jupple Sake, okay? Alright? No problemo. Yeah."

Just then Leon screamed out "I want to be alive!"

Sake, looking at Pepperjinc, motioned with her eyes down to Leon and said "Not used to interworld travel, I guess."

Pepperjinc gave a little chuckle, in a good-natured and knowing way.

Then Pepperjinc's eyes lit up and she addressed The Carbonize Neighbor.

"Carbonize Neighbor, I can understand the helping of myself and Jupple Sake. We were not in lives, to speak of. But Leon James Hara was alive. And given time, he could have led a fulfilling life."

"Ah, little Pepperjinc," The Carbonize Neighbor responded. "Leon was not quite what he seemed. A very twisted person. Some kind of hyperintelligent one-year-old, from god knows where, hooked into all kinds of computer networks and utterly insane, with multiple levels of delusions like you wouldn't believe. Either that, or I'm full of shit and I just made a mis-



take.”

Sake took a deep breath.

“Okay. Now for me, this is good. I didn’t like Mr. Hara’s Small Universe of Trucks, nor the promise of having to avoid his clumsy advances till the Whintillru Glass came around and allowed me to go somewhere else. I mean, I may be wrong, but I think this might be a little better.”

The Carbonize Neighbor nodded.

“It isn’t perfect, but it’s definitely better,” he said.

“And me,” Pepperjinc said, “I’m all muddled. I know there was a real person who was me, but I don’t know what part of that person was tied to the Glass. Anyway, being self-aware, I am a real mind, and I am one-hundred percent happy to be flesh and blood again.”

The Carbonize Neighbor nodded again.

Leon began bellowing “Yayayayaya... yoyoyoyo.... yayoyoyoyoyo...”

The Carbonize Neighbor walked over to Leon and knelt down beside him.

“Leon, get a hold of yourself, kid,” the massive Neighbor said.

Leon stared up at The Carbonize Neighbor, wide-eyed, bloodshot.

The Carbonize Neighbor looked over his shoulder at the two women, and turned his gaze back to Leon.

“Um,” The Carbonize Neighbor said, “first I have to say that I am sorry. I made a mistake. You were a little mad, and your imaginary world was so vivid that it registered as a valid, yet highly obscure alternate reality, and that is what attracted the Whintillru Glass to it. You were a little mad, and now you’re a lot crazy, kid. I’m sorry. I do what I do, and sometimes people get hurt. I know my words aren’t registering too much with you, but if any part of you is at all coherent, please accept my apology.”

Leon remained wide-eyed, but his gaze was blank, and he was motionless.

The Carbonize Neighbor got up and faced the two women, looking a little ashamed.

“I made all that up about him being a one-year-old. I was trying to hide the fact that I made a mistake. Were he that sort of a lost soul, then what I did wouldn’t have been a mistake. We’ll do all we can for him here. But I don’t think there’s much hope of him regaining any semblance of sanity. Not that either

of you knew him, but I know all three of us are good and can feel sympathy.”

“Where’s the Whintillru Glass?” Sake asked.

“That Glass was part of the problem. Big problem. Many-dimensional, and parts of it jut into That Which Lies Beyond. Can’t say much more. You can’t have it back.”

Sake leaned against the cordless phone display.

“So—this store—we work in this store. Is this a whole, big world, or is it just a little tiny store universe unto itself? Help me out a little bit here, Neighbor. Give me a little to work with. Cuz it could have been the other me who wound up in this fucking train wreck, the other me who wound up being named fucking Jupple Sake, goddammit.”

Pepperjinc put her hand on Sake’s shoulder.

“Come on, it’s gonna be alright.”

Sake closed her eyes and nodded, but it was clearly apparent that she was crying.

“Okay,” The Carbonize Neighbor said, and he strode forward and put his hand on Sake’s other shoulder.

Sake started to cry harder, and then, without opening her eyes, she said, “Look man, what’s your story? I gotta have something to work with here. Where are you at?”

The Carbonize Neighbor nodded.

“That’s fair. I’ll try to say something. You in trouble. I help you. Got Whintillru Glass, two particular cases, victims, in you and Pepperjinc of Clocks, of the two of the interconnection of the Earths, of called Sweptim and Aconck. See pattern. I see pattern. I help. Cannot communicate fully here. You better off than before. Here is open place, can go on from here maybe. I The Carbonize Neighbor, I help.”

Sake looked up at the man.

“You’re having trouble communicating?”

“Yes and no.”

Then he looked up and regarded something in the distance.

“Customers,” he said. “I will get rid of Leon James Hara. Put him in back room. You take care of customers. Fake it, bullshit a little, you’re smart girls, think on your feet, no problem, just play along. Act the part. Relax. Don’t flip out. I’m telling you that if you flip out and start asking these customers what world you’re on and all that it will only cause a lot of unneeded stress, for everybody.”

Then he turned, helped a now-semi-conscious Leon to his feet, and walked off with him through a door into the back of

the store.

The customers, two rich-looking women, approached. They started looking at the cordless phones. Sake and Pepperjinc stood still and exchanged glances. Then Sake started making silly faces at Pepperjinc, who returned a silly face, and then broke out laughing.

One of the customers looked over at Pepperjinc and held up a cordless phone.

“Excuse me,” the customer said, without a hint of humor in her face or voice, but rather a little bitchiness, “could you tell me the range of this phone?”

Pepperjinc strode forward and examined the phone the woman was holding.

“Well let’s see,” Pepperjinc said. “What model is this? The Joptortec? The 4115. Yes, that would have the 14 feet of, um, range.”

The woman holding the phone frowned. She said, “14 feet? Is that it? That can’t be right.”

“No,” the other customer said, “it says here that all the phones have at least a 40-foot range.”

“Ah, but,” Sake said, approaching the customers, “the correct way to define the range of a phone is to take the distance it can work under the worst conditions. So the 14 feet of this model translates to, in optimal conditions, roughly ten times that distance, or approximately 114 feet!”

“Don’t you mean 140 feet?” the other customer said.

“Probably,” Sake said, tapping her finger on the side of her head. “I used to be good at math, but I went through a period in my life when I did a lot of mind-altering drugs, and that kinda takes the edge off the math ability in your brain.”

Pepperjinc burst out laughing.

The first customer was furious.

“I don’t know what this is all about, but I want to talk to a manager.”

“Well babe,” Sake said, “why don’t you manage to get the fuck out of our store? It’s easy. Just take your fucking feet and move them any which way as long as they get you closer to the gooddamn door!”

Pepperjinc went into hysterics, laughing so hard she had to grasp the edge of the cordless phone display to keep from falling over.

“I demand to see a manager!” the first customer said.

The other customer took her by the sleeve, looked at Sake

and Pepperjinc with a worried expression, and said, "Look, let's just get out of here. We can call the manager from home. And we can hit the Joptortec outlet store when we go out to Kim this weekend."

The first customer acquiesced, but gave Sake and Pepperjinc a very nasty look as she departed.

Sake and Pepperjinc again exchanged glances, trying to hold back from laughing. But then Sake said, "We tried!" and Pepperjinc broke out into hysterics again.

Then The Carbonize Neighbor came back.

"What's the matter girls? What happened?"

"Oh," Sake said, "um, well the customers, um, they um, they told us a really funny joke... about this guy's penis, and..."

The two women broke out into total hysterics, and The Carbonize Neighbor shook his head with a little smile.

"What's not funny is," The Carbonize Neighbor said, "this country is going to have a war next week."

# SEVENTEEN

Legend has it that the hero Toal Tarby set forth on a perilous journey up the stream Adanden after dreaming of a fantastical cave at the head of the stream, and the treasures beyond reckoning it contained. That the things he described eventually became known as a payphone and a stuffed animal is a matter of great controversy. That the cave is inaccessible now is clear. But Toal Tarby's last words were that he would return with the prize, no matter how long it might take, and it might take centuries.

Well over a thousand years later, the people of this fine Earth have taken the legend of Toal Tarby as a bedrock of their society. Over the centuries, the route Tarby took gradually became more and more developed, from the village Porbe all the way to the mountainous site of the no longer accessible cave, now known as Goal.

In fact, in this time, the little stream Adanden is dwarfed by the massive wall now following its every curve, for hundreds of miles. Dubbed Greatwall by some long-forgotten commentator, this structure now stands as a marvel of engineering and faith, and all the shopowners and workers and administrators and fools and pets await the day Toal Tarby returns to walk through this immense tribute to his journey.

Of course, most people don't believe in Toal Tarby anymore. Greatwall itself is now a legend, and it's said people have been born, lived, and died without ever leaving its walls.

And it is here, at Greatwall, on Mate Pavement Earth, where Overwhelm Associates has its base of operations, and where Daptin Gone has now returned to after months of being AWOL.

"Hey, who's this sneakin' around here?" said Granticaine

Chug Perion, spotting Daptin Gone lurking near the entrance to the Overwhelm Associates administrative offices.

Daptin turned to face Granticaine. At least six-foot-six, Granticaine sported long brown hair which fell halfway down his back, and wore a blue and brown variation on the uniform he had worn in war.

The guy was smiling, but all Daptin could think of was the videotape Granticaine had shown him once. It showed him slaughtering enemy troops with an enormous chainsaw, and then, after his chainsaw had run out of gas, how he faced President Emmerdine and took 30 rounds in the chest from the President's semiautomatic pistol.

After that, he grabbed the President, and with horrific grace spun him around and ripped the leader's left arm off, then wielded the arm like a baseball bat and bashed the President in the head. The fury went on for several minutes, and all that was left after that was a room full of blood and body parts. Breathing heavily, Granticaine slowly turned around and faced the camera.

"Next," was his only utterance. The camera hit the ground as the camera crew turned and ran.

This was shown live across the world, and though condemned by some, Granticaine's rage against this dictator was the rage of the world, and his actions were a hearty catharsis to the long war. At that moment, his prior nickname, "Good Ole 494" was superseded by "Splatterlord".

"Huh?" Daptin said.

"Speak of the Devil!" Grant said. "We were just talking about you the other day. We wondered whatever became of our favorite Quality Scout, Daptin Gone."

"I uh, I've been around, y'know," Daptin said.

"I gather you have," Grant replied.

"So how're things around here, Grant?"

Granticaine clasped his hands together in front of himself and looked around.

"Oh, good. Good. Fife's still not a very skilled strategist, but that's forgivable. You missed another recruitment round, a few weeks back. And there were a few babes you really missed, eh? Nice ones. Maybe you'll encounter 'em in your next round."

Daptin leaned against a wall and sighed.

"I uh, I don't, I'm not sure if there'll be any more rounds. At least not for the time being. I mean, I'm not really here for, y'know, like to come back into full service or anything, I

mean—I have some stuff to sort out back...”

Granticaine took a few steps toward Daptin.

“You quittin’?”

“Huh? No. I’m just in the middle of like a vacation, but I’m back here just for a little while. I mean...”

“So you’re still on our side, then.”

“Yes, Definitely. My current, uh, concerns have nothing at all to do with Aconck.”

“Oh no? What have they to do with?”

“Nothing.”

Granticaine turned away from Daptin.

“I don’t want to intrude in your affairs, Daptin, but you’ve always seemed a decent fellow. If you need some assistance, you need but ask.”

“I, uh, appreciate that, Grant.”

Granticaine turned back to face Daptin, and unclasped his hands.

“In truth, it’s gotten very tedious and boring here at Greatwall. Fife’s got his head up his ass and he’s stalling, while Thewsike gobbles up Earths all on the outer. I want some action, man.”

“Heh. I know what you mean. That’s part of the reason I took my leave of absence, I mean, I—I mean, there are things in this universe to do besides worry about Aconck, you know? I mean like, y’know, like friends and family and things. Good friends.”

“Friends, yes, surely. But family, Daptin? In family, I can’t say I’ve had much experience. Personal experience that is. My fellow freedom fighters, my fellow Drampticans, all fine folks, but not real, true family. One thinks of such matters cooped up here on this alien world.”

“Yeah,” Daptin said, distracted in thought. “I guess I’ve been lucky to have such a sort of stable family.”

“Indeed ye have, man.”

Daptin looked down.

“I like, I mean, like you offered to help me if I needed it. And y’know, this being Overwhelm and all, I mean, if anyone else had said it to me, I think I’d’ve thought they were, like, having something devious in mind. But, I don’t know why, but I think I can trust you. You strike me as someone I can trust.”

Daptin looked up and tried to read Granticaine’s expression, but it was the same strong bemused glare as usual.

“You can trust me, man. I’ve about had it with these

flounders around here, and you know my word is my law. Also, if you have something challenging in mind, I'm more than game!"

Daptin took a deep breath and held both his hands up.

"This is like, so fucking intense. I mean, I have this thing I have to do, but I don't know where to begin, like, explaining it. I mean, it's like extremely dense. I mean, like it's so—"

"—Daptin, I feel you have a worthy challenge in your mind, but let us retreat to a more secure area to discuss it, eh? To whit, someplace far from Aconck tech, if you get my drift."

Daptin sighed and nodded his head.

"Yeah."

Granticaine looked around and then he and Daptin heard a crashing sound, followed by a pudgy little green faery running from around the corner and into Granticaine.

"Hide me! Hide me!" the little faery yelped in a high-pitched wail.

"Away with ye!" Granticaine exclaimed as he backed away.

"The faery problem?" Daptin asked.

"Aye," Granticaine said. "They can't seem to keep order around here."

The faery clutched its belly with one hand and let out a delirious and exaggerated laugh while waving its other hand in the air.

"Shut the fuck up!" Daptin said.

With this, the faery shot up and through the ceiling near fast as a bullet.

"And Treysess thinks this is all such a joke," Granticaine said.

"Dude, that was pretty severe. I mean, c'mon."

All of a sudden Supple Jake, a woman with black hair and harsh hippie poetry garb, came bounding around the corner.

"Where is that little bastard!" she said.

"Through the ceiling," Granticaine said, looking up.

"Hmph!" Supple Jake said.

"Hello Jake," Daptin said.

"Huh? Oh hello there Daptin. Where ya been?"

"Around."

"Haven't we all, hey? Now I must kill these faeries. You guys wanna help?"

Granticaine put his arm around Supple Jake's shoulder and started to lead her away, his massive form making her look like a small child.



“We’d love to help now, Jake, but we have business. Business, hey? I suggest you check upstairs.”

Jake looked up a Grant with a sort of dreamy smile.

“Good idea Grant. Good idea.”

“Thank you,” Grant said.

Jake started to walk away, but Daptin called after her.

“Hey uh, Jake. Don’t tell anyone you saw me just yet, okay? Okay?”

“Okay Daptin! I didn’t see ya! Got it!” Jake said as she left the two.

“Man this place is messed up since I left,” Daptin said.

“Quite so, Daptin. And the thing is, if a few locals see faeries, they’ll be disbelieved as loons or liars or indulgerists. But if a lot get out, then there’ll be no denying it, and I don’t think Overwhelm Associates wants to get into anything that would draw attention like that here on Mate P.”

“That’s right,” Daptin said.

“Now come along, we can take the superway down to Ostandon and get some strong tea and fend fruit and talk all about this problem of yours.”

“Um, sounds good to me.”

“But let’s cool any serious conversation till we’re there—the tech here gets up exponentially these days. You gotta see the new fabric reactor they got—it’s hot.”

After a twenty-minute ride in light rain on the superway, a monorail-like train which runs parallel to Greatwall, Daptin and Granticaine got to Greatwall at Ostandon and went inside. On the way, Granticaine told Daptin a story about how the press virtually ravished him after the end of the war.

“Let’s just go here,” Granticaine said, walking toward a Hello Tarby (a chain restaurant popular along Greatwall).

“Fine by me, Grant.”

As the two entered, they looked around.

“I think we can just take the table over there,” Granticaine said.

They went over and sat at the table. It was midday, and the place wasn’t very busy.

“I always feel so uncomfortable just hanging out at the Wall,” Daptin said. “They don’t have Arcticans here, and with this green hair of mine, everyone must think I’m some sort of radical student protester or something.”

“Oh come now, Daptin. You’re probably just imagining it. You don’t have it near as bad as some of the hairies, like

Vladimir Bonk or Caffeine. And poor Pantry Lurkin, he sticks out like a sore thumb. We try to dress him up as a little kid, but it's never easy."

"I guess. It's just that, y'know, being Arctican in Baskonontana is tough enough. All the jokes and stuff. But travelling to so many different Earths, I guess it's just that green hair isn't so popular anywhere."

"I wouldn't worry about it Daptin. And, if I'm not mistaken, isn't there a green-haired character in *The Essex of Toal Tarby*? I see representations of her around quite a bit."

"I think so, Grant, but it's a woman and stuff, and wasn't it like in a vision or something? I don't know. I could hardly get through his book. I mean, I know it's, whatever, these people's Bible, but it seems a little silly to me."

"Personally, I found it a fun work, but hardly something to build a civilization upon. This is a damn fine Earth though, compared to the multitude I've visited myself. Nice and peaceful, and that's what matters, I'd say."

"Uh-huh."

"Actually, there's a book on my Earth that's somewhat similar, called *The Dalcyn Hightime*. I've been reading it on and off for awhile."

Daptin nodded.

Grant took a deep breath and looked around.

They were silent for a time, then Grant spotted the waitress.

"Hey! Hostess! May we order?" Grant yelled.

A waitress carrying a tray full of empty plates and glasses turned to the two.

"Uh, be with you guys in a minute. Okay?" she said as she went into the kitchen.

"Hey, she's a hot one now, hey pal?" Granticaine said.

"Damn nice," Daptin said, thinking of Spanking New Sarah and whether or not he'd ever be in her bed with her again. He also thought of Fluffy Netherfuck, his friend Tanner's god-dessfriend, and wondered what she was like in romance.

Granticaine put on a neutral smile and looked out the window into the main corridor of Greatwall at Ostandon. In the distance, a band began playing a Toal Tarby-based folk song.

"Man, these folks are so obsessed with Toal Tarby," Daptin said.

"Well, that is the whole basis of all of Greatwall. I see it as an interesting impetus to construction. Greatwall is undeniably one of the most fabulous structures in all of known

Aconck. Every inch of his mythical trek now one enormous building. I say, whatever the motivation, it must be good to result in such a wonder as the place we're sitting in now."

"I guess. But it's like, Adanden is totally covered and guarded. Under glass. And artificially preserved. I mean, if Toal Tarby does ever return, what would he think?"

"Well Daptin, if I were him, I'd be very pleased with what was conceived of in my honor."

"Yeah. I don't think he'll be coming back, though. I mean, people just use him to increase their business. I don't think many people believe in the whole thing at all."

"No? Let's find out," Granticaine said as the waitress, a pretty young woman with a conservative blond Mohawk, approached the two.

"You ready?" she asked.

"Yes, but I have a question for you—do you believe that Toal Tarby will return, and if so, when?" Granticaine asked.

"What, are you guys from TV?" the waitress asked.

"No, we're just, eh, foreigners curious as to what you Greatwallers really think about all this Toal Tarby stuff," Granticaine said.

"Well, I don't live here. I grew up in Ostandon, but out in the suburbs. I'm no Waller. I mean, I work here and everything. But I don't know. It's a nice idea, him returning. I mean, the whole telephone thing is, well, it's interesting, a telephone all those centuries ago. But I don't know. I guess I don't really care either way."

"See?" Daptin said.

"It's just one person!" Granticaine replied.

"Whatta you guys think? And where are you from anyway, Coipte-Cross?"

"Heh heh, no. But a long ways away, at that," Granticaine said.

"I just think this whole thing, with Tarby and everything, seems a little silly to an outsider," Daptin said.

"I guess," the waitress replied. "So what can I get for you?"

"Okay," Granticaine said. "How about the full fend fruit entree, and several strong teas, hot and cold. Okay Daptin?"

"Fine."

"That's it? Okay, it'll be just a few minutes. And try not to worry about our local customs too much, okay?" she said with humor.

"Okay, Sleep," Daptin said, looking at the waitress's

nametag.

Sleap looked down at her nametag, smiled, and strode back to the kitchen.

“Rather friendly of you, Daptin old fellow.”

“What can I say? I’m a friendly guy.”

“Yes.”

Granticaine was fiddling with a little card thing on the table announcing a special deal on some sort of potato product.

“So Grant, you wanna hear the whole—I dunno—the whole deal here, with the thing I need to do and stuff?”

“Okay.”

“Well, I mean, okay. I think I can trust you. I just wanna, y’know, be clear on like, that this is all in confidence. I mean, you’ll see soon enough the nature of what it is I’m gonna tell you, so like, I wanna, I just wanna know that you’ll keep it, y’know, in confidence and stuff.”

“Daptin, I am a man of my word, as you well know. And I give you my word that what you tell me now will be in the strictest confidence.”

“Okay good, that’s all I needed to hear. Anyway, I guess I’ll just spill my guts. Back on Red Alley Earth, where as you know Bavler Bestroystraw began Aconck, there is—how can I put this—there is a place where these gods live. And I’ll tell you, if you’re familiar with Bavler’s writings, you know about Sweptim. Well, I think I may have discovered the remnants of Sweptim. I mean, they claim they’ve been there for all time, but I have serious doubts. Now, no one else in Aconck knows about this—just me. And now, I guess, you too.”

Granticaine looked very serious as he tried to let the information sink in.

“Go on.”

“Okay,” Daptin said. “There are five cities, connected to each other and to Red Alley, by standing bridges. I mean, they’re definitely bridges, but they’re permanent, and very stable—none of this 50% stuff—you get through the first time, every time. And apparently, they’re concealed by advanced situation claying, far more advanced than anything we have in Aconck. And their tech is also far beyond ours, although it might all be old stuff from Sweptim, I don’t know. Anyway, Grant, see, I was, when I was visiting my friends at Thatterine College, where I graduated from, they told me about this place called Agoopish, and then they just, like, took me out to this abandoned area and then like, we were just in this weird city.”

“And these friends of yours—they know nothing of Aconck?” Granticaine asked.

“No. At first I thought it was related to Aconck, but then I realized it wasn’t. I was thinking of telling a few people, but I didn’t. I mean, it was weird. They were expecting me to like totally flip out, but really, I was like, big deal guys, I’ve been to tons of other worlds. But like, I tried to make like I was totally shocked and stuff. But this is a definite thing, that the two worlds, I mean The Avert Cities and Aconck, are separate. I mean, think about what the companies would do if they knew about it? All sorts of new armaments and tech, and a lot of potential operatives in the Avert mortals. And the potential for reopening Sweptim—y’know—it could destroy all of everything we know. So like, you can see where I’m coming from.”

Granticaine took a deep breath and rubbed his chin in deep thought. Sleaf the waitress came out with a tray full of strong teas and fend fruit.

“Here y’all go,” she said, setting the stuff down.

“Thanks,” Daptin said.

“Still contemplating the absurdities of Greatwall?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Daptin said. “It’s a strange world out there. A lot to see. A lot to see.”

“I know what you mean,” she said. “I’ve always wanted to travel more. It seems like so many people ignore the world outside of Greatwall. It’s like, let’s go to Porbe, let’s go to Goal, it’s all the same. There’s a whole world out there! But who’ll listen?”

“Yeah. Travel’s great,” Daptin said, a little impatient as he could see Granticaine chomping at the bit to ask him more questions.

“Yeah,” Sleaf said, “I don’t know. People here are just so used to Tarby and the Return of Tarby. I mean, just look at this place, ‘Hello Tarby’. It’s like there’s so much else out there besides all this, but...”

“I know what you mean,” Daptin said. “So much out there, and like, so little time and stuff to do it.”

“Yeah. Well, gotta get the register. Enjoy!” Sleaf said as she brightly walked away.

“Ah, strong tea. My favorite thing about Mate Pavement Earth,” Granticaine said.

“This weird fruit ain’t bad either.”

“Not bad at all,” Granticaine said, taking a bite out of an oblong, peeled blue citrus. “Now Daptin, I must tell you. I read a lot and I’ve become quite conversant with Bestroystraw’s works and related materials, and I have to say that if you’re right, we’re faced with a dilemma.”

Granticaine finished off the fruit with a loud slurp.

“I’m just telling you what I know. I could be wrong,” Daptin said.

“I realize that, but from what you’re saying, I think you may have something. But tell me, beyond all this, what is the mission you referred to before?”

“Okay. I had become what in Avert they term a ‘mortal’, which means I can handle their bridges and use their tech. The gods can’t go through bridges themselves. Anyway, they had sent me on my first official mission, they being The Caxopy Group, a small mortal organization. Anyway, they had us, me and my friend Fake Cerquaine, go on this mission with this Cup of Coffee to rescue this girl who was like trapped inside the Cup. Anyway, to make a long story short, they lied to us and we wound up in this totally fucked-up place, and we were attacked by this gang, and I ate some goodbye popcorn, a piece of their tech, which makes you not exist for awhile.”

“They have tech popcorn?” Granticaine asked.

“Yeah. All sorts of stuff—you gotta see it. Anyway, apparently it didn’t work there and I was like totally eradicated. Then like, I mean, if I’m telling you this I may as well tell you about Obfuser. He’s an Ultra Occult Entity, and he like saved me since I was like dumped out by reality like billions of years later. So he returned me here—that’s how I got back. So I have this Cup of Coffee, and I need, just to, y’know, rescue my friend Fake, and maybe, y’know, figure out things with the Caxopys. I mean, deal with why they did this to us.”

“Well Daptin, it sounds like a mission I can certainly help you with. What exactly is the course of action, or do you even know?”

“It’s like,” Daptin said, “Obfuser told me to drink some of the Coffee and go through a bridge, and then I’d get back to that world where I left from, and to stay with Fake until the Coffee in my system took us back to the Cup, which I’d leave back here at Greatwall. But like, we’d need to fight off that gang.”

“I see. Did they seem formidable?”

“Oh man. Formidable? Forget it. They creamed us, and we

were armed to the gills. No, they're definitely a force to be reckoned with."

"I see," Granticaine said. "Perhaps we should bring my whole team, if you feel comfortable letting them in on this."

"Well yeah, but like, I mean, do they need to know everything? I mean, we're going to some undefined world, and then back to Greatwall, so like, if they do come, could they like..."

"Don't worry Daptin. They'll understand if things aren't entirely explained to them. And frankly, they're so anxious to see some action, I doubt if they'll have many questions."

"Good. I just hope old Provocation Team D is up to the challenge."

"Daptin, you know we're competent. In fact, we're far too competent for the use Fife is putting us to. I've been so serious about forging a lethal fighting team, it's taken me a long time to realize that Fife and the others are far too disorganized to need such services. No, I think something like this is just what we need."

Granticaine drank a whole glass of cold strong tea and put it down. Daptin wondered, in light of what Granticaine had just said, if it was wise to reveal the whole story to him, since The Avert Cities weren't directly involved. But he was relieved that the burden of being the sole holder of the knowledge of Aconck/Avert was lifted from him. And Grant and his little team might be useful backup in confronting the Caxopys as well, if that eventuality ever occurred.

"Well, at least with all this weird universal stuff going on, there's still nice, stable places like this," Daptin said, holding a cup of tea and looking down into it dreamily.

"Stability seems to be the norm in my travels," Grant said. "It's funny, one might expect a lot more disorder than is commonly seen in Aconck. Perhaps it is that the original formulae derived by Bestroystraw favor stable worlds. I don't know."

"Well like, if you ever like get to see Agoopish and stuff, man, you'll see disorder in action, like, in full force, y'know."

"This whole world of the gods you describe is extremely interesting, Daptin. I hope you'll truly consider taking me to this place."

"I think, y'know, I think we can do that. It's just, y'know, I don't wanna make it like a big scene, y'know? I don't wanna open like the floodgates between these two worlds. Aconck and Avert are like, y'know, like oil and water or something. They don't—or won't—mix."

“Well, with what we know of Sweptim, if these are the survivors, I’m sure they’d react pretty violently to the news that their old interconnection of Earths has been resurrected, even given that Bestroystraw claims to have overcome the deadly flaw in the Sweptim formulae.”

“I dunno, Grant. It’s just like, it’s like being there, there’s so much that seems hidden. I don’t know. I mean, there’s just so much, uh, I don’t know...”

“You know many goddesses there?” Granticaine asked, stirring a sweet black spice into some hot tea.

“Huh? I uh, well, I mean there’s lots and lots of goddesses there. And like, for some reason I had access to the god community right away. I guess it’s because I’m a mortal there, but I dunno. I seems sort of, almost, suspicious. I don’t know. But yeah, I knew a number of goddesses. I mean, I know them. I do plan on going back.”

“Are they nice?”

“Nice? Yeah! They’re amazing. I mean, you like get buzzed and tingle all over just being near them. It’s really weird. That’s one reason I doubt the Sweptim thing—they really do seem to be like, I dunno, like deities.”

“Hmm. I’d like to see what this is all about. I’ve long suspected that there’s a lot more going on than just Aconck, and it looks like my patience has finally found fruit.”

“Yeah.”

“Found fruit, not to be confused with fend fruit, eh?”

“Heh heh, no,” Daptin said, smiling.

Granticaine took a big bite out of a piece of fruit and looked again out the window into the interior of Greatwall.

“So Daptin, what sort of framepoint are we looking at for this mission of yours? Is it time-sensitive?”

“Um, well y’know, that’s a pretty good question. Obfuser didn’t make that part very clear. In fact, he didn’t make much of anything clear.”

“Is this Obfuser fellow contactable?”

“Um, generally no. I have been able to get him to show up on a few occasions, but there were special circumstances involved. I had kind of a supernatural problem back in college, which as far as I know is not connected to any of this other stuff. And he helped me with all that, y’know.”

“Hmm,” Granticaine said, nodding.

“I mean, I know very little of the physics of the matter, this whole time travel thing. I assume time is running pretty much



equiv between here and there, where Fake is. I guess he put me back a little while after I disappeared. And at this point..."

Daptin looked down for his wristwatch, only to find he wasn't wearing it.

"Need the time?" Granticaine asked.

"Yeah."

Granticaine flipped up a portion of his collar to reveal a clock which appeared to be embroidered into the fabric.

"It's a little after 3:30."

"That thing actually works?" Daptin asked.

"Yeah. I know it seems unlikely, but the underlying mechanism is actually quite simple. It's from Govern Wetness Earth, or so I'm told."

"Huh. Well, I guess that if I include a lag time for the popcorn, like say two hours, and the time since I got back, I'd say it's been something like four or five hours since I left Fake in that weird place."

"I see. But I'm curious, why didn't you let the girl escape before you?"

"Well, I dunno. She was like, I mean it was a real tense situation. It was like a split second thing. If I had offered her the popcorn, she might not have taken it. I mean, I took a real risk doing that, and I almost got erased for good. So I mean, like, it didn't even cross my mind. I thought I could get the Cup of Coffee away from the situation and hope things had, y'know, improved when I got back."

"I see. And what makes you think this gang hasn't slain your friend by now? Or captured her and taken her back to their base of operations?"

"I don't know. Obfuser seemed to think it'd be pretty easy to get her back."

"Well, from my perspective, we're walking into a very unsure situation. I would like more time to prepare, but unfortunately, from what you've described, time is our enemy. I think I'll call Mallie and have the team assemble in a set location. Do you need to get anything from Greatwall Base?"

"Yeah! I have a lot of stuff there. And like, I mean, I have to keep the Cup of Coffee in my apartment, and after I drink it we have to go though a bridge right away. So I mean—"

"—I can't afford to build a bridge unannounced at the base," Grant said. "We have to be far away, as they'll monitor it. And they might follow after if they don't like what they see."

“But after I drink the Coffee, we might fall out, off of this world at any time.”

“Then what does the bridge have to do with it, Daptin?”

“Well I guess—I mean, he said that it was too loose here to fall out normally, I mean...”

“So what is it? Does the bridge do it or not?”

“Yeah! But we can’t cross so much space, or it might start right then.”

“So? If it starts, fine! The purpose of the bridge is to transport us to this world, right? I assume the Coffee will alter the nature of the bridge.”

“No, it’s not quite like that, Grant. It’s like, he said, Obfuser said that one travels cupward, whatever that means. He implied that the state of reality, I think like the ratio of situation-to-reality, has to be tight to travel this way. On a regular Earth it’s too loose. In Avert, it’s so tight it’s almost instant. And apparently, the act of bridging creates a tight ratio. So I don’t think it even matters where the bridge is to, not that there are so many options along the Wall.”

“I see. But I maintain that we must bridge in an area as far from the base as possible. Do you think the Coffee will last a trip to, say, Goal?”

“I guess so, but it’s just so, I dunno. It seems like almost a waste of time. If we’re totally gone, they can’t follow us anyway.”

“Daptin, humor me on this one. If we start to slip out the this world before we get to Goal, in this cupward direction as you say, then all the better. Okay?”

“Alright. And I mean, I’m not trying to be difficult, it’s just that, like, I wanna do this right.”

“We will do it right, Daptin. We will.”

After finishing the meal, Granticaine paid the bill. As they were leaving the Hello Tarby, Granticaine found a little business card attached to the receipt with a note scrawled on the back, reading “Greenie—every Faprintarb, Copanck Center Basement NE, occult meeting—try it! Hope I see ya there—Sleep Drassy.”

Granticaine looked over and saw that Daptin had not seen the card, so he carefully placed it in a little pocket on his sleeve. At first glance, he thought the note was for him, but upon seeing the reference to “Greenie”, he realized it was to Daptin. There was something special about this Sleep Drassy, and he definitely wanted to keep the key to getting to know

her better. Besides, his mind was racing trying to cover all the angles on what Daptin's motivation might be for telling him all these things and recruiting him for this mission. Was Daptin telling the truth, or was it a scam of some sort? Was he being manipulated?

Granticaine continued to ponder this issue, as well as when the hell Faprintarb was. Another of Toal Tarby's gifts to this Earth was a cute scheme of giving each of the 42 four-hour segments of time in a week a specific name. Faprintarb was one of these, but he'd have to look it up.

"So what exactly are we doing?" Daptin asked Granticaine, as the two walked along the promenade of Greatwall at Ostandon. Like most of Greatwall, it seemed like the interior of a mall—a mall that stretched on for hundreds of miles either way.

"Well Daptin, I have decided on a course of action, and before we begin, I want you to agree on it. I propose we go back to Overwhelm, where you can make the preparations you need to make, and I can round up the team. When we're ready, you can drink the Coffee and we'll take the superway up to Goal. I know it's a long trip, but believe me, we have to keep Overwhelm out of this, and Goal is a good place to bridge in and out of because of all the activity there. Then, if indeed we begin to travel in this 'cupward' direction you referred to, we'll deal with things as they come, with our objective being the rescue of your friend Fake, and the safe return of us all to Greatwall. Any additional matters, such as visits to this place Agoopish, will be dealt with at a later date. Agreed?"

"Yeah. I still don't know why we can't just go out into the woods of Cagapin and bridge from there, but if this is the way you want to do it, I accept your judgment."

"So it's agreed then?" Grant asked.

"Yeah. Agreed."

"You sure you don't need some rest before we go, Daptin?"

"No, I feel fine. I guess technically I haven't slept for billions of years, but as far as my circadians go, it's, y'know, like mid-day."

"Good. And Daptin, know that I have given you my trust. This is not something I do lightly. So please keep in mind that in a mission such as this, a time may come when you will need to give me your trust in a split second. I hope you'll keep this in mind."

“Hey man, no problem.”

A few hours later, Daptin and Granticaine were on the superway heading up to Goal, along with the other three members of Provocation Team D—Wreckage Mallie, Pantry Lurkin, and Iterator of Rail Avenue.

Granticaine had rounded his fellows up but didn't tell them very much, except that there was an emergency mission which was not under the authority of Overwhelm Associates, but also did not deal with OA's sphere of activity. Daptin geared up with his mortal supplies which he had left behind in his apartment for his meeting with Granticaine.

Daptin also performed the daunting task of drinking from the Cup of Coffee, which he decided to do quickly without freaking himself out too much about it. He found that the lid came off quite easily, and that the coffee was about the best he ever tasted. In short, it seemed like a freshly poured cup of excellent black coffee, no sugar. He had drunk about four or five mouthfuls of the stuff before he felt he had enough in his system. Afterward, however, he felt very weird, and he couldn't tell if it was just a psychosomatic response to having done such a bizarre thing, or a real effect of having 40,000-year-old coffee in one's stomach and bloodstream.

“It's a nice area up here,” Wreckage Mallie said, looking out the window at the sun setting over the hills which run parallel to the northern section of Greatwall. Mallie was an athletic sort with very short black hair which bristled. He wore a gray sweatshirt with tan rough pants, and carried a duffel bag with a gun and a pipe inside.

“Hee hee, nice indeed. Big nice land, I agree!” said Pantry Lurkin, an odd little faeryish fellow, not even three feet tall, trying his best to pass as a midget, but attracting scores of stares nonetheless. He wore a diminutive red plaid shirt and a pair of tiny blue jeans, which looked ridiculous on his spidery frame. On his sharp face was a black mustache, and though he tried to hide them, his pointy ears always managed to see the light of day. Also, he insisted upon wearing his blue cap with its two long and droopy black feathers.

“What's that thing over there? A water tower? I saw it before,” said Iterator of Rail Avenue, a woman of average build with short, very light brown hair, who wore a suit of tan and brown with a lot of complex layers, cords, buttons, connections, etc. She was a quiet sort, never asserting herself very much. She seemed sad all the time.

“Um, I don’t know, Iterator,” Daptin said. “I’ve seen it a couple of times too. Is it something from the Essex of Toal Tarby maybe? I dunno.”

Iterator of Rail Avenue looked over at Granticaine with a sort of longing look.

“Uh Daptin, it’s a small point, but as you might remember, Iterator of Rail Avenue likes to be referred to by her full name, the full ‘Iterator of Rail Avenue,’” said Granticaine, shifting in his seat to try to hide Pantry Lurkin, who was looking out the window and acting hyper, from a group of college students across the train who seemed fascinated by the little fellow. For some reason, they didn’t pay much heed to Daptin’s flaming vest or submachinegun.

“Sorry,” Daptin said to Iterator of Rail Avenue. “I remember you saying that way back when, but I kinda thought you were joking. I didn’t see much of you on my Quality Scouting.”

“Well it’s okay,” said Iterator of Rail Avenue, “but it makes no sense unless you say the whole thing. Just saying ‘Iterator’ is meaningless. It sounds totally wrong.”

“Okay. ‘Iterator of Rail Avenue’ it is, Iterator of Rail Avenue,” Daptin said.

“Thanks.”

“Yeah, and where did that name come from anyway?” Daptin asked.

“I could tell you but we don’t have time,” Iterator of Rail Avenue said.

“Hers is an odd tale, indeed,” Granticaine added.

“Oh, hee hee!” Pantry Lurkin said with an evil grin, turning to face the group. “A silly silly odd tale, a wonder! Weird mystery, the super duper duper doo!”

“Now this feller,” Granticaine said, “this feller you can call just Pantry, as he misses his, the one he lurked in for such a time.”

Pantry Lurkin sat back in his seat, and closed his eyes with an exaggerated smile on his face. He remained so for several moments.

“Stop it Pantry, you scare me when you act like that,” Iterator of Rail Avenue said.

Pantry Lurkin’s eyes shot open, and he began to giggle under his breath hysterically.

“I think some of those alien faeries got into his system,” Granticaine said.

Pantry Lurkin instantly stood up on his seat and pointed his finger toward Granticaine, with his arm fully outstretched.

“Oh no—not them!” the strange little fellow said, with a mockingly serious look on his face.

“You’re weird,” Iterator of Rail Avenue said.

With this, Pantry Lurkin pointed his finger at Iterator of Rail Avenue for a few seconds. And then in a flash, he sat down again and held his knees tightly to his chest, staring weirdly at Iterator of Rail Avenue.

“I’m glad to see you have such stable people on your team,” Daptin said to Granticaine.

“He’s just like my little brother,” Wreckage Mallie said.

Pantry Lurkin shifted his stare to Mallie.

“A total hyper spaz,” Mallie continued. “He can’t sit still.”

With this, Pantry Lurkin pointed his tiny index finger skyward, and noisy multicolored sparks started to gather above it. A few of the college students got up to see what was making the noise. Granticaine looked calmly over at the students and then gently put his hand on Pantry Lurkin’s back.

“We’re on the train, Pantry. It’s a public place,” Granticaine said in an even, relaxed tone.

The sparks stopped, but Pantry Lurkin kept his finger in the same position, as he smiled weirdly at Grant.

The train then lurched to a halt, and the students sat back down.

“Uh, we have a stop signal,” a voice said over the intercom. “We’ll be moving shortly.”

The five individuals sat silently for several moments.

Finally, Mallie spoke.

“So can you tell us more about the mission now, Grant?”

“I think we may be far enough away from Cagapin,” Granticaine said, but then things changed.

For a few moments, it was as if there were two or three superimposed images of the five in the same space, and it got totally silent.

“What’s happening now?” Iterator of Rail Avenue said, bracing herself against her seat.

Pantry Lurkin jumped up to again stand on his seat, looking back and forth with a wide smile.

“It’s the Coffee,” Daptin said. “The Coffee. The Coffee. It’s that we’re falling off this Earth now.”

“How should we do it?” Mallie asked, getting disoriented.

“Do nothing!” Daptin yelled, feeling himself getting heavier

and heavier. "Just sit still. Do nothing!"

Suddenly, all that could be seen was a close-up view of a wooden statue of a cannon, in an ornately adorned room. A musty odor came, along with the sound of a distant jet airliner.

"What kind of is this!" Wreckage Mallie could be heard to say, ever so faintly.

"Wait for the," Daptin said through clenched teeth, then lost consciousness.

"Does it please your myselfness?" Iterator of Rail Avenue blurted out.

All was dark.

Soon Daptin awoke, dazed, to find himself and his four companions strewn about the edge of a water tank in a water treatment plant. The others were stirring.

Pantry Lurkin, lying sideways, propped his head on his hand.

"I like this mission," the little imp said.





# EIGHTEEN

Dolthethmen handed the cashier a five-dollar bill and a one-dollar bill. The cashier gave him two quarters and a nickel. Dolthethmen grabbed the coffee and the bag of nacho chips and the magazine and the gum and walked out of the store. He walked out of the store and into the phase of the fuzzy weekday afternoon. His car was gone.

No, the car wasn't gone. He was mistaken. He'd parked at a shopping plaza across the highway. Now he had to cross the highway to get back to his car. He looked down at the crap he just bought. He looked across the highway where he could see part of his car from behind a cement partition in the parking lot. The traffic on the highway was getting heavy, and Dolthethmen reckoned that his adroitness would be dampened by the coffee and the chips and the gum and the magazine. So he opted not to cross the highway just yet.

Looking to his left and then his right, Dolthethmen went right. Here on this highway, the parking lots of the stores, shopping plazas, gas stations, and movie theaters blended together. So you could walk along from lot to lot. But it was behind the stores and the plazas where it was cool. Because it's quiet back there, and remote, and abandoned—but someone or some car might appear at any time. Also, there were woods behind this highway's establishments. But Dolthethmen didn't feel like going behind the stores. He wanted to walk down the highway and maybe get to an arcade to play pinball or get to a movie theater to go and see a movie.

It was as this walk was in progress that Dolthethmen thought these things:

Here is reality. Right now it seems to me that I am walking down the highway. This is a fact, that to me right now I seem

to be walking down a highway. That such a fact can exist is heartening.

For so much of life is unexplained, and there are so few facts. It is hard to understand what is really going on. But in the scope of what I understand to be going on, there are things which are plain, such as the idea of cars.

As I understand it, cars are devices built by people, used to go from place to place. But other things in life, such as the progressions of situations, are not so understandable.

But, like cars, these unclear phenomena are observable. So through reasoning, some possible explanation can be reached. And, though this explanation may be invalid, if it is a possible explanation, it can serve as the first level of basis in further examination.

In this way, at least as a sketchy proposal, reality can begin to be understood.

This is the season of my great discontent. I am not responsible for my situation, for in some way I've been thrust into this place and situation.

Will 1994 turn to 1936?

That's not a good, normal thought.

So it was a few nights ago, a stark chilly night under the crisp stars where I waited for that girl but she never showed up. I thought we would go into my car and I'd turn the key but not turn on the engine, so I could turn on the heater and maybe some music so we could make out.

But probably we wouldn't have made out.

I've not been having much luck with girls lately. But walking down this highway, pretty girls must be passing in cars. Just think—why is a girl driving a car sexier than a girl riding in a car?

Well, I guess driving is more aggressive and sexy than riding.

Sexual stereotypes really do play a big role in sexual fantasy or desire or whatever. It's almost like, any deviation or variation from the norm of behavior is sexy.

No, that's not quite right. Not all behavior—just some. What day is it today?

Dolthethmen kept walking down the highway.

Up in the next parking lot, by a big video store, he saw a bunch of people standing around, clustered around something. He quickened his pace and got to where they were.

These people were watching two young guys fight. They

were all bloody, and continued belting one another. A really nasty fight.

“What’s going on here?” Dolthethmen asked a girl watching the altercation.

“Dunno. These two guys just started fighting a minute ago, so we’re watching.”

“Shouldn’t someone call the police or something?”

“Yeah.”

Pause.

“So has anybody called?” Dolthethmen asked.

“I dunno.”

“Should I go and call?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Cuz it’s fun watching them fight. It really pumps me up, gets me hot, to see two guys fight. I love to see animal rage spill forth onto this dull highway. Primal energies contrast well with the staid hum of the atmosphere of the video stores and arcades. Here, any rage or honest madness is welcome. I see that you are full of that rage, and yet you hold it inside so well. You would never fight as these two do, for you fear the release of your energies upon this world, for it would forfeit your unique position, were you to reveal your true self.”

Dolthethmen was stunned by this girl’s words. What she said jibed with quiet thoughts he had been having. That another, especially a desirable female, would even talk to him, let alone say revelatory, almost psychic things, excited him.

He responded to her.

“How do you know things about me, dear?”

“I have to go.”

With this the girl was off, striding swiftly towards the video store. In the blink of an eye she was in the video store. Dolthethmen turned around and saw that a few more guys had entered the fight, themselves getting bloodied also. But he dismissed the fighters and walked quickly toward the entrance of the video store.

As Dolthethmen neared the door, however, he was overcome by resign, and gave up trying to seek this girl.

He thought, there’s no way I’ll catch up with her, and even if I do, nothing will happen between us. I could ask her how she knew stuff about me, but probably she was just speaking metaphorically. Probably, she’s just weird. So I must give up and continue on to play pinball or see a movie.

Turning, Dolthethmen saw that there were six or eight people now involved in the fight, but he just figured it would end soon, and continued to walk down the highway. He hadn't walked ten feet, however, when he felt someone roughly grab the back of his neck.

The one holding his neck then roughly spun him around. It was the girl. With her other hand, she grabbed Dolthethmen in the crotch and then roughly pulled his head toward hers and kissed him, her tongue slipping into his mouth. And in that moment, the stunned Dolthethmen felt her tongue first enter the back of his throat, and then felt it move up into his brain, snaking its way all about inside his skull, until he lost consciousness.

# NINETEEN

“Give me my stuff, you bitch.”

Fake Cerquaine sat imprisoned in a little cage made of splintered wood, held together with darting, little black lines. Kesh the Vector stood nearby, maintaining the cell with little effort. Classic of Logic was examining Fake’s equipment in fascination and awe.

“Maybe if you give us the Cup you can have your things back, dear,” Classic said without looking up. “But you do have some keen baubles here.”

“Yeah well, don’t touch any of it cuz you don’t know what you’re doing and it’s goddamn dangerous,” Fake said, grabbing at one of the pieces of wood, then cringing with the weird tickling sensation the vectors brought.

“What’s this?” Classic asked, picking up a pair of yellow socks with lavender polka dots.

“Don’t touch those! They’re mine and only I know how they work!” Fake said. And then, turning to look up at Kesh she said “Let me out of here, you weirdo! She’s gonna hurt herself! Can’t you see?”

Kesh tilted his head slightly. Fake now saw that within the darkness of his face was a square shape with patterns on it. It looked like a tile. It seemed to float within the head cavity.

“My dear, this is no game,” Kesh said. “And you needn’t worry about Classic—she can do just about anything.”

Just then, Classic began giggling.

“Christ,” Fake said with a grimace.

“It’s such a pretty thing!” Classic said with a spaced-out look. “It’s very far and very near.”

Classic then began rubbing the sock gently up and down her cheek.

“Stop that, dammit!” Fake said, grabbing at the pieces of wood again. “Stop it, that’s mine!”

Suddenly, Fake flailed herself against her cage and succeeded in shattering a part of the structure. Smiling, she began to leap toward Classic, but in mid-jump she lurched to a halt, feeling Kesh’s vectors flowing through her.

“Really Miss Cerquaine,” Kesh said as he lowered her and restrained her on the ground, and rebuilt the cage around her. “The construct was a courtesy, as most individuals find the tactile sensation of my vectors unpleasant. I don’t relish this task, young lady, and I’ve hardly seen any glimmer of ability on your part to break free from me. Please make it simple on both of us.”

Fake felt the vectors leave her body as the cage was then fully rebuilt around her.

Both the Silly Train, who was sitting on Fake’s cinder block to keep it under control, turned around from his lookout spot and yelled “Keep it down over there, you rattlers! I think I hear something!”

Classic was now lying on her back toying with one of Fake’s situation grenades. She snuggled it, smelled it, briefly licked it.

“Hey you!” Fake yelled at Kesh. “Prettyboy! Are you blind? Look at what’s happening to little miss perfect over there.”

Kesh the Vector turned to look at Fake and then at Classic of Logic, who was getting up with some difficulty.

“I may not have eyes, but I can see. I can see, Miss Cerquaine,” Kesh said. “And I’m sure Classic has a reason for her behavior. Hey, Classic?”

Classic was still trying to get up, and then she spilled the can of conductor voice peas she was holding all over the ground. She tittered and fell down again.

“Oh crap—did you see that! She breaking everything I own!” Fake yelled, pointing.

“Classic, are you quite all right?” Kesh asked.

Classic looked up at Kesh with a sweet drunken grin and her hair mussed up all over her face.

“I feel... I feel pretty good, actually, Kesh,” Classic said, and then she rolled over several times, finally winding up on her back. She blurted out another bout of laughter and reached over into Fake’s pile of stuff and got a huge tin clock, currently in its cigarette-pack-sized form. She scrunched up her face and balanced the clock on her lips and nose.

Kesh strode over to Classic and knelt down, examining the

pretty young girl.

Looking over at Fake, Kesh asked “Was there some sort of poison or narcotic in your weaponry?”

“Not that I really know of, but I don’t even understand most of that stuff. Just get her away from it! She’s losing her fucking composure!”

“I tend to agree with you,” Kesh said. “Now Classic, what is wrong? Why do you act in such a manner?”

Classic looked up at Kesh.

“I don’t know but it feels grand. I’ve never been drunk, but this is how it must feel,” Classic said, looking up at the sky. “What a feeling!”

Kesh reached out with his black lines and engulfed Classic.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself, dear, but for now let’s just get you away from this stuff!” Kesh said, lifting Classic and moving her far from the pile of mortal supplies.

“No Kesh! I like that stuff! I like that stuff!” Classic whined, whipping around like a rag doll, suspended in midair.

“Never mind it, it’s affecting your mind,” Kesh said.

“No! No,” Classic said, and began crying a little. “Let me see those socks again, Kesh. Let me see it.”

“I’ve never seen you this way before, young lady. And I’ll not be a party to such hazardous indulgence.”

Kesh didn’t see it, but Classic still had a huge tin clock which she had stuck under her shirt. With a “Ha ha! Whee!” she tossed the metal object skyward.

“What?” Kesh said, watching as the clock lurched unnaturally upward, growing steadily larger, until after a few seconds it hung diagonally and swaying high up in the air. It cast a huge shadow on the party, and it seemed enormous. As it wobbled, it looked like it might drop on the group at any moment. It’s pendulum swung madly back and forth as a silent cuckoo bird shot in and out of its door.

“It’s gonna fall!” Bith the Silly Train exclaimed, looking up in horror.

Elsewhere, at the water treatment plant, some folks were confused.

Daptin Gone stood up and surveyed the scene. It was definitely a water treatment plant. They had all collapsed, but were now getting up. It appeared to be mid-afternoon.

“What is it about this place?” Iterator of Rail Avenue asked.

“It a fun, fun place!” Pantry Lurkin said, jumping about in a little jig.

Granticaine Chug Perion looked around at the flat landscape dotted with huge power line towers and spoke.

“No—Iterator of Rail Avenue is right—I feel something—familiar about this place—like—”

“—like we work here?” Wreckage Mallie said.

Daptin shook his head.

“We do work here, don’t we? I mean, we definitely do.”

“Poo in, faucet out, mister! The water treater of all is me and you, you, you. Uh-huh,” Pantry Lurkin said, climbing up onto a railing looking over a huge pool of water.

“No, you’re right Daptin,” Iterator of Rail Avenue said. “We do work here. We have for a while.”

Mallie knelt down and opened his duffel bag, examining the contents, a gun and a pipe.

“I realize we work here,” Mallie said. “I know it’s the Arietta Sane City water treatment plant. I know I’m an assistant engineer.”

Daptin grabbed his forehead and spoke.

“But—I mean, I know I don’t have to bring this up, but weren’t we, like, going to rescue my friend, Fake? And, I mean, I know it’s obvious, but we just got here because of the Coffee I drank. I mean, we were on the superway at Greatwall just a minute or two ago.”

“That’s true Daptin,” Granticaine said, “but whatever the details, we do have to get back to work. Don’t you see that? We have our responsibilities.”

“I wanna work. I like it,” Pantry said.

“Okay, we’ll all go back to work in a minute,” Iterator of Rail Avenue said. “But first let’s sort this thing out with the just getting here, and the mission and everything.”

“You’re right,” Mallie said. “There’s something here we’re missing. It all seems to make sense, but it leaves me with a bad taste in my mind.”

“To coin a phrase?” Granticaine asked, referring to a popular song on his and Mallie’s home Earth, ‘Bad Taste in My Mind’.

Just then, Bobby Murph and Kell Weaner came up a ladder onto the roof.

“This the new coffee break hangout?” Bobby asked.

“Coffee break?” Daptin asked, slightly shocked.

“Boss’s lookin’ for y’all,” Kell said. “Says he’s got a munity on his hands.”

Bobby and Kell laughed.



Granticaine, Daptin, Pantry, Iterator of Rail Avenue, and Mallie also started laughing—it just seemed funny.

“Y’got that new in-line farbin intake, Iterator of Rail Avenue?” Bobby asked.

“Yeah, we were supposed to get it Tuesday, but the jerks at Moppis sent it to Hoom!” Iterator of Rail Avenue said.

“Well, we could really use it,” Kell said.

“Isn’t that the truth!” Granticaine said.

“Very many truthful, you do know!” Pantry said, walking toward Bobby and Kell. “I like work and good work is the best, Kell.”

“If anyone likes work, it’s you Pantry,” Kell said.

Daptin looked out over the landscape and called out.

“Hey, you guys all go back to work, but like, like me and Grant, we have to talk a little. In private.”

Grant looked at Daptin, puzzled.

“Guy stuff,” Daptin said, nodding and looking over at the others.

“Okay, I know when a woman isn’t wanted,” Iterator of Rail Avenue said. “Let’s go guys. If we’re lucky the two of ‘em will get fired and we’ll all be happier.”

“Ha ha ha ha! Fire them all, the man said! The man is good, the man fires them all! Ha ha!” Pantry Lurkin said as he descended the ladder.

“See you two later,” Mallie said, and in a few moments Daptin and Grant were alone.

“What do you want to talk about, my friend? You don’t have a ‘floppy disk’, do you?”

“No, Grant!” Daptin said through clenched teeth, “We have to talk about this mission thing.”

“What about it?”

“Just look at me! My vest is on fire! I have a fucking machinegun!” Daptin said, shaking his gun. “And I have no memories of this place.”

“It’s interesting you say that. I mean, I’m aware of what you’re saying, yet the situation is undeniable. We work here, and live nearby.”

Daptin got more agitated.

“Yes, yes, yes! The situation does exist, and I know it seems to outshadow all the other issues, but you are Granticaine Chug Perion, war hero and Aconck traveller. Why would you be working at a place like this? We were going to help my friend! We were on our way, and now this.”

Grant exhaled loudly and shook his head.

“Okay—so you’re saying this is some sort of—I don’t know—psychic attack—messing with our minds?”

“I don’t know. But Obfuser did tell me the Cup of Coffee affects situation. He said—he said it wraps situation around you, that’s what he said. He said it happened to Tavmatey.”

Daptin then felt a weird vibration throughout his whole body. With a look of horror on his face, it took him several seconds to realize the vibration formed the words “Daptin, where are you now?”

“Grant,” Daptin said, “this is getting out of control. That girl Tavmatey, who I talked to in the Cup, I just heard her, inside me.”

“I didn’t—” Granticaine said.

Daptin held his hand up.

“I was at school,” the vibration came, barely understandable.

“What?” Daptin said angrily.

“I was at school, that’s why I couldn’t talk,” the vibration came.

“Can you—can you hear me?” Daptin asked.

“Yeah, but it’s sort of muddled. I lost you right after you said something about ‘communing the Cup’ or something. I had to go to school so I just went, and now I’m back, and I’m so glad I can hear you, Daptin who’s not my Daptin.”

Daptin closed his eyes, cringed, and shook his index finger back and forth trying to remember something.

The vibration came yet again.

“We had the international festival in—”

“Shut up! Shut up!” Daptin said tersely.

“Huh?” the vibration came.

“Just shut up for a minute!”

Grant put his hand on Daptin’s shoulder.

“You okay, Daptin?”

Daptin opened his eyes.

“Grant! This whole thing—it kind of makes sense. We do work here because that’s the situation, but the situation was just thrust upon us. It’s the damn Cup, the damn, the damn Coffee! It’s doing this. It made this situation, somehow. And we have to get away from here.”

Grant looked down.

“I know you’re making sense, but if we don’t get back to work—”

“—what? What will happen? Do you even, do you even know what it looks like, y’know, inside the plant and everything? Can you even remember that?”

“Sort of.”

“Yeah—like the basic layout and stuff—the situation! But not, y’know, like specifics, right?”

“No, I guess not. But does that matter? I guess it does matter.”

Daptin fondled one of his situation grenades.

“Yes it does matter. It does. Now I wonder if this damn thing’ll work. They called it a situation grenade, said it would disrupt situation. I wasn’t really sure what they meant, but now it’s making some sense.”

“You shouldn’t do that, not here. Think of the others,” Grant said.

“I don’t want to use it, but it might be our only chance!” Daptin said, looking around again. “Jeez!”

The two stood there for a couple of moments, silent. Daptin felt a brief vibration within him, but it was very faint. Finally, Grant spoke.

“Best I can tell, my mind’s been stunned or shocked somehow. And I can’t really think clearly.”

“Dammit Grant! Didn’t Overwhelm get that clarity hang done? Didn’t you get it or something?”

“Yeah they got it. I mean, we all got it, a few weeks ago.”

“Well do it, dammit!”

“Okay,” Grant said. Then he cleared his throat and in a louder voice said “Eighty-A Clarity!”

A smile slowly came to Grant face.

“Well?”

“Yes it’s working. Yes, working very well.”

“Good. But I don’t have it, so you’ll have to help me.”

Grant nodded his head.

“Yes of course, but it’s not that easy. I have a clear idea of what’s going on, but even so, the situation, as you call it, is massively compelling. I’m afraid we’ll get caught up in it if we go down to join the others.”

“We just have to cross sufficient space to get away from here, Grant. We just need to all get out of here.”

A voice came from the other side of the pool of water.

“Okay, what the hell’s going on, don’t you guys care about the drinking public of Arietta Sane? C’mon, let’s get real and get back to work. The torphid levels are not checked, Mr.

Gone! You better hope they're baseline!"

It was Rickal Nesoffin, the boss.

Daptin looked to his friend for help, saying "Grant?"

"We can't, um, tell you why right now but we have to stay out here awhile longer, okay?" Grant said.

"No it's not okay, you bums!" Rickal said. "I don't care if you jerk each other off till the cows go home, but I need work done and that means now, folks."

"I quit!" Daptin managed to blurt out.

"Yeah, me too," Grant said.

Nesoffin was shocked.

"Fine! Then clear out your lockers and get out of here!"

The two didn't respond.

"Get on outta here or I'll have the sheriff escort you out in front of all the ladies. Would you like that?"

"You'd do well to reconsider this course of action, friend," Grant said.

"I'm not your—"

Daptin then brandished his gun and waved it at Nesoffin.

"Doesn't it seem at all odd to you that I'm carrying a gun like this? Why would I need a gun? At place like this? Huh?"

"I'm not interested in your personal problems," Nesoffin said.

Daptin fired a short burst into the air.

Nesoffin, not impressed, said "Okay guys, I'm outta here," and walked back into the building.

"Grant, we have to get the others out of there and get going!"

"I know, but how? If we go down there, we'll get all caught up in it."

Daptin thought for a moment, and then took out a huge tin clock.

Reaching around in his pockets, Daptin asked "You don't have a pen, do you?"

"No, why?" Granticaine responded.

Daptin got out the geometric weight marker and sighed.

"See, you had one," Grant continued.

"I know but it's not a good pen."

"Why not?"

"Okay, shit, what the fuck," Daptin said as he carefully uncapped the magic marker and wrote the words '80-A CLARITY' across the face of the clock. He then carefully resealed the pen.

“Wish me luck,” he said. “Super!”

He hurled the clock with all his superstrong might far off into the distance. It grew quickly until it hung several miles away up in the air, its pendulum swinging evenly, and its hugeness appalling. The words Daptin had scrawled were blown up to immense proportions across the face, readable by everyone for miles around.

“Cool trick,” Grant said. “So what now?”

Soon a group of people came out onto the platform where Grant and Daptin stood, gawking in awe and horror at the huge tin clock in the distance.

“Okay, who put what in the water?” they heard someone in the crowd say.

Soon Iterator of Rail Avenue (with Pantry Lurkin sitting on her shoulders) and Wreckage Mallie came out onto the roof. Daptin and Grant went over to them.

“Say it!” Grant said.

“Eighty-A Clarity,” Iterator of Rail Avenue said. “Wow, I see what you mean.”

“What is it? Oh yeah, Eighty-A Clarity,” Mallie said. “Okay, now I understand about the job and the mission and stuff, but what the hell does that have to do with a UFO disguised as a clock?”

“Eighty-A, Eighty-A, Eighty-A Clarity! Eighty-A, Eighty-A, Eighty-A Clarity!” Pantry Lurkin chanted. “Yahoo, I’m a pretty smart boy!”

“Daptin doesn’t have the hang,” Grant said, “so we’ll have to help him along. But right now, we have to cross a physical distance of some length to get us out of here, okay? Let’s go down the ladder and off down that road, hey? Okay?”

That’s just what they did, and they were ten minutes into their walk when they heard a massive explosion as the clock fell to the ground.

“Damn pen,” Daptin said, and just as he said it, they cup-slipped again.

This time they heard a deep voice saying “Swish”, and an image like colorful paint dripping into a whirlpool, along with a flowery scent.

When it was over, they were sitting in something like a bathhouse or swimming pool, on turquoise-tiled benches, except there was no water around. There were, however, a number of naked people nearby, some of whom were performing sex acts on one another.

Granticaine looked around and sighed.

“Give me one of those grenades, won’t you, Daptin.”

Without a word, Daptin handed Grant a situation grenade. Immediately, Grant pulled the pin and looked dumbly down at it. About ten seconds later, it exploded.

The five experienced a silent shimmering around them, and their benches were transformed into tree trunks without any of the group changing position. The sex palace was transformed into a hilly gray wasteland. In the distance, a huge tin clock could be seen wobbling wildly.

“Why’d you do that?” Pantry said. “I saw some sex I’m sure I did! I saw it more, but not today! Why escape such lovely peeking, deeny?”

“Look—” Iterator of Rail Avenue said, “over there—the clock. But I thought it fell.”

“Yes, falling can be done well by a good clock! I fall too! I fall too!” Pantry said in a hyper manner.

“It’s not the same,” Daptin observed. “It doesn’t have the writing on it. And this place looks awfully familiar.”

“Could this be some...” Mallie said, “I don’t know, some alteration of the world we were just in? I mean, a clock like that, I mean, you don’t find one just—”

“—I’d say we’ve arrived at our destination. Hey Daptin? Your comrade has those clocks, doesn’t she?” Grant said.

“Yeah she does,” Daptin said. “That could well be one of hers. And I’m just about sure this was the place, though one devastated landscape looks the same as another, I guess.”

“Yeah—and notice,” Grant said, “there isn’t any overtly incongruous situation here, as we had in the last two worlds we were in.”

“Ug! Don’t remind me of that last one!” Iterator of Rail Avenue said. “I’m glad you set off that bomb—cuz that was just... so perverted.”

“Mmm. Hmm,” Pantry said, looking up at Iterator of Rail Avenue with a deviant smile.

“So we just, I guess, should head over that way and, uh, rescue my friend, uh, I—” Daptin said.

“—that would seem the best course of action, but we should be prepared for combat,” Grant said.

“I wanna try and reason with them,” Daptin said. “After what happened to me when I ate the goodbye popcorn and woke up billions of years after the end of the universe, I don’t wanna have anything else to do with that damn Cup of Coffee.

They can fucking have it.”

“That’s fine, Daptin,” Grant said, “but remember—our goal is to retrieve your friend and return home safely. We need to guarantee that will happen—and if giving them the Cup does that without loss of life, all the better. But we don’t know how desperate they are or what they’re willing to do, so let’s be on edge.”

“Okay,” Daptin said distantly.

Grant began walking up a slight incline toward the clock, and the rest fell into step behind him.

“If it’s a fight they want,” Daptin said, loosely holding his gun to his chest, “it’s a fight they’ll get.”

“I kinda hope there’ll be a fight,” Wreckage Mallie said. “I need the exercise.”

“I’m gonna use my magic to kill. Oh yes!” Pantry Lurkin exclaimed.

“Now Pantry, is that nice?” Iterator of Rail Avenue asked in a lightly-admonishing tone.

“Yes,” Pantry stated, staring blankly off into the distance.

“I mean—let’s put it this way,” Daptin said. “If all they want is the damn Cup, they can have it. I should’ve just brought it.”

“But then we’d have nothing to bargain with,” Mallie said. “If they’re stronger than us, we’d be dead. As it is, they need us to get the Cup, right?”

“How the hell are we getting back, anyway?” Daptin said. “I mean, when the true Coffee in my system vanishes, like, I know we’re supposed to return, but where? Near the Cup?”

“I very much hope so,” came a female voice from behind them.

Turning around, they saw Pattern Integrity hovering in the air and pointing her Massive Assault Weapon at them. Instantly, Grant recognized her uniform—it was from the same army he had been in, back in Dramptica.

“Now just relax,” Daptin said, holding up his hands. “We don’t need a repeat of last time. I’m willing to give up the Cup, but I need my friends back.”

“If that’s true, why’d you bring back-up and why don’t I see the Cup?” Pattern asked.

“Because you are an unknown enemy,” Granticaine said, “and force is the universal language. One that we’re somewhat fluent in, Major.”

Pattern looked down at the emblem on her shoulder and

then back at Grant, studying him.

“You’re not Lord Perion, are you?” she asked curiously.

“I am Granticaine Perion, young lady. I see you wear the colors of Dramptica, but your uniform and weapon are strange. Are you indeed in the Barzhims?”

“I was once,” Pattern said, raising her weapon away from the group cautiously. “Now I seek the Cup.”

“Where are my friends?” Daptin asked.

“Over by the clock,” Pattern said, and then returned her fascinated gaze to Grant. “How could it really be you? You’re long dead. I mean, I’ve seen some strange things these past decades, but never a major historical figure.”

“I was major when I killed President Emmerdine, but the war was already won,” Grant said.

“Are you kidding? You were Lord Emperor. You ruled over half the world. And we’re still fighting for the other half in your great-great-great-granddaughter’s name.”

“I don’t know anything about that,” Grant said.

“You were our great leader. You turned all of history around.”

“Well I’m not into politics, so you must have the wrong guy,” Grant said.

“It was your well-known reluctance to get involved in politics which finally propelled you to the top, when things got out of hand.”

“You’re talking about something which is in the distant future. I suppose that’s where you’re from. What year?”

“When I left, it was 366 NN.”

“Well, to me it’s almost 131 NN, so I guess we have a time travel thing here.”

Pattern stared at Grant and appeared to be daydreaming. She seemed a lot happier than she had been just moments earlier.

“I’ll go back and tell the others you’re coming. I’m sure we can work something out. Just head for the clock,” Pattern said, and then vanished, only to reappear a second later. “I just have to tell you, Lord Perion, I had such a crush on you when we studied you in school, especially the young you!”

Pattern stared another moment at Grant, smiled broadly, and then disappeared again.

“I think she likes you,” Daptin said.

“We have a crazy time spinner, a spin a time, a look look look Lord Perion, a look look look Lord Perion,” Pantry said.



“Don’t call me that, pest,” Grant said.

“So should we head for the clock?” Daptin asked.

“Why not? Grant’s new girlfriend should sort everything out up there for us,” Mallie said.

Grant gave Mallie a dirty look, in good humor, but said nothing.

They all started walking toward the clock.



# TWENTY

“Where is that darn Moisture Detection Friend of mine?” Carne said.

“I’m not sure,” Pacer said. “I saw him at the strip mall across the street two days ago, but it was from a distance.”

“You didn’t talk to him?”

“I was riding by on my moped. I had to get to Toys’R’Us before it closed.”

“Thanks, that’s really helpful.”

“Hey man! I had to get the Insaniac action figure from Small Soldiers!”

“How was that movie, by the way?”

“It’s kind of horrible,” Pacer said, “but in such a way that it could become a cult classic. I liked it, but I can’t really recommend it. It reminded me a little of Last Action Hero. You know how the kid in that movie was so friggin’ annoying? This kid is even worse. You just want to punch him in the face, he’s such an irritating little freak!”

\* \* \*

“You know Pacer, I think my Moisture Detection Friend likes your sister,” Carne said.

“Yeah, well, I don’t know what to say to that,” Pacer said.

“Yeah, I don’t know. Hey, how much further before we get to the abandoned ski resort with all the arcade video games locked in the basement?”

“As soon as we turn this corner, you’ll see it... yup, there it is!”

“And there are video games in the basement?”

“Yeah, I told ya, I saw ‘em myself! I looked in through the

window.”

“Well, it’s such a shitty day out, hopefully no one else will be around. Gray and cold and wet. I guess we need days like this in order to appreciate the truly nice days.”

“Huh? Sorry, I wasn’t listening. So look, I got the bolt cutter in the trunk, we’ll break in, see if there’s anything worth taking, and if there is, we’ll go into town a rent a U-Haul.”

“Maybe we should just try and locate the owner and do it the legal way. I’m sure we could get all the games real cheap.”

“Um, but we can get them for free this way.”

“If I was storing valuable games in a remote, insecure location, I might protect them with an airborne virus trap. But that’s just me,” Carne said.

\* \* \*

“It seems like everyone has a website these days. Even my Moisture Detection Friend has one,” Carne said.

“I’m gonna have a website,” Pacer said.

“Oh yeah, what’s it gonna... Whoah!”

“Hey! Come on man! Stop driving like a psycho!”

“It wasn’t my fault, that guy totally cut me off!”

“Well, I don’t know. Just you’re always supposed to be in control of your vehicle, y’know? Anyway, my website? It’s gonna be of imaginary cat food. It’s gonna have all graphics and shit. This friend of mine? He knows a guy in the city who does artwork and logos and stuff, and he says he can draw all the fake cat food cans and make them look, y’know, real.”

“So, what, like something like ‘Frothy’s Buffet’, and have a rabid cat foaming at the mouth—something like that?”

“Um... not really... we’re not really going for that college humor sort of direction. We have some stuff like ‘Nuts and Bolts Cat Food for the Robotic Cats’. Or, ‘Lumber Scrap Cat Food for the Wooden Cats’” all stuff like that.”

“So, is this meant—is it meant as comedy, or as...”

“It’s mainly the artwork. I saw some of what this guy does. I tellya, it looks—y’know—totally professional. Anyway, we’re gonna let people see like two or three of the cat food cans, and then they can pay a monthly fee to see the whole collection—like ten dollars a month, or something. Not that much. And then we’ll split it with this guy, the guy in the city.”

“And you think people are gonna be... um... signing up for this?”

“That’s the beauty of it,” Pacer said. “There are millions and millions of people online. Say ten million. If we just get, like, I don’t know, one percent of the people out there, that’s like, a hundred-thousand people. And each of them paying ten dollars a month, um... well, I figured it out, and over the course of just one year, we’ll make like over ten million dollars. So my split will be, like, three million dollars or something. And that’s just one year!”

\* \* \*

“I was at a beautiful place,” Carne said. “My Moisture Detection Friend had been there a week earlier. It’s kind of hard to describe. It was a glass lodge on top of this hill, with a killer view. Everyone just sits in there and smokes these great cigars and drinks this awesome iced coffee.”

“Yeah?” Pacer said. “That sounds pretty cool. So when the fuck is this ride gonna start up again? I’m tired of sitting here in the ‘Amethyst Cave of the Ancient Way’. This ride sucks, man.”

“I don’t know. I think all these rides have great character. Maybe from the viewpoint of whatever modern aesthetic you adhere to you might think of this ride as ‘corny’, but giving it such a simplistic label would be doing it a disservice.”

“Did you see that Erica I was talking to before? I told her I was gonna meet her at the ‘Major Frolicking Waters’ stage show thing, y’know? But I’m sitting here in this friggin’ dark ride. No, it’s not a dark ride, it’s a dork ride.”

“What I am often fascinated by is the application of the term ‘artificial reality’ when referring to rides such as this one, or places like that lodge I was telling you about. Is not all human architecture and design meant to evoke something beyond the natural world?”

“You know man, I don’t wanna get into this with ya, and I’m just about to jump off the ride and head for that exit sign over there, though I know I’ll get jumped by security before I make it ten feet. But your argument is wack. It’s not a matter of strict black-and-white definitions, it’s a matter of extent! And what the hell does a crystal, fairy, jerk-around cave have to do with my life?”

“Yeah. So what was up with that Erica girl? Do you know her from somewhere?”

“Nah,” Pacer said, “she was wearing a T-shirt of this band

I like, 'The Associated General Contractors'. So I just started talking to her. I'm starting to believe in this philosophy a lot of guys have, to like ask out every girl you meet. Maybe one of out twenty will say yes. It makes me feel like an asshole, but when am I gonna see these people again, anyway? But Erica really seemed to like me. And I tellya, I'd rather be staring at her face right now than looking at these goddamn fruity purple elves!"

\* \* \*

"This is the strip mall you saw my Moisture Detection Friend at, isn't it?" Carne said.

"Yup," Pacer said. "What was it, a few weeks ago? A month ago? I was going to buy that stupid action figure. And I wound up in the rafters of the Toy'R'Us, swinging around like a monkey, till I finally lashed myself to a beam and fell asleep. I slept all that night, the next day, and into the day after that. I don't think anyone saw me the day I slept, but the next day, I woke up screaming from some yellow and aquamarine nightmare, and the management team was all pissed-off that I was lashed up there. It was a real mess."

"Uh-huh. You know, there's something peaceful about sitting at the spot where sidewalk meets parking lot. Very humble, very cool, very Zen. Maybe I'll create a computer game centered around the act of sitting in a place like this."

"Yeah? Cool. Um... What I just said? It's true. I know it sounds like a lie, but it's totally true. Just go to Toys'R'Us and ask them. I have to go to court in a week-and-a-half cuzza the whole thing."

"I know you well enough to believe you. But how did you get into such a hairy, zany predicament? And why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"Ah, it was that damn health food store, the new one that just opened up on the strip? They have all these natural, legal drugs there that you can take. Damn expensive, by the way. Anyway, I took way too many of these drugs—they call them 'herbs', but what's the difference, right? So I took all this shit, and I went bonkers. I thought I was a monkey. I really did! Or an ape. Or a mandrill. Or something like that, I don't know."

"How did you lash yourself?"

"Um... I raided the back-to-school department. Backpacks? You know how they have those plastic clip-lock kind of thin-

gies? I grabbed a whole bunch and connected them all together. It worked remarkably well.”

“And for an entire day, as you slept, no one noticed you?”

“Oh, I’m sure people noticed me. But people are sheep. They don’t want to get involved. People suck.”

“Yeah, they’re pretty bad. So anyway, why have you been keeping this a secret from me?”

“Um... I know this is gonna sound lame, but I didn’t really remember the whole thing at first. And I wanted to have the full story before I told you. That’s it, man.”

“Look at those birds over there,” Carne said. “And the sub sandwich wrapper. And the weeds. It all means something. I tellya, it all means something.”

\* \* \*

“My cousin was pretty unique,” Carne said. “Her and my Moisture Detection Friend would sit around for hours, playing strange games without saying a word. So when my cousin joined that cult, we were all very disappointed. We were expecting great things from her.”

“What cult was that again?” said Pacer.

“They worship this guy named Greg Ann Conway. He’s a maniac. He makes them sleep in Nineteenth-Century gambler outfits. You know like on riverboats, like in the ‘Karma Chameleon’ video? They sleep dressed like that. A damned ridiculous idea.”

“That sucks, man... Y’know, is this rain ever gonna stop? Can you even see where you’re going?”

“The directions are pretty sketchy, but I tellya, I knew the guy we’re going to meet in college. He’s a real computer genius. If anyone can load my cousin’s disk, it’s him. It’s amazing we even found it, considering how well she hid it.”

“So whattaya think is on there? Poems? Drawings? A novel?”

“We’re leaning toward a novel. She always said she was working on one, but she’d never give specifics. And if the disk does contain a novel, maybe if we publish it, it’ll snap her out of this stupid cult involvement.”

“Cool. Damn it’s windy! I think this shitty Ford Aspire of yours might just go and blow away—with us in it! What possessed you to buy such a friggin’ lame car?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I kind of like my little Aspire. It’s not

much of a car, but it gets me where I want to go. And whenever I see some big shot pass by in a Hummer, smoking a big expensive cigar, I smile, and take a draw on my corncob pipe, and know that I am free of that man's burdens."

"What? Man, you're losin' it. I think you're in some kind of cult. Some kind of Ford Aspire, corncob pipe kind of wacky cult. And you don't take this austere, Zen attitude when it comes to buying your audiophile shit! You spent more on your turntable than on your car!"

"Well, I bet you've spent more on those silly action figures of yours than your... um, your... that new moped you're thinking of buying."

"Come on man! Action figures are the, like, quintessential representation of the rebirth of our culture! You gotta realize that! The statues of the gods have become the plastic figurines of godlike characters! You gotta know that!"

"Maybe my cousin is smart to be in that Greg Ann Conway cult," Carne said. "She doesn't have to worry about cars or pipes or action figures or mopeds. All she has to do is wander around all day long, doing whatever Greg Ann tells her to do. I heard that last week she was selling sand to inner city youth. And that's not so bad."

\* \* \*

"In 1982 there was a videogame called 'Moon Patrol'," Carne said. "My Moisture Detection Friend could play that game for hours and hours. He didn't care. If he had to be somewhere, meet someone. Nothing."

"Yeah, I went on a moon patrol once," Pacer said.

"You liked the game too?"

"No, I mean a real moon patrol. I went with a friend of mine, who's in the Moon Brigade. You know those UFO's they found in Arizona or something? They figured out how to make 'em. Anyone can go to the moon. You just have to know the right people."

"So Pacer, what is the moon like? What's it like to actually be there?"

"Hold on a minute. Um... excuse me! Yeah, can I get some more water here, please? Thank you. Geez, this place has terrible service."

"Yeah, it's not too good. So now, what were you saying about the moon?"



“I didn’t get to walk around, I just stayed in the UFO. And the Earth, it looks like someone painted it up there. It looks fake, y’know?”

“So, this was a dream?”

“Yeah. So?”

“So why’d you say it was real?”

“Dreams are real. They’re part of reality. You experience them in a similar way to the way you experience life in the waking world. Why not?”

“I think this conversation we’re having is a dream,” Carne said. “It’s certainly not up to par with other conversations we’ve had!”

\* \* \*

“Leonard Maltin. That’s his name,” Carne said. “My Moisture Detection Friend tells me he knows a lot about movies.”

“Yeah? Cool,” Pacer said. “Wow—look up. Willya just look up there! The Contemporary Resort Hotel! Can you believe that we’re actually here? This is like, I don’t know, like the greatest place in the world! And we’re gonna be driving those little speedboats around Bay Lake and Seven Seas Lagoon in a matter of minutes!”

“Yeah, well, not if it starts to rain. Look at that thunderstorm there, um, in the distance.”

“Nonsense. Total nonsense. It’ll rain for like five minutes. And what are they gonna do if we’re out there, kick our ass or something? I don’t think so.”

“I don’t know, Pacer. I’ve heard some pretty wild things about Disney security.”

“Yeah, but that’s for like college kids who jump off the ride in the Haunted Mansion and start beating the shit out of the ghosts and stuff. They got cameras everywhere man. I knew this one guy who jumped off the boat in It’s a Small World and started beating the shit out of one of those little puppets, and they like took him away and locked him up and handcuffed him and everything.”

“Who is this, that you know and who did that?”

“I don’t know. That dude Klein. Klein something... I don’t know. His buddies just dared him. So he had to do it. I don’t think he got in all that much trouble, but all I know is that he’s not allowed to ride that ride anymore.”

“Yeah. Hey, check out those girls over there.”

“Wow. I could do with a little bit of that. Geez, just think, those girls were probably born after Epcot opened! Is that wild?”

“Look, Pacer! A raindrop on my arm! It started raining already! There’s no way they’re gonna let us go out on those boats now!”

“Yeah, great. That sucks. Hey, you know how we were talking about dimensional travel before, how we could go and see like the Western River Expedition and the Asian and Persian and Venetian Hotels, and the Tron Arcade, and all that? I was thinking about something like ‘rain travel’, where you could go from like one time and place where it’s raining to another. So we could, for example, go to the Short Hills Mall at a point in time when it was raining there.”

“Could we, perhaps, go to that cave where the Nazis hid trillions of dollars worth of gold and art masterpieces? I know it couldn’t rain in the cave, but if it was raining outside, could we use rain travel to jump right into the cave?”

“I don’t know, man. Come on, let’s head on back to the Fiesta Fun Center. Or whatever the hell they call it now.”

“I think it’s time to take a long, depressing Walt Disney World bus ride in the rain. Whattaya say?” Carne said.

\* \* \*

“Hey Pacer,” Carne said, “did you know that my Moisture Detection Friend used to go door-to-door, offering people \$20 cash for unworking remote controls?”

“Why?” Pacer said.

“He would take them apart, smash them up, whatever. He had one of those huge bottles—the kind some people try and fill with pennies. He was trying to fill it with remote control parts.”

“What is he, stupid?”

“I don’t know,” Carne said. “But he must have spent about a thousand dollars on the project. And now the bottle is just about full, but it’s sitting in his basement and he never even looks at it! And when he went through his next phase—his CB radio phase—his nickname was ‘Remote Control Crusher’. I think there might be some allegorical meaning to it, but darned if I know what it is.”

\* \* \*

“Three days ago I was in a sewing store with my Moisture Detection Friend,” Carne said. “We spent eight hours there.”

“Why?” Pacer said.

“My sewing friend asked me to watch his store while he went to court. My Moisture Detection Friend had nothing better to do than hang out with me. We spent the whole time making fun of all the sewing crap.”

“What was your friend in court for?”

“Oh, you know that town. He experimented with selling ‘adult’ sewing patterns, and the township got all bent out of shape. It was some kind of First Amendment thing. I don’t know. He said he’d stop selling the naughty goods—he said he really didn’t care. But they wanted to fine him anyway.”

“Wow man, that sucks.”

“What sucks even more is that the sex sewing sets have started to catch on—getting national attention and everything. They’re kind of a hot item now,” Carne said. “A few people even asked for them while I was at the store. I just told ‘em to go to the porno shop across town. Heck, I don’t know if that store has the sewing kits, but I’m sure those people will find something there to appease them.”

\* \* \*

“Yeah, ‘hoopy’ was a word from The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy,” Carne said. “Last month, my Moisture Detection Friend started using it, figuring it was cool to use a word like that.”

“Aren’t they coming out with a new movie of that?” Pacer said.

“I think so. Yup. So anyway, you’re telling me that all these treehouses just appeared out of nowhere? And nobody questioned it?”

“I tellya man, I was here like two days before they appeared. There was an article about it in the local paper. But everyone just kind of thinks it’s somebody else’s problem. No one’s doing anything about it.”

“And you can actually go in ‘em?”

“Yeah! Come on, I’ll show ya. The weird thing is, they all seem like they’re very old, y’know, been here for a long time.

The wood is all weathered and everything. I found a really weird coin in one of them, and I told the newspaper, but they weren't really interested."

"This is really unbelievable. I mean, it shows how—y'know—how all this unexplained stuff—how it can go by virtually unnoticed and unchallenged."

"Yeah, and the part that sucks is, I'm part of the problem. I could be doing more, but I have a lot of other stuff in my life, and I can't devote the time and energy—and money—that it would take to try and bring this to the attention of the public."

"Who owns this land anyway?"

"I don't know. It's real near a state park, but I think it might be part of an estate that's in total dispute. I guess the guy died and his relatives are fighting over it. I don't know."

"You know, I'm part of the problem too," Carne said. "I should be thinking about this amazing treehouse phenomenon totally. But I keep thinking that I want to get to Sam Goody before it closes to get that My Bloody Valentine album, Loveless. I shouldn't be thinking about that, but I am."

\* \* \*

"Wow, man," Carne said. "I love hanging out at a seaport cinnamon shop, half-asleep and having just met a ton of celebrities. My Moisture Detection Friend would be jealous."

"Huh?" Pacer said.

"This is cool man! I wanna take a boat to Brazil!"

"Chill out, man. I don't think that supersonic boat is real. I think it's just a gimmick or a rip-off or a tourist attraction or something."

"You couldn't be more wrong," Carne said. "I'll be in Brazil in about an hour-and-a-half. Oh wow! Check out these cinnamon Spuds Mackenzie wafers! These have gotta be at least fifteen years old! Geez... I'm wiped out, man. I'm totally wiped out."

\* \* \*

"My Moisture Detection Friend can be quite good at electronics when he puts his mind to it," Carne said. "Just last week, someone gave him one of those new-fangled birthday cards that plays 'Happy Birthday' when you open it—you know—on a little electronic device."

“Yeah,” Pacer said.

“Well, he must have stayed awake for like two days reconfiguring the thing so it plays ‘Music to Watch Girls By’ when you open it. It sounds pretty cool. And he was quite proud of himself for the accomplishment.”

“What song is that?”

“‘Music To Watch Girls By’. It’s a great song. It was... I don’t know... Andy Williams or something. He sang it, at least. I don’t know if he wrote it. I don’t think he wrote it.”

“Well, I guess we have to stop walking—this looks like the end of the road.”

“Yeah... I don’t cherish walking back the same way, though. Maybe we should just keep on going.”

“Well, I may be mistaken, but isn’t that a massive wall of sticker bushes up ahead? I see many varieties of nasty thorns.”

“Yeah, but who knows? Maybe it’s not as bad as it seems. And we’re dressed for this Autumn weather. We might be okay.”

“Oh, alright. Let’s go.”

“Onward!” Carne said.



# TWENTY-ONE

“Okay, okay,” Daptin said, holding his hands up, walking toward Cup’s Club. “Everything’s cool. We talked to your friend there. Let’s just sort this all out.”

The members of Cup’s Club were standing at the ready. Coabler the Sawman pointed one of his saws at Daptin and asked “So where’s the Cup of Coffee?”

Daptin looked over at Granticaine, who shrugged, then back at Coabler.

“Okay,” Daptin said, “I’m gonna be totally honest. Some of it is in me. That is, I drank some of it.”

Coabler looked angry and puzzled. Daptin continued.

“I mean, it’s okay. The thing is, it’s a pattern integrity, just like her. It’ll go back together. In a while.”

Kesh the Vector moved a little closer to Daptin.

“Let’s assume you’re telling the truth,” the phantom said. “Why exactly have you drunk it?”

“Um,” Daptin said, “the idea is that, like, when the time comes for it to like, you know, go back, together, it will draw us all back into the regular world. Get us out of this place.”

“I see,” Kesh said, sounding satisfied.

“And you guys can have the goddamn thing when we get back,” Daptin said. “The people who hired us used us as pawns. We have no personal interest in the Cup.”

“So why did you guys go on the mission in the first place?” Demolish All asked lazily, looking at her long black fingernails, leaning on a log.

“We didn’t know!” Fake said, sitting on the other end of the log. Kesh looked toward her. They had let her out of her cage on the condition she behaved herself.

“So what are you saying?” Coabler asked, looking from

Fake to Daptin. "You were sent on a mission, but you subsequently discovered that you were being deceived?"

"Yes!" Fake yelled.

"Cool it," Classic of Logic said, standing nearby with her arms crossed, glaring at Fake.

"How?" Coabler said.

Just then, Daptin felt the vibration throughout his body of Tavmatey trying to talk to him. He couldn't understand it, however. He cringed, and getting a little upset, answered Coabler.

"Look buddy. Not that it's any of your business, but we could hear a girl's voice from inside the cup. We were supposed to rescue her, but it all went wrong. Or right I suppose, for them. But you guys came along and messed everything up. After the balloon, she told us everything, the girl we could hear."

"Okay," Coabler said, looking over at Kesh, who nodded. "Just give me your word that you speak the truth, and we can get on to the business of figuring all this out."

Daptin looked around.

"Me? You mean me? Yeah. I give you my word. I give you my word that everything I told you is true, that we will give you the Cup if we can, and that we won't attack you, only defend ourselves."

"That satisfies me," Coabler said. "Come hither and let us discuss many matters."

With this, Daptin, Granticaine, Wreckage Mallie, Iterator of Rail Avenue, and Pantry Lurkin approached Cup's Club, who had arranged a number of logs into a rough circle.

As Pantry Lurkin walked past Kesh the Vector and Bith the Silly Train, he looked up and said "I like weirdoes!"

As Daptin found a log to sit on, he spied Jerald Hapal Hatch stirring a little, sprawled out on the other side of the circle.

"Whatever happened to him?" Daptin asked Fake.

"Whatever happened to you?" she shot back. "They just knocked him out. He's still alive though, maybe unfortunately. But what the fuck, man? Where did you find all these new psychos? Did you get back to Agoopish?"

"Let me explain it all to you later. These 'new psychos' as you call them are my good friends. Just trust me on this."

"Fine," Fake said, looking away.

All twelve individuals were seated around the circle of logs, and Coabler took charge of the affair.



“I have been seeking the Cup of Coffee for an extremely long time. I have the ability to walk toward the Cup. There have been several false Cups, but I believe the one you folks had was the true one. We just have to—”

All of a sudden, a musical beeping noise could be heard. Instantly, Mallie looked down at his duffel bag.

“What is that noise?” Kesh asked, a tone of alarm and threat in his voice.

“Uh—it’s, uh—it’s my gun—” Mallie stuttered, nervous.

“Gun?” Coabler bellowed, standing up.

“Relax!” Granticaine roared in a tone of supreme authority. Pattern Integrity smiled at him intensely. “It’s nothing more than a communication device built into his gun.”

“Probably just his girlfriend calling,” Iterator of Rail Avenue said.

“But I don’t think—” Daptin began.

“Okay, take it out,” Coabler said, still standing, but somewhat calmer.

“Okay,” Mallie said, as he unzipped his bag, shaking in nervousness, and carefully picking up the gun in an unthreatening manner.

Kesh looked at Coabler, saying “I would thoon safe.”

Coabler nodded.

“Should I answer it?” Mallie asked, trembling.

“I don’t think—” Daptin said, but was cut off by Coabler raising his hand.

“Okay sir,” Coabler said, “now answer that call on the count of three. Understood? When the count reaches three, answer it.”

Daptin looked helplessly at Mallie, then at Granticaine.

“One,” Coabler said.

“Hold on a second!” Daptin yelled, standing up. The musical beep chimed yet again. “I don’t like this! This place is totally fucked up! Things don’t work right. My popcorn sure fucking didn’t!”

“What are you trying to say?” Coabler asked.

“Look fella—we’re dealing with two totally different worlds here. Stuff designed for one place does weird stuff—maybe bad stuff in the other.”

“Fine. Settle down green-hair,” Coabler said. “You know more about this than us. We’ll just wait and hope the call stops.”

Just then, the warbling chime was replaced by a continuous

tone. Mallie looked up, and said simply, “Shit.”

“What!” Daptin said.

“Answering machine,” Mallie said.

A click could be heard, and Mallie looked at the base of the handle of the gun, where there was a little video screen. A little image of a young woman with gold-and-brown-striped skin came onto the screen. Her voice could be heard tinnily through the gun’s speaker.

“Hi Mallie, just wondering where the andle you are. Looks like you forgot our date again. Well, I guess I’ll just have to go to Mompobla by myself tonight. And I didn’t tell you before, but...”

“Goddamn!” Mallie yelled, looking at Daptin. “I have to answer it! She’s in danger! For real!”

Daptin inhaled sharply. “Do you absolutely have to, Mallie?”

The woman sounded like she was finishing up her message.

“Yes Daptin! There are people there who’ll—come on man!” Mallie pleaded.

“Okay! Answer it!” Daptin yelled.

But just as Mallie was fiddling with the controls, the screen went blank.

“Fucking goddamn bastard!” Mallie said. “I gotta call her back right damn now!”

Daptin looked down, sat on a log, and said, “Fine. Go ahead.”

“Just be nice and easy with that firearm,” Coabler cautioned.

“I will. I will,” Mallie said, fiddling with some buttons. The screen filled with text.

“Okay. It’s going through,” Mallie said.

Muffled beeping noises could be heard from the gun, and soon the clicking noise was heard again and the woman’s face came up.

“Yes?” the striped woman said.

“Hi Phazzy. It’s me,” Mallie said.

The lighting around the group changed. Everything got just a little bit darker.

“Barenfa! Where are you, baby?” Phazzy asked.

Suddenly, things got brighter. A lot brighter.

“I’m on a mission with Grant and the gang. But I can’t—what the hell?”

As the light had been getting brighter, it suddenly stopped,

and the sky, which has been a very dull gray, became a gloriously bright green.

Everyone looked up at the changed sky.

“This is a really weird place,” Mallie said, sighing. “But look honey, I’m not gonna be around tonight, but do not go to Mompobla. Kanvin is out.”

“Crap!” Phazzy said. “Nice of you to tell me.”

“I’m telling you now.”

“Fine. Guess I’ll do some education tonight instead. But will you be back soon?”

“Yeah,” Mallie said, looking at Granticaine. “Yeah, I should be back for tomorrow.”

“Okay baby,” Phazzy said. “Take care of yourself—I don’t want you to pull a Cueria on me!”

“No I won’t,” Mallie said, scratching his head. “So I gotta go now. Love you honey.”

“I love you too, baby. See ya.”

Mallie ended the call. Just before Phazzy’s image left the screen, Mallie thought he saw the room behind her shimmering weirdly, but he figured it was just static in the signal.

“That was important?” Daptin asked.

“Yes. Very. She could have been killed.”

“Fine,” Daptin said, looking up. “What the fuck was that that just happened? The sky?”

“Who knows?” Fake said. “This place is so bizarre who cares if weird stuff happens? I mean—are you even surprised?”

“First of all,” Coabler said, “you turn that gun off. I don’t want any more calls. And the rest of you, no more calls, hear me? And look at the sky—I’ve been in these cupworlds for years, and I’ve never seen anything like that. Now you folks gave me your word—can you tell me now that you didn’t cause that?”

“We didn’t cause it, friend,” Granticaine said.

“Clearly,” Kesh said, “we are in a highly unstable situation. I felt something when the sky changed—something that has me very worried. I think Daptin was right about these two worlds not mixing well. We must be careful.”

“I agree,” Daptin said. “These kemig communicators use a very iffy and mysterious wave. Those idiots at Overwhelm shouldn’t be issuing them without further testing.”

“Well, let us put such issues aside for now, and conclude this discussion,” Coabler said. “And let me cut to the chase—am I right in believing, Daptin, that you will now take us all back

to wherever the Cup is?”

“Well, yes,” Daptin said. “It’s just, there’s a time factor.”

“A time factor?” Coabler asked.

“Yes. It will take some time, maybe like eight or twelve hours, before we can return.”

“And this is because the Coffee you drank will seek to reunite with the Cup?” Coabler asked.

“Yes. I believe so,” Daptin said.

“Come over here,” Coabler said to Daptin, who hesitated. Coabler narrowed his eyes. “I have the ability to feel the true Cup. If you have its Coffee in you, I should be able to feel it and verify your story.”

“I—I guess that should be okay,” Daptin said, approaching Coabler.

“Just hold out your hand,” Coabler said.

Daptin complied, and the Sawman took hold. After a few moments of concentration, he released Daptin. “That’s an affirmative. Let’s get going.”

“How do we know that we’ll all be brought along?” Bith asked.

Everyone looked at him.

“I don’t know,” Daptin said. “It seems that if people are travelling together, they’re all pulled along.”

“Quite right,” Coabler said. “That’s how my power works. But we have to be moving, walking. So let’s get up and get a move on right now—we can’t risk any of us being left behind.”

“Fine by me,” Daptin said, getting up. “But what about Jerald?”

“No problem for me to carry him, with my vectors,” Kesh said quietly.

Soon, the whole group had gathered everything together, and began walking in an arbitrary direction under that disturbingly brilliant green sky. The huge tin clock still wobbled in the sky behind them.

They eventually found the way hard going—it seemed the slay balloon’s intensity was so great near the epicenter, that it left only smooth ground—but beyond a few miles, tangles of broken trees made travel difficult.

“This sucks,” Fake said.

“It would suck even worse if you were trapped on this shit-hole forever, which is what’ll happen if I slip away while we’re standing still,” Daptin said.

“Yeah great, but do we have to travel so fast?” Fake said.

“Let’s err on the side of caution, little one,” Kesh said, floating easily over a fallen tree.

Fake climbed over the tree with some difficulty, saying “Yeah, but Daptin, didn’t you say it would be like eight hours or something before it happens? I can’t keep up this pace. I tried to ride on my cinder block, but I’m too heavy!”

Daptin looked over at her, her cinder block hovering close nearby. Then he looked ahead at the unconscious form of Jerald Hapal Hatch, floating along, shot through with vectors from Kesh.

“Yeah,” Daptin said, wiping some sweat from his forehead. “This is pretty rough going. But it’s not like we’re on an innocent hike. We’re in pretty deep shit here, Fake. We’re talking like never ever getting home if we’re not careful.”

“Ha! You’ll get back no matter what! You’ve got the Coffee inside you,” Fake said.

“Not necessarily,” Coabler said, bounding over a tree trunk. “If Daptin isn’t moving at the moment of return, he too may be left behind.”

Daptin looked ahead at Coabler, not too thrilled to hear that.

“But uh, Coabler,” Daptin said, “couldn’t you just use your power then? Move toward the Cup?”

“That’s what I have been doing for a long time, green. It took us eighty years to find it. You fancy trekking another eighty?”

“Good point,” Daptin said. “But you know what I was thinking—like Kesh, could you maybe, I dunno, float a log and let some people ride on it or something?”

Kesh paused in midair, turning to face Daptin.

“That’s not a bad idea. I thought of it myself, not too long ago, but there are a few problems with it. First off, I have my limits—I certainly couldn’t carry everyone. Also—since we’re being so purist in terms of travel, could riding a log animated with vectors be the wrong sort of travel?”

“So what about Jerald?” Fake asked.

“I’m carrying him, not a log. If he were conscious, I don’t think he’d like the feeling.”

“Not much,” Fake said, smiling, recalling the creepy feeling of Kesh’s vectors.

“Let’s keep it as an option,” Daptin said. “But for now, we’ll make due.”

“The end of the quest,” Classic of Logic said distantly.

“Who cares about the Cup anymore?” Demolish All said. “I wanna have fun in the ‘regular’ world, whatever that is.”

“Hey you with the crowbar,” Fake said.

Demolish All stopped and turned. “Me?”

“Yeah. I saw you blast that tree before. Why can’t you blast a clear path for us?”

“The junk we’re climbing through now is a result of your destructive wave. What makes you think mine will be any cleaner? Just do another balloon, kid.”

“That would delay us a lot longer,” Fake said, “waiting for the mass destruction to die dow. If you can’t blast, it’s no big deal. I guess I’m lazy. Always looking for ways to make this trip easier.”

“No big deal, there, chick,” Demolish All said, continuing on.

“I wanna destroy more! Blast ‘em!” Pantry Lurkin said, riding on Mallie’s shoulders.

A few members of the party chuckled, but a moment later, a booming voice, deep and resonant, announced “It’s Millicent!”

“Who said that?” Pattern Integrity said, looking around in confusion.

Ahead of them, the whole group saw a young woman standing on top of a fallen tree trunk, smiling and looking around. She wore a black overcoat, had a round face with neat, straight, long blond hair.

“I actually did it—I’m inside the movie!” she said, nodding in satisfaction.

# TWENTY-TWO

Ledrant Hate and Prince Ferrajalt stood motionless outside the Noyage Parlour, surveying the unbelievable scene.

“This is big,” Ferrajalt said.

“Yeah. So Injure was right after all. God damn,” Hate said, taking a drag on his cigarette. He was shorter than Ferrajalt, thin and wiry, with short blond hair and a cool hat.

It was the streetlights that really got them. That, and the strange sort of cold. And of course, the lack of people. But the streetlights, they were a real pisser. Huge. Too huge. Fifty stories high they looked, some of them, casting their cold light on the cold scene.

“So is this it?” Ferrajalt said. “Are we screwed? Is this the end of everything?”

“I don’t know. I wish we could get a hold of Injure. Why don’t you try the payphone again?”

“I told you man, I don’t like the shit I’m hearing on the phone. Weird shit, it doesn’t make any sense.”

“Theoretically Prince,” Hate said, taking another long drag of his cigarette and looking up the abandoned street, “we could be stuck on this crashed Earth for the rest of eternity. Who knows if death even works anymore? The collapse of all reality—and Injure saw it coming.”

“Yeah—and what the hell was he saying this morning—we all thought he was nuts—about how that guy Daptin Gone was involved in it, like it was his fault or something?”

“I have no idea. You know I met Daptin Gone on the day I was recruited. He gave Zillionthi a pretty good scouting report, unlike three months ago. He seems like a good person.”

“Yeah,” Ferrajalt said.

“But you know, Injure was right about this happening, so who knows what the hell else he was right about.”

Suddenly, the payphone rang. A chill ran up Ferrajalt’s spine. He looked at Hate.

“Hey man, why don’t you get that?” Ferrajalt said.

“Why—scared?” Hate responded.

“Fuck yeah I’m scared—you didn’t hear that shit like I did.”

“Fine,” Hate said, walking over to the phone, deliberately calm, and answering it.

“Hate here.”

The voice was that of a feisty old woman.

“Hey sonny, get your life in order, get rid of that Office Complex at Gumhanshire. Operator 6, 114-Demise.”

With that, the line went silent, save for a distant buzzing.

Hate looked at the handset with a puzzled expression, then hung it up.

“What was it?” Ferrajalt asked.

Hate turned around.

“It was some woman. She said I should get my life in order and get rid of Office Complex at Gumhanshire. Then she said something about an operator.”

“Huh?”

“Exactly. Is that the sort of stuff you heard?”

“No,” Ferrajalt said.

Then the two were startled by voices they heard from within the Noyage Parlour, approaching the door.

“People!” the Prince exclaimed.

“Let’s hope so,” Hate said.

In the dark, Dolthethmen started to get worried.

“Hey Dole,” Hasnafter whispered. “Shouldn’t we have gotten to the door by now?”

“I don’t know!” Dolthethmen shot back. “Maybe it’s dark outside too!”

“Now boys, just have some patience, will you?” Emily said.

“We won’t see the doors until—now.”

The group came around a corner of the Noyage Parlour to see the outside, oddly lit and abandoned.

“Oh this is just great!” Dolthethmen moaned.

“It’s not right, is it?” Am said.

“Don’t worry, honey,” Hasnafter said to her.

The group stopped.

“I really did it this time,” Dolthethmen muttered.

Emily turned to face him.



“What?” she asked.

Dolthethmen looked right into her beautiful eyes.

“I think I screwed up the universe or something.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Because—I just do.”

“Look folks,” Hasnafter said, “I don’t know about you, but I’m going out there. Whatever the hell’s happened, we have to move forward. You always have to move forward.”

“Fine,” Dolthethmen said, striding in an exaggerated manner to the doors.

“Hello?” Prince Ferrajalt said, jumping out of the way of the doors as Dolthethmen swung them open.

Dolthethmen looked at Ferrajalt, then at Hate, as the other three came to the threshold.

“What happened?” Dolthethmen asked Ferrajalt, looking hard into the Prince’s eyes.

“Uh,” Ferrajalt said, haltingly, “well, something’s happened for sure.”

“Were you in the Parlour here when it happened?” Ledrant Hate asked.

“Holy fuck!” Hasnafter exclaimed, looking at the nearest of the giant streetlights.

“Yeah we were in there. Something’s happened, for sure,” Am said dreamily, also looking up at the lights.

Emily looked around and appeared to be in deep concentration.

“Do you know anything about all this?” Dolthethmen asked Ferrajalt, and then looked over at Hate.

“We have ideas, but nothing concrete,” Ferrajalt said. “Is there anyone else in there?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so,” Dolthethmen said.

“Okay folks,” Hate said, clapping his hands together. “Listen to me. We have a serious problem on our hands. As far as we know, the world as we know it has crashed. It has failed.”

“What?” Dolthethmen asked loudly.

Hate held up his hand.

“Just hear me out. A friend of ours predicted that this would happen. We didn’t take him seriously, but now, it seems that he was right. The only thing I can think of doing is to try and get to him—he may have some answers.”

Emily looked up.

“Where is this friend of yours?” she said.

"As far as we know, he's still back in Derolbam City," Ferrajalt said. "I know it seems like everyone's disappeared, but our friend, Injure Bodoni, was working on a way to protect himself this morning. Maybe it worked, maybe it didn't."

"Let's just hope it did," Hate added.

"Look, who are you people?" Dolthethmen asked.

"Well I'm just a regular guy from the area, my name's Ledrant Hate. But him—he's royalty. You can call him Prince Ferrajalt."

"Yeah," Ferrajalt said sarcastically.

Hasnafter and Am had their arms around each other's shoulders, staring worriedly up at the nearest streetlight. They were silent.

"Well, we're just regular folks from the area too. My name's Dolthethmen, and this here's Emily. The other two over there..."

Dolthethmen noticed what was happening with Hasnafter and Am.

"What's their problem?" Dolthethmen asked.

"Hey guys—you okay?" Emily asked of the stunned two.

"Yeah, we're okay," Hasnafter said blankly. "But willya just look at that thing?"

Emily looked up at the streetlamp and then back at Hasnafter.

"It's very strange, but then again, we're in a very strange situation," Emily said. "Don't make such a big deal out of it."

"Folks," Hate said. "Dolthethmen, Emily, all of you—we have to get to Derolbam City, and we came here by bus—a mode of transportation which doesn't seem to exist anymore."

"I have a car," Dolthethmen said.

"So do I," Emily added.

"Great," Ferrajalt said. "So if the cars still exist, and if they still work, and if the roads are still there, and if Derolbam City is still there, we should be okay."

"That's a lot of 'ifs'," Emily said.

"The whole world is one big 'if' now," Ferrajalt responded.

Suddenly, Hasnafter and Am began muttering under their breath, as they leaned back against the wall of the Noyage Parlour. The muttering soon turned to wailing.

"We're just not interesting enough!" Hasnafter moaned.

It was becoming apparent that the two were slowly sinking into the wall.

"I always wanted to contribute!" Am yelled.

They were getting swallowed up by the wall, faster and faster.

“He just wants to get rid of us!” Hasnafter wailed.

“We can’t fight it,” Am said.

Emily turned to Dolthethmen.

“What should we do?”

“I don’t know,” Dolthethmen said, thinking of rushing forward to help his friends, but hesitating. “Hasnafter! What’s wrong? Who is it that’s trying to get rid of you?”

“It’s no use, Dole,” Hasnafter said, a horrible expression of despair on his face. “We have no place in this strange, exciting new world.”

“I don’t know about you,” Ledrant Hate said to the group, “but I think we should just let them go. Just look around—everyone else has disappeared—these two may have just had a little extra time. And everyone’s existence may hinge upon us finding Injure and finding a way to set things right.”

Emily stared at Hate, incredulous.

“We can’t just let them disappear!”

“Wait a minute,” Dolthethmen said, holding up his hand. “Am—Ambivale—listen to me! Who is it? Who is trying to get rid of you?”

Am looked up at Dolthethmen with the look of a child pouting after a temper tantrum, and with a distant and apathetic voice, she said “Someone.”

Am and Hasnafter were silent and dazed now, more than half sunk into the brick wall. Emily looked around at the others.

“Why doesn’t someone try and pull them out?” she yelled.

Hate looked at the girl, and in an accusing tone, said “Why don’t you?”

Emily paused, jumped once in frustration and said, “Because, I don’t want to get sucked in too!”

“Exactly,” Ferrajalt said, with a slight snicker and smile.

“Just look everybody,” Dolthethmen said. “They say that someone is trying to get rid of them. We have to find out who that is!”

“Maybe it’s Daptin Gone,” Ferrajalt said, looking over at Hate.

“I have no idea,” Hate said. “But look around, people. Please. We’re in a real bad situation here. Any moment could be our last. I know they’re your friends and not ours—but we need to get going if we have any chance of solving this crisis.”

“Who is this ‘Daptengon?’” Dolthethmen asked.

“An old associate of ours who may be involved in this,” Hate said. “But we can talk about this on the way back up to Derolbam.”

Dolthethmen sighed.

“Fine. Let’s get going,” he said.

Emily looked at Dolthethmen, then back at the hapless two, now more in the wall than not.

“No!” Emily yelled. “We can’t just leave them. There has to be something we can do! It has to be something like a test! Maybe whoever’s doing it is testing our love for our friends!”

There was a pregnant pause as the three not-in-the wall fellows looked at Emily.

After a few more moments, Emily said, in a terse and inquiring manner, “What?” while flipping her hands up.

“Do you really love your friends there?” Ferrajalt asked.

“Huh?” Emily said, looking over at Am and Hasnafter, sinking quicker and quicker. “Well, yeah. I do. I mean, I guess I...”

“That’s it,” Dolthethmen said. “It is a test and we fail. I don’t have any love for either of those two. Hasnafter is annoying and Am is a freak. I don’t give a crap about them. Let them fucking go!”

Emily stood there, looking back and forth, tears beginning to form in her eyes. And almost immediately, Ambivale and Hasnafter were gone.

Ledrant Hate waited until he felt it was right to speak. “I know it’s a shock to lose your friends, but like I said—look around you. Reality is shot. And just think of all the other people you’ve probably lost.”

“You said you guys had cars,” Ferrajalt said. “If they’re still here, we really have to get going to Derolbam.”

“Okay, let’s go,” Dolthethmen said, turning and starting down the street. “They’re at the parking lot down here.”

Emily, openly crying now, followed along as the group began down the cold, scarily-lit street. Soon they came to the parking lot, and found that most of the cars were upside-down.

“Uh,” Ferrajalt said. “Upside-down cars.”

“Very observant,” Emily said, sniffing and seeking to see if her car was upright. It wasn’t.

“Where’s your car?” Ferrajalt asked Dolthethmen.

“Fuck!” Emily said. “They got my car!”

“Relax,” Dolthethmen said from across the lot. “Mine is rightside-up, and it has a full tank of gas, unlike yours, Emily—remember?”

“Hmm!” Emily said in mock, flirty frustration.

“Okay everyone—get in,” Dolthethmen said.

Soon they were all inside the car.

“Lucky those two dropped out,” Ferrajalt said. “They wouldn’t have fit.”

“Have some manners, Prince,” Hate said. “If they were your friends you might not be so flip.”

“Just stating facts,” Ferrajalt said.

Dolthethmen started the engine, and it sounded fine.

“We’re on our way,” Dolthethmen said.

They pulled out of the parking lot and drove up the street, but as they passed the Noyage Parlour, Dolthethmen stopped.

“What’s wrong?” Emily asked.

“Nothing—I just want to check something.”

Dolthethmen left the car running and got out. He walked up to the doors, opened them, and peered in. Then he entered the building.

“Look, what the hell is he doing?” Ferrajalt asked Emily.

“How should I know? He’s fucking nuts,” she responded.

Soon Dolthethmen reappeared in the entrance area and nodded toward the folks in the cars. Then he stepped away again, soon to return, leading Ambivale and Hasnafter by their arms. The two shuffled along like zombies, blank expressions on their faces.

Dolthethmen opened the doors and yelled “See! I had a feeling! They went through the wall, and just wound up inside!”

“Son of a bitch!” Ferrajalt exclaimed, as he and the others climbed out of the car and ran forward to see what the deal was.

“They’re okay,” Dolthethmen said. “Right Hasnafter?”

“Yes. We are okay,” Hasnafter said in a very robotic manner.

“Am?” Dolthethmen asked.

“Yes. We are okay,” Ambivale said, in an equally monotone fashion.

“Do you want to come with us?” Emily asked, putting her hand on Ambivale’s shoulder. “We’re going up to Derolbam City to see about fixing all this.”

“No,” Ambivale said. “I would like to stay here.”

“Has?” Emily asked.

“No,” Hasnafter said. “I would like to stay here.”

“Gee Dolthethmen,” Ferrajalt said. “You sure it was a good idea to find them?”

“Look,” Dolthethmen said. “I want to find out who it is that was behind—uh—behind putting them through that wall and zonking them out like this. Well Hasnafter? Who was it?”

“A man who is listening to music. No more,” Hasnafter said.

“A man who is listening to music. No more,” Ambivale said.

“Okay, I’ve had enough of this. Let’s get a goddamned move on! Come on!” Hate said.

“Okay, okay,” Dolthethmen said. “You two sure you’ll be okay here? We’ll come back for you if we can.”

“We’ll be fine,” Hasnafter said, a little less robotically, with an almost sinister look on his face.

“Okay—let’s go!” Dolthethmen said, and they were on their way again.

# TWENTY-THREE

“Well hey,” Carne said. “Those sticker bushes weren’t so bad! No doubt my Moisture Detection Friend would have whined and complained about such an experience, but you and I, Pacer, are made of tougher stuff regarding such experiences.”

“And we’re still in the same general area as were were before we went through the bushes,” Pacer said. “That’s somewhat impressive.”

“I know. The gravel road before us is of the same kind of gravel. But... well, not quite. I like this gravel better. It’s sharper, more rocklike. I like that.”

“Who’s Vontolleny?”

“Huh?”

“That skywriting up there. It says ‘Vontolleny is cool.’ See it?”

“Um... oh yeah. I think it’s just that new videogame character, the one who travels around through the certificates on people’s walls, the tan and white bridge-dwelling jackdaw? You know the one I mean?”

“Wasn’t that some vaporware game from like ten years ago?”

“Apparently the game is gonna happen. Or has already happened.”

“I hope they make a View-Master for it.”

“They won’t,” Carne said. “They don’t make videogame View-Master reels, I don’t think. Videogames are the most massive piece of pop culture real estate that is treated like dirt, mostly. Or... maybe just as every pebble is a little different... um... I mean... ah whatever. Let’s go get some coffee.”

\* \* \*

“My Moisture Detection Friend bought a subscription to a magazine from an alternate reality,” Carne said. “He got two issues, and then... nothing. I’ve been helping him investigate the phenomenon, but we haven’t had much success. And he lives in fear of government agents breaking down his door to confiscate his alternate reality contraband!”

“Yeah, the world is weird. Weird stuff like that happens sometimes,” Pacer said.

\* \* \*

“It is a peculiar kind of otherworldliness that my Moisture Detection Friend possesses,” Carne said. “We often invest an image of otherworldliness in other people, and at times that assessment is wrong. It is based on our innate hunger for otherworldliness.”

“‘Otherworldliess’—how many letters does that have?” Pacer said.

“Um... sixteen.”

“I knew a girl once who seemed pretty otherworldly, but she turned out to be a psycho, and not much more.”

“Well you see, that’s just what I’m talking about! That ‘other world’ we are so much in love with is actually right here—and our inability to see it is the impetus behind all of our problems.”

“Yeah man, this girl had problems. She thought that people were just piles of leaves—like you get in Autumn—piles of leaves that just transformed and became people. Weird, huh?”

“Well, it could be that she was a psycho, but also, maybe she was just putting on an act so you’d leave her alone. I know how you obsess on women.”

“Yeah,” Pacer said, “that’s what I thought. But a long time after I stopped talking to her, I’d see her lying on the ground, hugging piles of leaves and stuff. So I think she may have actually had some genuine problems.”

\* \* \*

“Yeah, hello,” Carne said. “I am talking to you from an airport chocolate store in Iowa or something. Can you hear me?”



My Moisture Detection Friend would love this place! He would totally suspect that time travellers from the 1970s were all around here.”

“Carne man, I can barely hear you!” Pacer said. “What are you calling from, a walky-talkie or something?”

“Almost!” Carne said. “It’s one of those newfangled anti-satellite phone systems. Ytterbium, I think they call it. Instead of satellites, they bury transmitters deep in the earth’s crust, allowing you to call from any point on Earth—even Iowa!”

\* \* \*

“Wow, Pacer’s not here,” Carne said. “That’s weird. I knew he was planning on trading Wacky Packs with my Moisture Detection Friend, but it’s one of those stupid science fiction fan holidays today, like ‘Square Root of Pi Day’ or something. I thought he’d be celebrating it. Maybe I should check out some depressing malls, being that it’s a weekday afternoon. Or I could go to a gardening store and think about monorails. Yeah... that’s a good plan...”

\* \* \*

“My Moisture Detection Friend helped design a strip mall,” Carne said. “He included a hatch at an interior corner which inexplicably led down into an underground entertainment area, with monsters, pirates, robots, and all that kinda stuff. They kicked him off the project, but last week the strip mall opened, and damned if they didn’t have that hatch and all the stuff he designed!”

“Wow,” Pacer said. “And they didn’t pay him anything?”

“No—but he didn’t care. They like sent their lawyer over, all worried and everything, but he just laughed and said that the fact that something like that was actually built was more than enough payment.”

“So there’s no sign on it or anything? It’s just like this hatch in the middle of nowhere?”

“That’s it! But they must have spent hundreds of thousands of dollar on the entertainment center it leads to.”

“So it’s free to get in?”

“Yes! There’s nothing barring you at all! You just climb down the hatch, and there you are!”

“So people must be getting to know it by word of mouth

and press and stuff, huh? But how do they make money?"

"Advertising. The place is full of advertising."

"That's not so bad. At least they don't have those Japanese animation booths, where you insert \$200 and it automatically spits out a DVD anime adventure starring an anime version of you, and your friend, if you got one! And if you want to see the next episode, you gotta pay another \$200!"

"Well..." Carne said. "They do have those. But they only charge \$175."

\* \* \*

"Today marks the third day that my Moisture Detection Friend is spending in an alternate reality with a bunch of kids who have a secret hideout in a quarry, under a big pile of rocks," Carne said.

"How'd he get over there?" Pacer said.

"It's easier than you might think. Alternate realities are all over the place. You can walk to them, anytime. Just, normally your mind won't allow you to even consider going to the right places."

"Yeah? So how do you actually go about doing it, then, my friend?"

"Well, he's good friends with two fairies, and they lead him around. But I'm sure there'd have to be some other way of doing it. I mean, most people lose the ability to see fairies at about age six. And the memories are cloudy. Kids have a natural antagonism toward fairies, as evidenced by how few are led off to permanent lostness by them."

"You're talking about fairies as if they're real. Why, man?"

"Because they are!"

"And you, do you also have this ability to talk to fairies?"

"I try to. And I think I've had some communication. But it's never very lucid or concrete."

"They say that fairies and aliens are the same thing. Back in the old days, people felt they came from Fairyland, cuz that made sense back then. Now, the only uncharted territory people can conceive of is outer space. So they think the little fuckers are from outer space. People are dumb, man."

"Yeah, I know," Carne said. "But not all the fairies have flying saucers. The techno-fairies and the trad-fairies split a long time ago. And there's a lot of other splits in the fairy world. I think, all-in-all, we're lucky not to have to deal with the fairies

and all their problems. We have enough problems of our own.”

\* \* \*

“My Moisture Detection Friend had an idea for a story,” Carne said, “with an entertainment building with a dark ride that you go through on your own personal vehicle, going to all these different themed areas, and then stopping for views, dining, resting, etc. Like you control these vehicles somewhat, deciding where to go next, and hotels in there, and you can stay there for days and days. And also, in comparison, another part of the story, like this park. Kind of like Washington Square Park in the sixties, with all these people, like at night in the summer, and exploring the idea of the promise that such a situation holds—but instead of the promise giving way to disappointment, you know, like it just keeps getting better and better? Like not the dark side, but that initial sense of the cool stuff that might happen, and then it does? That’s what he’s talking about.”

“Cool,” Pacer said.

\* \* \*

“You know that painful feeling of nostalgia, equal parts pain and pleasure?” Carne said. “My Moisture Detection Friend loves that feeling. He tries to cultivate that feeling, but it’s not so easy all the time. The past is so alluring because it’s out of reach. Just like that toy you had as a kid, that you search garage sales for. That toy is an object of worship! But once you get it, it’s just not the same. You see what I mean?”

“Yeah,” Pacer said. “But still, if I could time travel to a Toys’R’Us in 1975 or something, I think I’d have a wicked time. A totally wild, insane, wicked fuckin’ time.”

\* \* \*

“Can you believe it?” Carne said. “We’re finally down South, on this back porch right next to a swamp, banjo music playing, all that good stuff. And it’s hot, really hot! My Moisture Detection Friend would be so jealous. He loves clichés.”

“Yeah, man,” Pacer said. “So when are we going to the

mall? I gotta get a new pair of Oakley sunglasses, and I wanna see if they have that new videogame at the arcade.”

“I am not at all distressed by your statement. Though we are in a semi-legit location, I think that these themes and cliches go hand in hand with the milieu of the mall. In fact, we should come up with a new kind of place at a mall, with these kind of themed locations and the like.”

“They already have it to some degree. Rainforest Cafe, for example. And a lot of stores are theming themselves more and more these days. They got all this competition from the online stores—they gotta come up with ways to lure people in.”

“I know what you mean, but... but I can’t help but think that people would pay to be in a pure location like this—no shopping, no restaurants, no drinks—just unadulterated location.”

“Well, Disney-style dark rides have been doing that for decades, haven’t they?”

“They have, but it’s all a bit tainted with stories and characters and most of all the darn time limit. If I could, I’d like to spend hours and hours in the Pirates of the Caribbean universe! You know?”

“Well, in California they do have that restaurant that’s kinda in the Pirates world... but I guess you’re talking about more like just being there...”

“Yes! I’d like to pay a small fee, and just be there. No time limit, no structure, no sequence—just the being. Kind of like that dark ride building kind of idea... where you just wander and be in cool themed places. That is what I’m talking about.”

“Shit! Another friggin’ mosquito bite! This reality shit is bullshit. Give me a fake version any day—without bugs and heat and shit!”

“I quite agree,” Carne said. “Just like looking at a painting of a thing is a far different, and perhaps better, experience than looking at the real thing, so too with this whole idea of themed locations. And maybe we’re just the ones to make an idea like the one I’ve been describing a reality. ‘Carne & Pacer’s Themed Something or Other’. That’s a goal, my friend—something we’ve been sorely lacking! Y’know?”

\* \* \*

“My Moisture Detection Friend is trying to create online entertainment,” Carne said, “but web surfers’ attention spans

are very short, and those folks are very fickle. Faced with information overloads, minds frazzle and pop, and your website could easily be blown out in one of those pops, in each person's mind."

"Yeah," Pacer said. "A lot of stuff on the web sucks. And even the stuff that's good sucks at some level. And usually on many levels. The traditional network and publishing idea, with very strict editors and decisionmakers filtering content... that was a good idea."

"I agree. When there were only three or four TV channels, folks could talk about the shows the next day at work. But with hundreds of millions of websites, usually no two people have seen the same thing. But then there's the promise of bringing together exactly those people who went to that website, online, via chat and message boards and email and the like."

"That's the problem. It's the casualness that's cool. The people in the place you work, you're just thrown in with them. There's a reluctance on your part, but that makes it cool. Just like TV. You flip around, and you're like, this all sucks, but then you catch something and start watching it, and whatever. It's not like you sought it out. When you have no expectations, it's a lot easier to have a good time."

"I quite agree. That is why I told my Moisture Detection Friend that he has to come up with something so good that it transcends all these barriers. Of course, every website creator is trying to do the same. Commercial sites, at least. And they are all failing, to some extent. You're right. People fare the best without expectations."

"And the moment you check something out, it's no longer new. It's old. That's a big thing. And also, what it means to be cool. People are like apes. They look around and do what other people do. You can't say that's totally a bad thing, cuz without that psychological dynamic, it'd be a pretty fucked-up world. We need commonality. But it needs to be balanced with individualism. And these days, everything's out of whack."

"Yes, I agree. And the Internet is taking all the mystery out of the world. It makes you think the world is full of perverts, obsessors, idiots, and victimizers. Sports, weather, politics, TV, music, movies... there's gotta be more to life."

"Hey, what about that thing we're gonna do, that big dark ride thing? We could have a website, y'know, like virtual and 3-D, but also with live cams and all that, and people in the

vehicles can talk to the people online and stuff like that? That'd be cool."

"I know, but this thing we want to build is going to cost, I don't know, hundreds of millions, maybe even over a billion dollars. Where are we gonna find that kind of money?"

"Dude, you may have your Moisture Detection Friend, but I have a cool friend too. A Chronoscope Friend. He's developing a chronoscope—a device which can look back in time. We could use it to find buried treasure or something. Or make porno movies of historical figures. Or solve crimes. I don't know."

"I daresay that a true chronoscope would certainly dwarf our dark ride idea, by many orders of magnitude. If your friend does indeed invent such a device, and is awarded a patent, he'll be far richer than even Bill Gates, if he's not instantly murdered by the government the moment they catch wind of it."

"Yeah. Like that guy who invented a car that runs on water. I think they killed him. Or just like gave him millions of dollars to just forget he ever thought of it."

"But, you know," Carne said, "in the case of a chronoscope, I think that most people would prefer that such a device not exist. It would mean a complete and utter lack of privacy. Everything that anyone ever did would be open to potential viewing by anyone with the device. And it would destroy the mystique of history. And that would suck."

\* \* \*

"Powerful. Yeah, with real power you aren't burdened. My Moisture Detection Friend always tells me..." Carne said.

"There you go again," Pacer said. "You always start every conversation mentioning your Moisture Detection Friend."

"Um... uh, what... uh what's the matter with that? I mean, I know I talk about him a lot, but he's about the most interesting person I know—besides you, of course. And I don't start every conversation talking about him. I mean... I mean I don't think I do... I mean..."

"Just cool off, man. I didn't mean anything by it. I'd like to be hang gliding right now. Hang gliding through a thunderstorm! Or no—above a thunderstorm, yeah man, that's it."

"Kind of a non-sequitor there, eh?"

"Yeah, okay. I criticize a type of statement you make and

now you have to criticize what I have to say?”

“Why are we fighting? I don’t see any need to fight. It’s just... there’s a certain tension in the air... like a big change is looming.. Why is that? Why?”

“The Talking Heads. Now there’s a band. They kinda sucked, but they had some really good stuff too. But they took themselves too seriously. So they had their fifteen hours of fame, what do they want, their own godhead?”

“What? Godhead? What the hell’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s just an expression man. Oh, I played this shitty Playstation game, called ‘Doc Pourri’, about a potpourri superhero or something. It looked cool on the cover, like some hippie dude, but it really sucked. There was an opening FMV with a CGI Washington Square Park that was pretty cool, but it was like this 2-D side-scrolling platformer with 3-D elements, and... and... and I don’t know. It really sucked.”

“Uh-huh...”

“Look man! We’re cracking up! We gotta get some direction! We gotta build our dark ride thing! Come on, you know you wanna do it!”

“I know, but we don’t have a pot to piss in, and this thing could cost maybe a billion dollars to build! I mean... we could try and find investors, venture capitalists, and... I mean, I don’t give a shit if we make any money off it, I mean, I don’t know if you care...”

“I don’t care.”

“Y’know? I mean, just like my Moisutre Detection Friend, with that strip mall and the underground entertainment complex? He didn’t give a shit about the money, he was just thrilled that they actually built it.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.”

“And I know, y’know, I know I have no life, but I’ve been trying to come up with a name for this thing, and I’ve been spending a lot of time on it, and I came up with a pretty cool idea for a name.”

“What is it?”

“‘Pacer and Carne’s Darkider,’ Carne said. “I took the term ‘dark ride’ and got rid of the space, and then I moved the ‘r’ three spaces over. I don’t know, but I think it’s a pretty good name.”

“Pacer,” Carne said. “Why are we at this yacht dock, and what is this secret you keep talking about? We have to go and talk to my Moisture Detection Friend about the Darkider later, y’know?”

“Okay man,” Pacer said. “You see that yacht coming in to dock? I got us a meeting with Jay Pime, the billionaire! One of my sister’s friends knows him or something. This may be the break we’ve been looking for to fund the Darkider.”

“Well, alright. I guess there’s no harm in it, though I’m not too hopeful anything will come of this. Is that him up there?”

“No, man. That’s the driver. The boat driver. Jay should be coming soon. Um... oh, there he is now.”

“Um, okay.”

“Hey! Jay Pime! What’s up!”

“How how,” Jay Pime said, “now’s I meeting, Meadowlark Lemon and Peter Lemongello. How how, look just like Meadowlark Lemon and Peter Lemongello.”

“Um... no, um, I’m Carne and this is...”

“Cool it, man! This dude’s insane. Just go along with it!”

“Okay, okay.”

“Okay, how, got my hair cut at The Lemon Tree,” Jay Pime said.

“Hey man. Let me shake your hand, dude. Cool. Carne, shake the man’s hand, man.”

“Uh, pleased to meet you.”

“Ahvell said you boys, Meadowlark Lemon and Peter Lemongello, how, said you had a business propo, propo, propo lemon!”

“Uh, yes...” Carne said. “Ah, it deals with the essential nature of the dark ride, a kind of Twentieth Century...”

“Look dude, we got this great idea and we need money from you to build it,” Pacer said.

“Yeah, how, how, got off like Bob Ray Lemon. Got off like Bob Ray Lemon. Got his hair cut at The Lemon Tree.”

“Well. Uh...” Carne said.

“Look Jay, we got this great idea. It’s called ‘Carne and Pacer’s The Lemon Darkider!’”

“Parm and Pacer The Lemon Darkider! Parm and Pacer, Lemon Darkider!”

“Um, it’s Carne actually...”

“Okay,” Pacer said. “Yeah, so like, lemon, we need, um, lemon, we need like a billion to do The Lemon Darkider. Like, lemon, a billion dollars.”



“Lemon, how, how. A billion bucks? I got three of ‘em. You can have one. You can have one. Lemon Darksider. Lemon Darksider.”

“Dark... Dark ‘ider’,” Carne said.

“What does it matter?” Pacer said. “Eh? So Jay, shall we talk to some of your lemon people? Draw up some lemon lemon contracts?”

“Lemon. Lemon. Lemon,” Jay Pime said.



# TWENTY-FOUR

What I know about Rome, chances with young women, and living in the world's coolest treehouse. Wild saw-mangled energy motorcycle, take the plunge Barry. Laughing on wing-time the spot gravellette. Earth hole wandering, just another airday tramp. Emma, the flask of the, Wallace, of splinter of congress of them, I opened the theater.

Lazy day and odd sun. Nine little pebbles remote in a vast deserted parking lot huddle together, speaking in relaxed whispers, having a little meeting. The clouds come. Thunder the darkening sky. Air the prime raindrops blossom forth in deluge collapsing onto the pavement. And the nine little pebbles have a little drink.

Under the way, a friendly odd place, where broken colorful glass is there, and a land of friends is there, and a land of animals. The rainy reality system's gift, a many-aspect question, for the bright kids of yestermore. Just a slant crossing, just a bare react-fashion, just the former three, or four if you prefer. I was never grouped under those who pretend, but here all is lost, Emma.

This is happening. It is unregulated. I was quiet. In wood huddle. Sweet smoke on hill. Time has come to do some exploring. That is unrehearsed.

Flew at latenight rented car earlymorn, domed hotel and ralcifice office, the tin bannister sanction. Was I not a warrior, of skill and power? Billiard winter drink, I was in you, I was the deep glass window at the airport last night. I am burning.

Hint of pepper in the air and she's finally with me. Today for adventure, tonight for sexual adventure. Why are there computer graphics in my thoughts? Dear home, I depart, and must hope you'll survive. You have a mundane life, not here,

but at most a day like this.

And it's a hunting. It's a knockout. Fan and random we ambled, and came upon an area funny. The darkness not under back a little, and all of us were frightening. Can this be reconciled, this days? Time travel is an option. Reality systems can'ts betrays evernessity. Lords of Uncontrol, we, nevery and quite silly. But all I want is the picture.

I am a wristwatch made of mist. Commanda Royal Blue, the cinnamon backlash affair. Junction, the mystery of the man made of milk.

Mendel is isn't it. Imperial the Scout Lounge. Try motion and ski Neptuna. Financial and ethical skinny dipping do the kid. Matrimonial erase, indrenction. Dark storm campfire running, the mellow flicker, dark wave campfire strolling. Spokes.

Going through a rain highway I said was a goal and a fair romance. Free in a clearing were bolt haven the corner mazen. And the in the day was fine, and in mine and is cure.

Dank blended heart, pleasing all morons in matters of affairs of the bit match smoldering in saliva sanguinely. Less else is nonsense to snare. Bareful bugs in neat supple vim. College caterwaul, blaming of the vane. Stupid awards in afternoon breezes.

Fallaback, Hanson, the days of smoke and swimming are done with. Strange needle tonight, the friend of a friend and his cool walls. Discovery night, and you're trying to worship Freya. Predatory car, magic branch, Lord of the Mall. If it weren't for constant competition, things would be pretty dull around here.

The radar echo would indicate lifeheat. Then I watched as the building, an office plaza, was blasted to rumble by an grenadier in shiny plastic white armor. His nemesis was gameshowhost. Just kidding, his nemesis was Roosevelt.

Neither the trowel nor the dame are languid. Look, the state of night far college drive. See, the girlfriend is just barely a friend, young nightmare. In sleep I know I think. A daze is my only seen in a mall with a games are good. No pretend car!

Cough drops are smooth, the power to go on. You're a girl and your cousin is a girl. I am night time, amber light, amber night. Let it all go. Cool in the darkness. You fool.

I'm on Tabasco and she's on codeine. Sometimes on cable I flip past a rodeo. Ten minutes ahead of travel.

Dark sky massive flight, Sunday destruction—killflay their

deity. Feminine day forever, was the and is the deep smell of girl. Foolin', retarded jigsaw circumstance, massage of emptiness, a bolt of heaven. Down for real, ignition in skin, a cold rainy street morning afterward. I'll take the outside.

Being that wonder is slight, going all along the day midwall, the corporeal stab is the your sense. Building is the same, in a wane, in the stay, to over gas stations. Can we all mall? Snowflaw car, the day of the eatery's salad bar super tray. For the nice domed window above I call home, and a book on magic at the library is under a roof in the rain. Can all this be? Twis sury.

Through these dank fields, did we all amble, chomping on shields, dining on bramble. The light of the morning, a masacre made, remember the warning—in fog we do fade.



# TWENTY-FIVE

The group under the green sky stopped and exchanged annoyed glances. Coabler rolled his eyes and looked back at the rest of the gang. “Okay, who wants to deal with this?”

Classic of Logic stepped forward and said “This is all we need.”

The girl who had just appeared smiled at Classic as she approached.

“Well hello there Classic of Logic and all of you. My name is Millicent, and you know what? I’m inside the movie!”

“Okay,” Classic said. “When you say you’re inside the movie, what exactly do you mean? Do you mean that you were watching a movie with us in it, and somehow used a superpower or device to step into the film?”

“You got it!” Millicent said brightly, jumping down and leaning on the log. “I’ve always loved ‘Cup’s Club’—that’s why I chose it.”

Daptin looked up at the green sky, and muttered “I knew that phone call was a bad idea.”

Bith, nearby, turned to Daptin and asked “Huh?”

“I’m just saying, when Mallie made that call and the sky turned green, I knew something went wrong—and now this! A girl who steps into a movie and we’re the movie. I mean, you know what? We’re totally fucked.”

Fake stepped forward and addressed Millicent.

“Look Millicent. As I’m sure you know from the movie, we’re in a pretty bad situation here, and to us, it’s reality. We have to keep moving.”

“I know. But you have some time yet. You can take a break and relax.”

“Can’t you see?” Daptin said. “It was the phone call! A

direct link between here and there, direct communication. Look at the sky! And now, we're in some really dangerous territory. Remember when we were working at the water treatment plant? Or that place where we were goddamn prostitutes? Now we're characters in a movie—or even worse—part of this babe's adolescent fantasy! I can't take it! I just can't fucking take it!"

"Now wait a minute, Daptin," Granticaine said, sitting down on a boulder. "I think you're overreacting to this. I mean, just think about it. If there are infinite alternate worlds out there, then it makes sense that in one of them they just happened to make a movie about characters and circumstances identical to us right now. That doesn't mean we're in the movie."

"I just have a bad feeling about the whole thing," Daptin said, his frost flame flaring.

"Now Millicent," Granticaine said, "just where are you from and what method did you employ to get here?"

"Well, I'm from a place called Canada, and I got here from a spell I read in an old book in the school library."

"And girl," Granticaine said gently, "what exactly do you intend to do now that you're here?"

"I just, you know, I just wanted to join you on your journey. You know, be friends with you."

"Uh-huh," Granticaine said. "And just how are you planning on getting back?"

"I don't know," Millicent said brightly.

Daptin shook his head.

"Let me get this straight. You found a spell in a book, and read it—where—in a movie theater?"

"No—they were showing 'Cup's Club' at the library."

"The same library the book came from?" Fake asked.

"No—that was the school library. This was the main library."

"And where is this book?" Granticaine asked.

"I put it on the seat beside me," Millicent said. "I memorized the spell and recited it."

"Okay I can't take it anymore," Mallie said. "What happens in the movie?"

"What, the whole movie?" Millicent said.

"No! The part after this part," Mallie said.

"Well, you see, that's sort of why I chose this movie. This is real near the end. They kinda leave it open, you know, to like



individual interpretation. We talked about it in class. You know, what people thought would happen and everything.”

“Great,” Mallie said.

“Do you want to go back, Millicent?” Granticaine asked.

“Um—I dunno. If I could live here with you guys I don’t think I’d ever want to go back!”

“The spell,” Classic of Logic said. “Do you remember it?”

“Yeah. Uh-huh,” Millicent said.

“Is there a spell to reverse it?” Classic asked.

“I think there was, but I didn’t really read it.”

“Don’t you think you should try and get back? You can always do the spell again, but you must have family who’ll worry sick about you,” Classic said.

“I guess. But you know—I didn’t really think it would work. I never expected it to.”

“So recite the spell!” Classic said.

“Um, okay. But it doesn’t make any sense. And it was the one to go into the story, not to get out. But I’ll try it anyway. Here goes... ‘Little tiny owl, small as a thimble, smart as a whip, furry like a bat, and what do you think of that?’ ...huh. I’m still here. Guess it doesn’t work the other way around. I told you there was another one to get back.”

“You’re a long way from Kanda,” Fake said.

“Canada!” Millicent said, stressing the pronunciation.

“Canada, whatever,” Fake said.

Daptin lost his patience.

“Okay people, whatever. Millicent, congrats, you’re now an honorary member of Cup’s Club. Now can we all get a goddamn move-on? I for one really want to see what happens next in the adventures of Cup’s Club, especially if it means us getting back to reality safe and sound.”

“Okay,” Coabler said. “Millicent, as leader of Cup’s Club, I do grant you honorary membership. Now all of you, forward!”

“I’m really here,” Millicent muttered, falling into step. “I can’t believe it.”

“We can’t either,” Daptin said wearily.



## TWENTY-SIX

“It’s not in there. Power zoom 7 carat/Farrafly method. It’s not there. I can’t jing it! I can’t jing it! Former, 14 Relora stance. Go. Go. Possibility phase delay! Go 16 toron. Drip in 5. It’s too impossible! Forgetprev dothis,” Injure Bodoni muttered to himself, a little furry lady on his shoulder, him oblivious to the group of people who’d entered his workshop about a minute earlier.

“Hey!” Emily yelled.

“Ah! Ah!” Injure screeched, holding his hands to his head in sudden shock, turning.

“Injure,” Hate said. “How goes it?”

“Greetings,” said the little creature on Injure’s shoulder. She was about a foot-and-a-half tall, wearing a black dress, and seemed to be a cute anthropomorphic fox or cat or something, with yellow-orange fur.

“Hi there,” Injure said, looking back at his equipment.

Hate strode forward and looked to see what Injure was doing, giving the little furry lady a sideways glance.

“Looks like you were right,” Hate said quietly.

Injure heaved a sigh and turned to face the others.

“Everybody, I’ve been working, um, at a steady pace since the collapse, and I have to say that while it’s bad—really bad—the fact that any of us are here is a good sign.”

The little creature smiled.

“What the hell is that?” Ferrajalt asked, nodding his head toward the furry lady.

“My name is Ann Saply. And I’m a who, not a what, young royal.”

“Sorry,” Ferrajalt said. “But where exactly did you come from?”

“This business just sort of shook me out the pepper shaker, so to say,” Ann said.

“She appeared soon after the collapse,” Injure said. “Her signatures indicate fifth-realm/perpendict origins, though of course I can’t be sure.”

“Uh huh,” Ferrajalt said, nodding, mocking Injure’s not-for-laymen techspeak.

Hate looked intently at Injure. “Have you tried to bridge?”

Injure gave a look of despair. “Yes.”

“What happened?” Hate asked.

“Well,” Injure said with emphasis, “it wasn’t pretty.”

“What do you mean?” Ferrajalt said.

Injure looked down at his instruments.

“With the collapse, this Earth is no longer suitable for bridges. The b-volume I hanced became terribly unstable, full of lightning and monstrosities. Pretty much what I expected.”

Then Injure looked at Dolthethmen and Emily. “These two—did you locate any more?”

“Huh?” Ferrajalt asked.

“These people you found—were there any more? Did you see any more?” Injure asked.

“Well,” Ferrajalt said, “there were two others, but they got really messed up. They looked at those streetlights and got sucked through a wall and were, like, totally stoned out.”

“Where are they?” Injure asked.

“Back at the Noyage Parlour in Hennonly. They were in no shape to travel,” Hate said.

“Hmm. I was wondering if any non-OA had remainified. Interesting,” Injure said.

“Huh?” Dolthethmen said.

Ann Saply gave Dolthethmen a strange look.

Injure looked at Hate, who nodded.

“I guess there’s no point in keeping this from you,” Injure said to Dolthethmen and Emily. “We are members of Overwhelm Associates—a company which has the ability to travel to thousands of different Earths. I had thought our off-Earth status was what kept us existent—even though most of us here went non—but with Ledrant and you folks, it seems like my theory is wrong. Though Ledrant is jolc-tethered flive, and Primate.”

“Yeah, that’s me, Mr. Jolc-Tethered. Anyway, who else survived?”

“Well, as far as I know, there are four others, all Primate,”

Injure said.

“Who?” Hate asked.

“Lemme see—Vike Varmabey and Treyess Arcomany were the only ones left here at base when it happened. Treyess wasn’t even supposed to be here—she was trying to get away from Greatwall until that faery thing blew over.”

“Who else?” Hate asked.

“Well, Nevrippa Den and V Sincein were stuck somewhere, and Vike and Treyess went to try and find them.”

“How’d you get in touch with them?” Hate asked.

“Oh—kemig communicators still work. At least in the same Earth—we haven’t been able to contact Greatwall or anyone else, though,” Injure said.

“Yeah, but who carries kemigs with them?” Ferrajalt asked.

“Luckily, V Sincein has one of the portable prototypes, built into his gun,” Injure said.

There was an uncomfortable silence, until Hate finally spoke.

“Can we reverse this collapse?”

Injure sighed.

“Short answer? Yes. Long answer? Highly unlikely. Not to get too technical, but every Earth has a complex system of event-whastions. The domino-wave that hit us sent the whole thing way off-kilter. At least, that’s my theory. I did see it coming, you know. You remember the weird coincidences that happened in the past few days—like a tsunami, disorder was sucked away briefly as the massive disorder deluge was approaching.”

“So how could we revive this Earth’s system?” Hate asked.

Injure smiled in frustration and shook his head.

“The right event-whastion could resuscitate part of the system, and if it’s the right part, it could set off a chain reaction which would totally on-line this Earth again. From there, Aconckwise, it’s fortyjult.”

“So what the hell does that mean?” Ferrajalt asked.

“It means, Prince, that we might be able to make things right by doing something, but we have no idea what that something might be,” Injure said.

“Oh,” Ferrajalt said.

“Okay now wait a minute,” Emily burst out. “Why did you say this happened again?”

Injure regarded the girl.

“I don’t know the cause of the domino-wave—it could have

been anything. The Unreal 64, another company like ours, has been doing very dangerous things with reality, so it was probably them. I also definitely read the signature of one of our former associates, a guy named Daptin Gone, in the pre-wave ifo-flow. He could have been working for them. I've heard rumors in that regard."

"Also," Hate added, "it's well-known that Aconck—our interconnection of Earths—has been tried before, around 500 years ago. They suffered a total collapse as well. And they never recovered. But luckily, that was a different set of Earths. Well, except for Red Alley Earth, which was spared, which is why we know about it.. But I digress."

"Okay," Emily said, turning to Dolthethmen. "Okay. Dole, you know what you told us. You said you might have caused all this."

Dolthethmen looked down, tears welling up in his eyes.

"Let's hear about this!" Injure said in his nerdy manner.

Dolthethmen frowned and shook his head, as the events of earlier in the day ran through his mind...

The girl's tongue in his head... he passed out and woke up to her doing sexual things to him, and she revealed she was him from the future... he used vague magic to get away from her, then he went to the mall... met Hasnafter and Ambivale and Emily there... he used vague magic again to make Emily attracted to him... then he went to the Noyage Parlor with them...

"Um," Dolthethmen said, "I don't know. I guess a lot of stuff happened today. Things kinda got out of hand."

"In what way?" Injure asked.

"Well, I guess since you were honest, I'll be honest too," Dolthethmen said, looking up. "I—I think I have powers. Today, what happened was, um, there was this girl who like, assaulted me, y'know, in that way, and it turned out that, y'know, she was basically me in the future. She had come back in time to, whatever, be perverted with her previous self."

"What?" Emily asked in shock and amazement.

"Yeah," Dolthethmen said. "The thing is, I was able to get away from her and stuff, but what I had to do was, I mean, I had to like make a mental note, that when I got that powerful, you know, having time travel and stuff, I should go back and save myself from her, and really erase the whole event. So that's what I did. But that's probably what attracted her—to that time and place. I don't know."

“Fascinating!” Injure said. “This is prime stuff!”

“Okay, okay,” Ferrajalt said. “Forget Bodoni—the scientist in him is taking over. So, uh—Dolthethmen was it?—why do you think you caused this? Because of this time travel junk?”

Dolthethmen sighed.

“It’s not just that. I—it’s just that, before...”

He looked at Emily.

“When I met you at the mall, Emily, I just—I don’t know. I had a fantasy about you, about going out with you and stuff. So I, well, I did the same thing—I asked my future self to alter reality so that I could go out with you and stuff.”

“And stuff?” Emily asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah,” Dolthethmen said, looking down again. “And stuff.”

“So you think you caused this reality collapse?” Hate asked.

“It crossed my mind,” Dolthethmen said, looking up at Hate.

“No,” Injure said. “What I gather from your story, the forces and frames involved, there’s no way it could have been you. Although—that all this stuff happened to you today is probably related to the approaching domino-wave. Has this sort of thing happened before, Dolthethmen?”

“Yeah. I mean, nowhere near as bad as this, but it has happened before. I mean, a little.”

“Well,” Injure said, “like I said, I’m certain that this phenom-set of yours is an effect of the domino-wave—not its cause. But thank you for offering the information—every little bit helps.”

“Uh-huh,” Dolthethmen said, miserable.

Suddenly, a wild beeping-and-ringing noise was heard.

“The central kemig!” Injure yelled. “Hopefully it’s V and Nevrippa telling us that Treyess and Vike are there.”

Injure fiddled with some controls, and an awesome visage appeared on the screen—a bizarre monster in bizarre armor.

“Hypergod Amnifaoz here,” a frightening voice boomed. “Who’s there?”

“Uh,” Injure said, “this is, uh, OA Consultants. Who’s this?”

“My ID precedes! All channels are dead. What is your twenty?” Hypergod Amnifaoz thundered.

Injure looked at the others.

“Um—we’re on Timber Serious Earth, in Derolbam City. What’s your, uh, twenty?”

The Hypergod was seen looking around for something.

“Not enough information,” Amnifaoz said. “Did you experience a disturbance 118 minutes ago?”

Injure looked at the others again, then back at the screen.

“Uh, yeah, we did experience something—a reality collapse of some sort.”

“Filba/fibla! Conkurs. Must reconnoiter with Emma. Hold,” the monster said, again looking around offscreen.

“Who the hell is that?” Ferrajalt asked.

“I have no idea!” Injure said. “We never picked up an alien signal on the kemig before!”

“End possibility/Emma,” Amnifaoz said. “I am utterly lost. Hypergod Word—request FIF, promise to do you no harm, provide help and rewards if asked for. Response?”

“Uh, what do you mean?” Injure asked.

“Rephrasing, I need permission to Full-Info-Fill to your twenty. I swear to do you no harm, and provide help and material rewards if you so wish. Do you agree?”

“I have to confer with my, uh, associates. Give me a minute.”

“Understood.”

Injure turned to the group, then to Ann Saply, still on his shoulder.

“Ann—you came out of nowhere—you know this guy?”

“I don’t know him,” Ann said, her eyes looking as wise as ever. “But he might prove helpful. I say let him come through.”

“Well, people?” Injure asked.

“It’s up to you,” Hate said.

“Okay. I say we let him through,” Injure said, turning to the kemig screen. “Okay, uh, whoever you are. Permission granted to come though.”

A flash of light and a brief popping sound later, Hypergod Amnifaoz towered before Injure Bodoni.

“You have my gratitude,” the monster said.

“No problem,” Injure replied.

The Hypergod then gazed at Ann Saply and let out a loud metallic sound that might have been a laugh.

“The re-ine of your kind! Twas a fine damagewave hit this realm then!” Amnifaoz said.

Ann regarded the beast calmly.

“Muttering recruit, get a grip,” she said.

“I thought you said you didn’t know this guy?” Injure said.



“I don’t know him, but his kind I know,” Ann said, jumping off of Injure’s shoulder and onto a nearby comfy chair. “He’s not really one of them. They started taking humans and turning them Hypergod some time ago. But that was infinity years ago.”

Emily sat down in another of the comfy chairs, holding her hand to her head.

“I know this might seem a little lame,” she said, “but I’m thinking now that this might be a dream. Why shouldn’t I think this is a dream?”

“I know this must seem unbelievable to you,” Bodoni said. “I mean, you being the only normal person here and all.”

“The thing is,” Emily said, “I’m not all that normal.”

“What do you mean?” Injure asked.

“I mean,” Emily said, “that I am Dolthethmen, from the future. I came back to fool around with myself a little. But I never expected any of this. I mean—I am from the future after all—and none of this ever happened!”

Dolthethmen felt like a mountain of bowling balls had just collapsed onto him. He stared blankly at Emily.

“Well!” Emily said. “What do you want? I remember when I was you all too well. I was such a loser.”

Dolthethmen continued to stare.

“So I was right,” he said. “You are the same future me that screwed me up in the parking lot.”

“Not really,” the pretty girl said. “I did that a few centuries back. I’ve mellowed out a lot since then.”

Dolthethmen sneered.

“So this is what I have to look forward to? Becoming a superpowerful pervert?”

“Among other things—yes,” Emily said.

Tears began to well in Dolthethmen’s eyes.

“I had a good life here. I was learning things. I was maturing,” he said.

“And you still will,” Emily said. “It’s just—oh!—you’re too irresistible a target!”

Dolthethmen turned away, and though trying to hold back, burst into tears.

“Sorry,” Emily said.

“Excellent situation! An exquisite flavor!” Hypergod Annifaoz bellowed. “Most refined.”

“What?” Emily asked, looking calmly up at the beast.

“Ho, I am a connoisseur of such fine situations! And you,

the sexual predator of past selves, provide lively grist!”

“I’m glad you find this so amusing,” Emily said.

“A fine spread. I must record. Hold,” Amnifaoz said, reaching into a compartment in the left shoulder of his armor and pulling out what appeared to be a snub gun of some sort.

Prince Ferrajalt held up his hand and said “ho ho ho ho” in alarm.

“Naw!” Amnifaoz said. “It’s just a situation camera—passive device. Does not harm. Here, a click.”

The Hypergod clicked the device, and placed it back in his armor.

“See? Now I can view the situation over and over again. Even publish-array it for my fellows!”

Injure Bodoni licked his lips and stared at Amnifaoz’s armor.

“A situation camera?” the scientist asked. “A truly functional situation camera? Incredible!”

“Yes,” Amnifaoz boomed. “Standard issue. I see you’re intrigued. I can confer all technical specifications to you, if you wish.”

“Haha! Yes!” Injure said, looking around at the others. “I want it! A situation camera!”

“Don’t listen to him,” the furry little lady Ann Saply said. “He’s got inferior equipment. I can describe to you a full-motion, 5-D situation recorder.”

“Bah!” Amnifaoz roared.

“Hey Mr. Scientist!” Emily yelled, standing up. “I know you’re getting a hard-on over all this new technology, but I don’t think you’ve grasped what I said before—I am from the future—and none of this ever happened! Not in any timestream!”

“Look you!” Injure said, losing his cool. “This sort of event wouldn’t leave a scratch on up to 18 accordions of time! So of course it never happened!”

“Huh?” Emily said.

“Whatever sort of creature you are,” Injure said, “you’re not gonna discover this sort of thing unless it hits you square in the ass!”

“I see,” Emily said.

“People!” Ledrant Hate yelled. “And others. We must seek a resolution to this problem. Injure here has stated that there is something we can do that will make everything right again. Isn’t that so?”

Injure looked at his instruments.

“That’s true, but with the setup I have here, the best I could do is test event-whastions to see if they’d work—but it could take 40 to 50 minutes to test each one!”

“What exactly is an ‘event-whastion?’” Emily asked.

“It’s just something that happens!” Injure said impatiently. “Saying hello to your mother! Throwing a soda can out a car window! Skipping a stone! Anything!”

“So effectively,” Hate said, “there are an infinite array of event-whastions available at any time.”

“Well, effectively, but remember Corridor—in any situation, only a tiny subset of all possible event-whastions will be apparent as options.”

“Okay,” Hate said, thinking. “Okay. Back at the Noyage Parlour, the payphone rang. I picked it up and some old woman told me something like, to get my life in order and get rid of Office Complex at Gumhanshire. Then she said something about an operator.”

“Look I don’t understand!” Emily shouted. “Why not ask Hypergod here or the fuzball over there? They obviously have the technology!”

Injure was annoyed.

“I already did ask Ann, and though helpful, she doesn’t have the capacity. I assume Amnifaoz doesn’t either, since Ann’s at a higher technological level.”

“That’s true,” Ann said.

“Fuzball! Ha ha ha!” Amnifaoz bellowed.

Ann sneered at the Hypergod.

“But this old woman!” Injure yelled. “What did she say again?”

“To get my life in order by getting rid of Office Complex at Gumhanshire—you know—that huge building down in Doscovor,” Hate said.

“I know it,” Injure said. “But get rid of it? As far as we know, it may already be gone—a lot of buildings here in Derolbam are gone, you know.”

“Well, I’m just saying, getting rid of that building, however it might be done, would be an event-whastion, right?” said Hate.

“I guess so,” Injure said. “But I still don’t understand exactly what ‘getting rid of’ means.”

“Destroy it!” Emily said. “Blow it up or something!”

Injure turned to look at Emily.

“First of all, blowing up a building takes months of prepa-

ration. Secondly, the ruins of the building will still be on site. So are we getting rid of the material of the building, or just its pattern integrity?”

Ferrajalt turned to Amnifaoz.

“Um, Amnifaoz—could you destroy a building?”

The beast regarded the Prince.

“My personal arms and explosives can mete out wild levels of destruction. But the demolition of a huge building is tricky work. I have tried. Like it or not, I am about as small as you when compared to such a behemoth construct. It would be a slow/messy process, away from these need-parameters.”

“Um, okay. But how ‘bout, y’know, like mass destruction?” Ferrajalt suggested. “Like atomic or strong force or whatever?”

“We don’t have any here,” Injure said. “And even if we did—destroying all of Doscovor and its environs is different than destroying a single building.”

“Well feed it into your machine—just blowing up the building or whatever—and see if it’s the right event!” Prince Ferrajalt said. “Why else would we have gotten that call?”

“I can think of lots of reasons,” Injure said, fiddling with his instruments. “But I guess it’s worth a try. Only problem is, it’s such a pain to get the datum into my models.”

“Well do it,” Hate said. “If it turns out to be the right thing, we’ll figure out some way to destroy it.”

“Remember Ledrant—the specific phrasing was ‘get rid of’. That’s what I’m putting into the model, and that’s what we’ll have to do.”

“Agreed,” Hate said.

# TWENTY-SEVEN

Daptin glared at the crowd he was trudging forward with. Thirteen people walking—one hovering in midair. He felt contempt for the others—to him, it seemed they were strolling happily, blindly into utter disaster. A horrible feeling of suspended panic was a heavy weight on Daptin's spirit. The green sky—the kemig call—all wrong.

The group was now ambling along a relatively clear area, and it had been several hours since Millicent had appeared out of nowhere. It almost seemed that they were approaching the outer perimeter of the slay balloon blast. An awfully powerful weapon, those balloons, Daptin thought.

The size of the group made Daptin nervous. He felt that he was leading them all to slaughter or something, that as soon as the coffee in his veins kicked in and transported them back toward the Cup, something terrible would happen. And he didn't like the feeling of responsibility. He thought back to Fox and The Tracy Taciturn and that lost day—something had gone wrong then, too. There seemed to be a lot of things going wrong in the universe.

What a fighting force this gang would be, Daptin mused. Cup's Club with its ultrapowerful members. Coabler the Sawman, Classic of Logic, Kesh the Vector, Pattern Integrity, Bith the Silly Train, Demolish All, and the one they told him about—the one who had been transformed into a little plastic toy version of himself—Tickle the Monster.

Daptin did like the sense of otherness he got from these folks. They truly did seem to be from far-off, whacked-out worlds—unlike the unsettling sense of familiarity he always got in Agoopish and Aconck.

And there was Granticaine and his Provocation Team D—

three awfully nice, but also awfully weird people. Iterator of Rail Avenue, Pantry Lurkin, and Wreckage Mallie. Mallie was especially strange—Injure Bodoni had been doing some weird experiment at Greatwall, and he called Granticaine over and asked him if there was anybody he'd like to bring back to life. It was supposed to power some sort of situation field, but instead Mallie—who had been killed in Grant's war—came into being. Bodoni had juryrigged the system and of course, just like him, couldn't reproduce the effect. Daptin was sure it still bothered the scientist.

And Daptin thought back to the Caxopys—that goddamn Cursive and her smirking sister Elaine—sending them on this suicide mission or whatever it was meant to be. Fake was such a nice girl, and she so loved the excitement of Agoopish. Now he wondered if they'd ever get back there, let alone anywhere coherent.

And the still-unconscious Jerald from Fiestarkoon. Daptin never trusted the guy, and was even a little disappointed to find out he was still alive. He was sure the little jerk knew more than he was letting on. He had to.

Then there was Millicent—appearing out of nowhere, claiming she had just succeeded in “stepping into the movie”—a “Cup's Club” movie, from what she told them.

Daptin looked at the girl and felt like crying when he regarded her innocence, her freshness. He stared at her and felt very low, very heavy, as if he were responsible for crushing this beautiful person's most cherished dreams.

As he continued to stare at Millicent, she slowed down a little, and looked around nervously. Daptin thought it was her detecting his glare, but then she looked down and pulled her hand out of her pocket. There was something in it.

“What's this?” Millicent said, examining the thing.

Daptin knew it was something important. He could feel it. It's importance was like a knife stabbing at him. And he moved toward Millicent to get a better look.

“This isn't mine,” Millicent said slowly, softly.

And Daptin saw what she was holding—it was a little plastic doll.

“Okay,” Daptin said, and Millicent turned to face him.

“Look at it!” she said. “I never put it in there! Things are getting stranger and stranger.”

The others all turned toward Daptin and Millicent, and the group quickly halted.

“Let me see,” Daptin said, holding his hand out. Millicent gingerly gave him the doll.

And Daptin looked at it. It was a doll of a young woman with long brown hair. He knew immediately that it was Tavmatey Numblem. But this wasn’t what gave Daptin such a wrenching feeling in his gut. The doll had a T-shirt on, a T-shirt with a face on it. And he recognized the face. It was the waitress he and Granticaine had met at the Hello Tarby. It was Sleep. It was her face. Her smiling face.

Granticaine came over to Daptin.

“What is it?” he asked.

Daptin showed him the doll.

“Huh. That’s strange. Not another of your party, is it Coabler?” Grant said.

“We’re all accounted for,” Coabler said. “Maybe Millicent here had a friend?”

“No, I was alone,” Millicent said, biting her lip.

“Recognize her?” Daptin said. “The one on the shirt.”

Granticaine stared intently.

“Yes! Yes I do! Who could forget that hairdo. It’s that waitress from the Tarby restaurant. Yes. But why?”

Daptin coughed.

“That’s what I want to figure out,” Daptin said. “Something about this feels so... I don’t know. I feel like I’m on the verge of realizing something.”

“Hey we should keep moving!” Fake said. “I don’t want to get left behind here!”

“Okay,” Daptin said, and the group continued forward.

And Daptin began to get light-headed.

“People—keep moving. I think it may be coming,” Daptin said, holding his hand to his head.

“We’re ready,” Kesh said distantly.

They continued for a few moments, and then Granticaine put his hand on Daptin’s back.

“Daptin—I have a confession. Back at that restaurant, that girl left a note for you,” Granticaine said, taking his hand off Daptin’s back and pulling the little business card from his sleeve, “And I kept it. At the time, I didn’t fully trust you—and afterward, I just forgot about it.”

Daptin had a very confused and upset look on his face as he took the business card from Granticaine and read it.

It read ‘Greenie—every Faprintarb, Copanck Center Basement NE, occult meeting—try it! Hope I see ya there—

Sleep Drassy.’

Daptin’s head was swimming.

“Something’s not right. It’s happening,” Daptin said, and he felt a chill and a surge of electricity all through his body. The image of the doll and the business card in his hands in front of him began receding.

“Everyone—I’m sorry if this doesn’t work. Please believe me,” Daptin said. But already, he knew that it wasn’t going to work.

He felt himself—and all the rest of his cohorts—getting sucked faster and faster into a vacuum—into an empty space—into true nothingness. There were no weird images, no loss of consciousness, nothing like their previous cupslips.

Then things happened very quickly, in the blink of an eye. Daptin could sense the others around him, and he was painfully aware of the acceleration of their flushing down the drain toward oblivion. He knew in an instant they would all cease to exist. He knew there wouldn’t be any cute saves by ultra-powerful friends, no world of nothingness they could escape from. He knew they would be completely and utterly obliterated. There was the power of the Cup and the power of whatever the kemig call had caused. And in-between these two powers was a place where no one reigned. They were headed for a total, irretrievably anonymous demise. So Daptin struck out.

He struck out into the gaping, horrifying void and felt a wellspring of resource fill him. Time didn’t matter anymore, all this was happening in a single instant. He struck out, images of his wonderful flight with The Tracy Taciturn down Canyon filling his mind. Yes—it was this sort of power and substance filling him. Primal.

He struck out, and in wild release, Created.

And in that single act, Daptin felt something more good than anything he had ever imagined. And he knew that things would never be the same, knowing that feeling.

He Created, and Thirteen people stood at the threshold of a new Land. They stood at the gate, the first opening, and they saw. And none of them believed what they saw. For it was a thing that all of them had harbored deep in their spirits, something glimpsed briefly only a few times in a lifetime, something you could maybe see a tiny glimmer of in one of those perfect days of youth. But here—here it just bluntly hit them all straight in the face. It was everywhere. It was unbelievable. It



was Creation.

And they saw Daptin in the distance, on a hilltop, arms raised. This was his doing—it all pointed to him. This was wonderful. This was impossible. This was Daptin's Land.

Many of them wanted to speak, but they knew they couldn't. Daptin would speak the first words here. That was the way it had to be.

And eventually, after what might have been a minute or a century, Daptin turned to the group and smiled.

"This is my Land," he said. "And you were all here to witness its Creation. Welcome."

They all smiled.

Daptin approached each one of them in turn, clasping hands with them and smiling. When he got to Fake, she spoke.

"I hope this doesn't make you think you're God or anything," she said, smiling.

"I'm still the same old Daptin you knew," he said, then his expression turned more serious. "At least, part of me is."

"This is the first time I've ever felt truly real," Bith said as Daptin clasped his massive hands. "Thank you."

Daptin smiled and moved on to Coabler.

"I've been to one of these before," the sawman said with a knowing glance. "Yours was better."

Daptin let out a short laugh.

"Thanks."

The Creator greeted all thirteen individuals, except for Jerald, who was still unconscious. Daptin was happy the little creep had missed his Wonderful act of Creation—it served him right!

And Daptin liked the fact that he could still feel such petty feelings. He didn't want to lose his humanity, and he knew he wouldn't, but his current state of consciousness seemed to dwarf the human in him. Indeed, he could feel and sense, see and hear, smell and taste every nook and cranny of the world he had just Created. And a wonderful place it was. He was even then finalizing the arrangements of everything—and he found it invigorating that he had such a canvas to work on. And it felt so natural—it was effortless—and he wasn't designing things either, he was just sort of directing the way they flowed.

He made the area directly around them into a green, hilly paradise, with waterfalls, flowers, streams, lawns, fruit, and all the rest. And in the center of it all, he made a structure, a

lovely house, including rooms that would always belong to each of the thirteen—even one for Jerald.

And then Daptin became aware of the two trapped in little plastic toy bodies, and he brought them forth and gave them life again and gave them rooms.

“Whoah!” Demolish All said as Tickle the Monster and Tavmatey Numblem came into being.

“So I made it through after all!” Tavmatey said. Then she looked around. “I guess.”

Tickle bounded around like a monkey, and was drinking in the first sips of the sensory overload around him. His primitive mind was just beginning to grasp the situation.

Daptin approached Tavmatey.

“Tavmatey Numblem, I presume?” he said.

“Yes,” she said shyly, smiling a sly smile and looking up at Daptin with awfully bright eyes. Her voice was hoarse, but adorable.

“Tell me about Sleep Drassy,” Daptin said. He already knew, but he wanted to hear it from her.

“What did you want to know about her?” Tavmatey said in a childish, flirting, impatient manner, her hands clasped behind her back.

“Well,” Daptin said, taking a step closer. “Out of all the things about Sleep, would you say there’s one thing which stands out more than the others?”

“You Created this world?” Tavmatey asked, a skeptical look on her face.

“Of course,” Daptin said.

“Well, Sleep makes your powers look like a weak effort, man. She’s the one that got the Cup of Coffee—from a place you couldn’t even understand.”

Kesh the Vector turned toward Daptin and Tavmatey.

“She invited me to a meeting,” Daptin said. “I think I should go and talk to her.”

“That sounds good,” Tavmatey said. “Maybe she can give you some pointers. And for goodness sake, take me with you. I’m dying to get back together with her.”

“I now see what you meant about knowing me,” Daptin said. “A little offshoot in my lifeworld. I remember it now.”

Tavmatey smiled and twisted back and forth in joy.

“I get it,” Daptin said. “Your precious Sleep got that Cup for me, didn’t she? So I could do this?”

“Mmmmmaybe,” Tavmatey said.

“Because I have something that she hasn’t got.”

“Uh... mmmmmaybe.”

“Because I was there.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I was there at the First Creation.”

“Bingo.”

“And she wants something from me—in exchange for this gift.”

“Yes.”

“But you don’t know what that is.”

“Uh-uh.”

Daptin turned around and rubbed his chin. His near omniscience only extended throughout his own Land, and no further.

“Wait a minute. I’m getting all this information from you—and you’re just one of Sleaf’s playthings.”

Tavmatey raised her eyebrows.

“She didn’t plan this—she saw it coming, and planted you so you’d wind up here,” Daptin continued. “Cursive and Elaine—are they her playthings too?”

“I dunno.”

“No—there’s something else going on. I’m getting this all wrong. Well, thanks for ruining the single most glorious achievement of my life! I create my own Land and because of you I’m wasting my time trying to second guess some super-hyper-ultra-mega-kazillion-powerful entity.”

“She is that, isn’t she?”

“She’s nothing,” Daptin said. “Her sphere of activity is a sublevel, even if it does reach such grand depths, relatively. Just like my friend Obfuser.”

Tavmatey narrowed her eyes and became more serious.

“Your view of things is clouded by the First Creation. How do you know she isn’t operating in That Which Came Before?”

“That is what’s driving her crazy!” Daptin said. “No matter how deep she gets, she can never get past the First Creation! She cannot penetrate That Which Came Before!”

“Says you.”

“Haha! I knew it!”

Tavmatey turned away.

“Your thinking is even more clouded by the abundance of youthness all around you,” she said. “This is your Land. Whatever you want to believe has to be true.”

Daptin started to take a step toward Tavmatey, then decided not to.

“Daptin,” Granticaine said, sitting on the grass, “I don’t want to spoil things, but where exactly is this Land you’ve created? Can you bridge from here? Indeed, can we get back to our Earths at all?”

“Yes, Grant,” Daptin said, turning away from Tavmatey. “Sort of. I mean, the Cup wanted to send me home, to Arctica. And it tried, but Arctica wasn’t there in the form it should have been, so instead of going home, we were headed for nowhere—and I do mean nowhere.”

Granticaine raised his eyebrows as Daptin continued.

“I have made a bridge—not the Aconck kind, but a real kind of bridge, which will lead to Arctica—when and if it ever comes back.”

“What do you mean, ‘come back’?” Granticaine asked. “Where could it have gone to?”

Daptin sighed.

“When Mallie got that call, that’s what did it. Communication between Aconck and where we were broke all kinds of laws of reality, and the whole thing just went haywire. At least, that’s my best guess. I got a glimpse of my home town for the briefest of instants when I Created—and I got that impression.”

“So,” Granticaine said, also sighing, “how do we know that Aconck will ever come back—recover from this disaster?”

“We don’t,” Daptin said. “But I have a feeling someone out there has the capacity to do it. Remember—Bavler Bestroystraw was careful to address the issue of stability in his equations. And he does refer to recoverable crashes in his works.”

Granticaine nodded.

“Well, I just hope that whoever that someone is who can reboot Aconck, they’re hard at work making it happen,” Grant said.

Daptin noticed that Demolish All was looking very unhappy.

“What’s the matter, Demolish All?” Daptin asked.

She smiled in a tense way.

“Well, Daptin Gone. I don’t want to annoy you, but I’m just...”

“You want to do some destruction,” Daptin said.

“Yes, and it’s just... your Land is so pristine and so new... all

this anti-damage is draining me.”

“Well, my dear Demolish, how ‘bout I create a sprawling cityscape for you to blast to your heart’s content?” Daptin said.

Demolish All perked up and smiled brightly.

“Do you really mean it? Oh, I would so love it!”

“You got it,” Daptin said.



# TWENTY-EIGHT

Dizappacha was 21 and a petite young woman. She wore a blue shirt, a multicolored tie, and a man's sport jacket, black. Below, she had a schoolgirl-style skirt going down to mid-calf, a black-and-gray checkerboard design. Her hair was a soft blue-green, dark, and it hung, full of body, halfway down her back. On her feet here a pair of black basketball sneakers.

She was walking down Rillekon's Road. Alone. No money. No stuff.

Until recently, she had been a member of Streamlike Lodge—an exciting young startup company which took over a building and converted it into a plethora of “Atmosphere Suites”—rooms stuffed to the gills with sound, lighting, scenting, visuals, theming construction, and the like—all meant to create certain atmospheres.

As well, there were “cast members”, in costume and in character all the time while in the rooms. The net result of this was quite effective. People who entered the suites were quickly drawn into the created situation. Only problem was, the whole venture had to make money, and this was where they ran into a little trouble.

Renting the suites was rather expensive, but with a group of people chipping in, it might not be so bad. Streamlike Lodge pitched the Atmosphere Suite service in a variety of ways—a place to take a date, hang out with your friends, have company meetings or entertain clients, and the like.

Each suite had different sorts of diversions. Some, like the “Perfect Family Home”, had a den complete with TV and stereo stocked with vintage content, plus “Mom” to bring you snacks, and brothers and sisters to play boardgames with.

Another, called “Opium”, offered a smoky (non-narcotic)

exotic dance and gambling environment—a real popular one to bring a business client. Dizappacha danced in this one, till she caught the drift that there was some real prostitution going on. Then she high-tailed it outta there.

“Shelter” recreated a cozy little cabin in the woods with a variety of natural disaster going on outside, like hurricanes and blizzards. Complete with roaring fire, this was a popular one for dates.

But the cost of operating Streamlike Lodge was sky high, and the partners were barely keeping their heads above water. Still, it was a unique concept, and they were getting a lot of press, so the founders all hung on, though they were losing their shirts.

Dizappacha had a small equity stake—her boyfriend, Larry Jonx, had been one of the founders—but they broke up. It was mostly amiable. He started cheating and she didn’t care all that much. She realized she didn’t want to be with him anymore.

But then the whole thing with Injure Bodoni started. He was also one of the founders, and a real techno nerd kinda guy. Basically, he started obsessing on Dizappacha after she broke up with Larry Jonx, thinking it was his chance to date her.

He wasn’t all that blatant about it, and that was the problem. He’d talk to her, but avoid eye contact, and sort of shuffle off in the middle of a conversation for no reason. Typical loser, Dizappacha thought. She was wrong, though.

Injure Bodoni was the guy who had the original idea for Streamlike Lodge. But it was really esoteric, and involved people going into some sort of meditative state in the suites, in order to try and transfer their minds to some other universe.

Well, Injure’s friends thought it was a cool idea making all these different Atmosphere Suites, but they didn’t really get the whole “new age” aspect. They had nothing against Injure experimenting, but they decided that promoting the venture as a place to go and meditate and maybe drift off into another world was not the best marketing angle.

There was one Suite that was Injure’s brainchild—“Maximum Ice”. It was themed as a barren, Arctic night with a sky full of brilliant stars. But there was this highway running through the wasteland. It seemed kind of out of place.

People rented Maximum Ice, but nowhere near as often as some of the other suites. Injure spent a lot of time in there, constantly making refinements, sometimes at an insanely



meticulous level, like moving a “star” a few millimeters, rearranging the fake snow, fixing the letter spacing on the signs on the highway. Everyone thought he was nuts.

Dizappacha took pity on Injure. She saw how hard he was working and how sexually frustrated he was, still a virgin at 24. She wasn't thinking of starting a relationship with him—she didn't find him attractive in the least—but rather, she felt that maybe she could steer him in the right direction, make him less nervous around girls, maybe even coach him a little on dating etiquette.

Of course, this just frustrated Injure more. He wasn't interested in any other women except Dizappacha. And soon, Dizappacha came to regret getting closer to Injure. Cuz he starting using some kind of magic or psychic powers on her, and she wound up getting too deep into Injure's bizarre sphere of activity.

It started with the dreams—of Dizappacha and Injure travelling to wonderful places across time and space. At first the dreams were thrilling, but as the days wore on, the dreams took on a darker, more sexual tone.

And in real life, Dizappacha acquiesced to Injure's desire for her to start meditating with him in Maximum Ice. And once she started with this, Injure really started to hit her with the whammy. And before she knew it, she was in bed with the novice love-maker, leading him by the hand through the simplest of sexual activities.

She realized that something was wrong, that Injure was exercising some sort of supernatural control over her, but she liked it. She figured that maybe Injure was making her like it, but she didn't care. She knew then that Injure was a real genius, far ahead of his time. And she wanted to be part of his world.

Her friends were concerned, though, and they kept after her about this weirdo Injure. What did she see in him? Her explanations came out like gibberish. “Genius in a cosmic sense”, “innovative meditation guru”, “boundary-wrecking super man”, stuff like that.

Then Streamlike Lodge started to have real financial problems, and there was talk of shutting down. But it was just talk at that point. Then one night she was meditating with Injure, when all of a sudden she found herself on the highway in Maximum Ice—not the miniature from the suite, but a full-sized, honest-to-goodness highway—exactly like the one

Injure had so precisely modeled.

She'd been working in the "Brandylake Times" suite earlier, and was still wearing her business suit/skirt costume. (Brandylake Times was a kind of nostalgic newspaper office at the edge of an idyllic lake.)

Looking around, Dizappacha saw that she was in the middle of a vast, snowy wasteland. And she was starting to get real cold, real fast. She yelled for Injure, but there was no response. And her voice echoed in an unsettling way.

She stared up at a big orange sign that arched over the roadway. But the writing on it, in a strange alphabet, made no sense to her. She had asked Injure about the sign on several occasions, but he would get agitated and say that it was only "for effect".

Nothing to do but start walking. Which way, though?

Injure had often spoke of Rillekon's Road—a highway that passes through the massive States of Reality.

In the Suite diorama, the road was built in false perspective—getting smaller and smaller the closer it got to the wall. Going the other way, the road got bigger and bigger, till it got obscured by a scale model snowhill.

But from here, both ways stretched off equally into the aching waste. And Dizappacha was starting to come to her senses—here, she was no longer under the influence of Injure Bodoni. And she started to see what a fool he had made of her. So she headed toward where the wall would be, toward where the scale model road departed into infinity. It made sense to Dizappacha to move away from Injure, no matter the level of abstractness.

She took the first of many steps down Rillekon's Road.

# TWENTY-NINE

“I told you it’d be cool!” Nevrippa Den said, behind the wheel of a big truck.

V Sincein sat beside her. He regarded his fellow Overwhelm Primate. She wore nothing but shades of pink, as a matter of principle. Kind of a skirt, kind of a dress, kind of a sweater, kind of a vest. She had a little bit of hair in a weird pattern on her head, dirty blond. Her tiny, naturally attractive five-foot frame was a frightening powerhouse. Indeed, she was one of Overwhelm Associates’ most formidable warriors.

This was part of the reason V Sincein wasn’t trying too hard to dissuade Nevrippa from her ill-timed campaign to steal all manner of treasures and art masterpieces while reality was crashed. He tried to explain to her there’d be plenty of time for looting after they returned to base and got a handle on the situation, but she wouldn’t have anything of it.

“But aren’t these masterpieces screwed up?” V Sincein asked. Indeed, the reality crash seemed to be especially adverse to works of art, all of which were twisted and altered to some degree or another. Scary stuff.

“I like the way they took the knockout punch. It’s awesome!” Nevrippa said.

“But the others must be worried about us.”

V didn’t like how that sounded. He sounded like a loser. Here was Nevrippa Den, living in the moment, as he had always strived for. But he was unable to match her pace.

As a radio DJ, V had gotten into a musical mystery perpetrated by supergroup The Anger Friends. They had a concept album, “Commonday”, which contained numerous allusions to some sort of horrible ancient secret. V got involved in the frenzy to figure the riddle out, and was the first to solve it.

Problem was, it turned out to be a very real and powerful ancient force. The Anger Friends had thought it was all a joke.

V gained some notoriety for finding the secret, but most people thought the odd phenomenon surrounding him—a huge gossamer cube which followed him around—was some sort of special effect. They didn't realize he'd uncovered something unbelievable.

He tried to convince people that he had discovered something remarkable. But more and more, people began branding him as a nut, and his radio career soon ended. But just a week into his personal decline after losing his job, V was recruited into Overwhelm Associates. He still didn't understand the magical immaterial cube, sometimes barely visible, which lazily followed him around. Nor did he understand the way it made him feel.

"Hey V! Guess what I see?" Nevrippa Den said.

"What?" V Sincein responded.

"A video store, guy!"

"So? What are you looking for—rare bootleg videos or something?"

"No silly. Just take a look at some of those paintings back there. If they got so messed by this reality crash, imagine what might have happened to some of our favorite Timber Serious Earth movies!"

A chill ran up V's spine.

"Now come on, Nevrippa. I don't know if we want to get involved—"

"—call me Rippy!"

"Huh?"

"I'm feeling good. Call me Rippy!"

"Whatever. Okay, Rippy. I was just saying, those painting are scary enough, with what's happened to them. Are you sure we should take the leap to videos?"

But Nevrippa was already stopping the truck in front of the video store, right next to the base of one of those enormous streetlights.

"Think of the marketing value, V! This stuff'll be worth big bucks when we get back to reality! I wanna be rich!"

"Well, I think it's a bad idea, really," V said.

But Nevrippa was already halfway out of the truck.

So they went into the video store. A TV behind the counter flickered with static, casting nightmarish shadows throughout the store.

The place looked like it had been ransacked. There were videos scattered all over the place. Nevrippa rifled through a pile on the ground, while V just looked around, a sinking feeling coming over him.

“Look, Rippy. I may have enough battery power left for one more kemig transmission. We should call and tell the others we’re coming back. Enough of this craziness.”

“I quite agree!” Nevrippa said brightly, as she jumped up with more spunk than reasonable, given the situation. She held a video up. “But we just have to take a look at this one! I think it’s a reality-crash derivative of that great high school exploitation flick, ‘Going Nowhere’.”

V looked at the label on the box. He could barely make out some sort of suburban street, with the title “Went Nowhere” spray painted on the road in the photo.

“‘Went Nowhere’? Maybe it’s the sequel?”

“No way,” Nevrippa said, wading through a sea of videos to get behind the counter. “I’ve researched the movie before. If there were any sequel, in any way, I would have known about it. No—this is the reality-crashed version of ‘Going Nowhere’. Isn’t this awesome? I’m all goosebumpy!”

V watched helplessly as Nevrippa fumbled with the VCR, stuck the tape in, and pressed play. He looked outside briefly. Just the same cold, abandoned city. The static and snow on the TV was replaced by the fresh black of a video start.

“I don’t know if I want to see this, Rippy.”

“Of course you do! Come on—you’re a Primate for crying out loud! Have some backbone in the face of the unreal.”

“Okay,” V said. He did fear Nevrippa. Not that she’d ever threaten him or anyone else in Overwhelm, but it was just the fact that she could utterly cream him in the blink of an eye. Such power, such terror, in the hands of this crazy little girl.

“This is gonna be great! I love the real version of this movie. I can’t wait to see how it got changed!” she said.

“We’re not gonna watch the whole thing, are we?”

“No—just the first couple of minutes, so I get an idea of what it’s like!”

The film studio logo faded in, normal except for a different color scheme. Then it faded to black, and then it faded into a scene of some teenagers in the woods. One boy was skateboarding on some huge rocks, and a girl was kneeling down with a video camera. A fat kid and a nerdy kid were also there.

“You can’t skate on rocks,” the fat kid said.

“What do you think I’m doing?”

The shot then changed to a close-up of the girl tearing open a brand new videotape and loading it into her camera.

“You’ll damage your wheels,” the nerd said.

“I’ll damage your face.”

After this, there were shots of the girl videotaping the cool guy doing all sorts of skating trick on the rocks, with plenty of adolescent repartee.

Finally, the guy fell into a stream, and the girl said “Okay, let’s go home and take a look at Mr. Wonderful TV star!”

The guy laughed sarcastically from the water.

V Sincein shook his head.

“Is this that much different from the original?”

“Yeah! I mean, they’re the same characters, but there was never any scene like this.”

“It’s just—it doesn’t seem very strange.”

“Shh! I wanna hear this!”

The four kids entered a nice suburban living room, and the girl set the camera down on the couch and took the tape out.

“You have to rewind it?” the cool guy asked.

“No, I rewound it in the camera.”

“Awesome,” the cool guy said, smiling and nodding.

The girl turned on the TV, put the video in the VCR, and pressed play. Instantly, an image came up, but it was of the four of them standing together on one of the rocks, arms around each others shoulders, as in a chorus line, happily counting, “eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen...”

“What the hell is this?” the cool guy asked.

“We didn’t do that!” the fat kid said.

The scene zoomed into the face of the nerd watching the tape, and he wore a look a horror.

The girl jumped forward and stopped the tape.

“Maybe I used an old tape,” she said, ejecting the tape to look at it.

“I saw you open it up! It was new!” the cool guy said.

“I know,” the girl said, looking over the tape.

“But we never did that!” the fat kid yelled, starting to panic, “I know we never did.”

The cool guy held his hand up.

“Okay! Just relax! There has to be a rational explanation for this.”

“Put it back in,” the nerd said, with icy calmness. “We have to see the whole thing.”

“Maybe it was the company who made the tape,” the fat kid said, starting to cry. “Maybe they did it.”

“How could they?” the girl said, shaking as she put the tape back in. “That was us!”

She looked back at the other three before pressing play.

The image came up again, the kids were still counting. Then the scene changed to the four of them climbing up on some kind of net, high up in some trees. The camera was shaking, as if the one holding it were also in the net—but all four of them were on screen.

“Now what the hell is this?” the fat kid sobbed, panic rising in his heart. “We never did that!”

“Shut up!” the cool guy yelled.

“Then the scene changed—it was a police car, pulled over, lights flashing. The camera was shaking, as if the person holding it was trying to get a better position. It seemed as if the camera was taping from a hidden location, under a bush or something.

There were two cops yelling something, and then it zoomed in to the girl, who was down on her knees, her hands handcuffed behind her back. One of the cops then yelled something else, pointed a gun at the girl’s head, and pulled the trigger. For a moment, the sight of her head being blown apart was visible, but then the scene in the film shifted to a still-frame of the four kids in the living room, all with looks of shock and horror on their faces.

The credits then started, with the scene panning and zooming around the still frame. The theme song was an upbeat, goofy sort of rock song, which contrasted in a very shocking way with the visuals.

Nevrippa turned around and looked at V, who had a kind of sickened expression on his face.

“See? I told you it would get good,” she said.

V smiled a little, and nodded his head. He couldn’t really think of anything to say—he was still trying to process what he had just seen.

“I gotta see what happens!” Nevrippa yelled.

As the credits finally ended, there was another fade to black, and the scene then faded into two kids hiding under a car in a parking garage—the fat kid and the nerd.

They were silent as they watched a big car drive into a car elevator. The doors closed, and from the cracks on the side of the elevator, it was apparent that the elevator was going up.

"See, I told ya!" the fat kid said. "It goes up! But there's nothing up! There's just a roof up there!"

"I see what you mean," the nerd said.

"So you wanna do it?"

"Do what?"

"Find out where they're going!"

"Definitely—but how?"

"Well—listen," the fat kid said, "here's my plan. If we hide behind that dumpster, then we could crawl in after they go into it, and they wouldn't see us!"

"I don't know—I don't want to get into trouble."

"What could happen! We're minors for god's sake! We can't go to jail or anything."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Listen—I hear a car coming up from down there—let's get over there."

"Well..."

"Come on!"

The fat kid and the nerd ran across the garage and hid behind the dumpster. Soon, a car came and stopped in front of the elevator door. After about ten seconds, the door opened up, and the car drove in.

"It's now or never!" the fat kid said, and the two crawled into the elevator, behind the car.

Slowly, the doors closed, and the two kids were in the stark light of the elevator. With a lurch, it began to move upward.

And it kept on going.

"This is ridiculous!" the nerd whispered loudly. "Where the hell are we going?"

"That's what I wanna find out!"

They continued upward, and the two exchanged worried glances. Finally, the elevator slowed and lurched to a halt. A sign came into view as the elevator doors on the other side began to open, reading 'THE UPPER CITY'.

As the doors opened fully, a bright scene was revealed—a gorgeous place and a gorgeous day.

"Whoah!" the fat kid exclaimed.

The nerd smiled broadly.

V was shocked as the TV switched back to static and snow. Nevrippa had stopped the tape and was taking it out.

"Oh—it's just you," V said.

"See—you were getting involved in it!" Nevrippa said, taking the tape out and putting it back in its case. "It's good, isn't



it? And the coolest part is—where the hell is it coming from, you know? Like, no one ever made it, but here it is!”

“Pretty scary.”

“Yeah. Now I want all these videos in the truck.”

“Huh?” V exclaimed in surprise.

“Yup. All of them. We’ll make a fortune, you and I.”

V sighed in protest, but figured he’d have to do it.

Nevrippa laughed—V looked so funny, sighing in protest with this huge transparent cube surrounding the upper part of his body.

“Come on, silly,” Nevrippa said enthusiastically.

And they began loading all the videos into the truck.



# THIRTY

Winter Stadium Them were having breakfast.

“Ah, look who’s coming—our wacky neighbor Darnazy Thonc,” said Evelyn Fangdoor, AKA Appomattox Flight, at the breakfast table.

“Comin’ up Rillekon’s?” asked Snoppy Parser, AKA Permanent Pioneer, wiping his mouth and standing up to get a look out the window.

“Uh-huh,” Evelyn responded.

“Does he have enough stuff?” asked Enc Larabeth, AKA Accurate Rebellion, with a smile.

“Oh yeah,” Evelyn answered wryly.

“Hey Snoppy,” Enc said, “he still live up at Last-Wave Jixie’s?”

“Yup,” Snoppy said, sitting down again and forking another block of pancake stack.

“He’s so funny,” Evelyn said.

“Yup,” Snoppy said as he chomped down the huge forkfull of pancake.

The three sat there for a while, eating and watching as Darnazy Thonc made his way toward them. Thonc was a huge man—maybe seven or eight feet tall, stocky, with red big hair and a massive red beard and mustache. He wore a huge assembly, something like an overcoat, in which he carried an amazing variety of stuff, like brooms and mops, a portable gasoline-powered electric generator, food enough for weeks, electronic amusement machines, guns and bombs, sporting equipment, apparel, toys, and the like.

“I get this feeling,” Enc finally said, “that we might get an assignment on the teletype today.”

Enc Larabeth had a smug look, glorious, flowing, curly

blond locks of hair, and reserved, almost handsome beauty. She wore her eyes narrow mostly, as if she were constantly assessing the situation. In full outfit, as Accurate Rebellion, she donned a suit of brasslike armor and wielded a great black sword. Right now, she had on a T-shirt with a royal crest and a pair of yellow jeans.

“That’s funny, I don’t get that feeling at all,” Evelyn said, smiling. “Just kidding. I get that feeling too.”

Evelyn Fangdoor had this drunken sort of look about her all the time, but it was borne more of her cavalier attitude toward life and her great confidence than actual overindulgence. Her skin was several shades darker than Enc’s china white. And like Enc, she was tall. Her hair was long, black, and straight. All over her skin, she had strange geometric tattoos. As Appomattox Flight, she wore a black leather outfit with many tassels, and a belt made of fire.

“Well dang the dang teletype,” Snopy said, “I was figgerin’ on chonkin’ over to Marriage Town this afternoon!”

Snopy Parser had a few scars, wore his brown hair very short, and wore his vast experiences in his face, along with a well-groomed mustache. His steely gray eyes were intelligent, but could at times be piercing and accusatory. He wore a black T-shirt, black jeans, a brown leather jacket, and black boots. As Permanent Pioneer, he donned a strange black cowboy-type hat and a brown leather trenchcoat with white ornamental design highlights. He also wielded a rifle, a knife, and a mean little crossbow.

“You’ve been saying that for awhile,” Enc observed, sipping coffee from a mug with a ‘Winter Stadium Them’ logo on it.

“I know I have, Enc. I know I have,” he said distantly. “But it’s time I had me a wife.”

Enc regarded him.

“I thought you were going to marry Bolt Cutter America.”

“Bolt Cutter America is in Gnoboslast!” Snopy snapped. “Ain’t no way we’ll ever see each other again, with her there.”

“You got out,” Enc said.

“Yeah, but I’m Permanent Pioneer—she ain’t.”

“He’s comin’ real fast now,” Evelyn said, and they all saw Darnazy walking in fast motion.

“Damn unpredictable roadway!” Snopy complained.

Darnazy disappeared from sight under their window, and they turned their heads as fast as they could, but Thonc was already at the top of the stairs, looking at them with a calm yet

edged smile.

“That was some slip!” Darnazy said, wiping his brow where a little sweat had collected. “Have not seen it like that for years.”

“What causes that?” Enc asked.

“Uneven pitch,” Snoppy said. “Inequalities between the phase grands.”

“Yes,” Darnazy said, striding across the room to the breakfast table. “Hello hello hello all! Mind if I storage my stuff here for a time?”

“Go right ahead,” Snoppy said.

So Darnazy backed up, turned around, and carefully lifted the entire assembly off of him. Then he gingerly lowered it to the ground, where it stood, a portable junk pile.

“Have the big seat, won’t you?” Evelyn offered, gesturing to a giant chair near the table.

“Thanks you,” Darnazy said, carefully sitting in the mammoth chair.

“What brings you out so early in the morning?” Enc asked.

“Callin’,” Darnazy answered.

“Good reason,” Enc replied with a touch of sarcasm.

“You came at a good time,” Evelyn said, glancing from Darnazy to Snoppy. “Snoppy was just telling us how he’s gonna get married soon.”

“Wha? Oh! My dear fellow!” Darnazy said.

“Ain’t got no one yet,” Snoppy said, looking down and shaking his head. Then he looked straight at Darnazy and continued. “That’s why I’m playin’ with the notion of using the chonk to get over to Marriage Town and take me a wife.”

Darnazy smiled, but then wore an exaggerated perplexed look.

“Snoppy my good man! With lovelies such as these sharing the Stadium, surely you need look no further than here!”

The two girls gave Darnazy a good-natured ‘are-you-kidding?’ look.

“Yes yes yes,” Snoppy said in an embarrassed manner. “That’s a thought that has certainly crossed my mind. But the thing is...”

The girls eyed him in humorous expectation. He continued.

“Well, how could I choose? They’re both so lovely and sweet and wonderful. It’d be as near to impossible as a thing can be. And to boot, if’n I did take one of ‘em, that’d leave the other in an awful state...”

“There’s always bigamy,” Evelyn said with a wicked smile on her tattooed face.

“Yes! Group marriage!” Enc said. “The three of us could get married—but hey!—why stop there? Darnazy could join us! And we could all sleep together in a really big bed!”

Snopy put his hand to his forehead and shook his head, smiling. Darnazy broke out into a thunderous laugh.

After a few transcendental moments of this, a distant sound of dot matrix printing was heard.

“Oh crap,” Evelyn said.

“What?” Enc asked, having just drank some juice out of a tall glass.

“Teletype,” Evelyn responded.

“Darn it!” Snopy snapped. “Everytime I wanna get myself married... hey?”

He turned around to see several strange flying things enter the room from the stairway. There were three of them, with more coming. Each was a long, slender rod with other rods sticking out of it in a variety of directions. On the rods were black, white, and gray little spikes. The things were also covered in mysterious glyphs. On the whole, they looked quite aerodynamic.

A red one and a yellow one were already in the room, and a pink one and black one were just coming up the stairs.

“Ah! Aha!” Darnazy exclaimed.

“What the hell?” Evelyn said.

“Damn unpredictable...” Snopy mumbled as he stood up and grabbed a big metal pipe that was leaning on the wall. The girls also stood up. The flying things were now almost across the room, making a wide berth around the four people.

“I like these!” Darnazy said. “Mascara from The Arpotruning Miller.”

“What?” Enc said incredulously.

“An obscure arm of research,” Darnazy said, wiping his sweaty brow with a ‘Winter Stadium Them’ linen napkin. “Pay no heed.”

“Whattaya know ‘bout these things, Thonc?” Snopy yelled.

“Just a cursory theoretical passing...” the huge man responded.

“But are they dangerous...” Enc said, her voice fading as Snopy leapt forward.

“Fuck ‘em!” he yelled as he bounded across the room and

bashed the yellow one with a tremendous blow. It made a terrible breaking noise, flipping in the air quickly away from Snoppy, but remaining airborne.

Darnazy broke out into his deafening laugh again.

The other flyers didn't react, and kept coming. At this point, there were seven or eight in sight.

Snoppy advanced on the yellow one, which was faltering, and bashed it again. It made another horrible noise and flew smack into a big case full of valuable dishes, crashing and smashing the whole deal.

"I heard on the reality report this morning that there was sleeking on Cwickalty's Banjoose Pike," Evelyn said, biting her lip.

"That's gotta be it..." Enc said. "But I've never seen it this bad..."

The yellow thing was near the ground now, spinning slowly, agitating the pile of broken glass beneath it.

"Lessee if I can ice this one, then we'll worry about the others," Snoppy said. Then he raised the pipe above his head and yelled "Fucker!" as he brought the weapon down hard on the unknown thing. A sound like a massive electrical discharge filled the room, and the thing shuddered, then dropped to the ground, motionless.

"Killable," Snoppy said with pride, nodding his head.

"Ah! Aha!" Darnazy said, standing up and inadvertently shoving the table forward, tumbling pancakes, syrup, coffee, juice, and the like all over the damn place. "Aha! I have it!"

He ignored the mess and strode over to his pile of crap.

"I should get my sword," Enc said as Darnazy rummaged wildly through his stuff, making a most unearthly noise.

"Yeah, go get it," Snoppy said, updating his grip on the pipe and getting ready to cream another flyer. "Looks like we got our work cut out for us."

"No Snoppy!" Darnazy moaned. "I have just the thing. No Enc! Rest your sword arm. I have just the thing..."

"Well hurry it up, Thonc," Snoppy said.

"Aha!" Darnazy burst out. "Yes, haha, great!"

He jumped up with a little blue something in his hand, his arm raised above his head, knuckles scraping the ceiling.

"What is it now?" Evelyn asked.

"Haha! A blue hole! What did I tell you? Just the thing!"

Enc looked around and sighed in frustration. "Do any of you have any idea what Darnazy is talking about—ever?"

"It's just his way," Snoppy said.

"My good friends," Darnazy said in an excited manner, "they will be as attracted to the blue hole as I am to Appomattox Flight and Accurate Rebellion."

The girls shook their heads in frustration.

"Horny bastard," Snoppy said with a grin. "Well, do what you have to do."

"Apologies to tablekind," Darnazy said, looking around wildly. Then he scrambled his huge body up onto the table, fully demolishing anything left on it.

When he put his full weight on the table, it totally collapsed. But he continued on, unfazed, and stood up straight on top of the ruins of the breakfast table.

Then carefully—oh so carefully—he extended his hand, the marble-sized blue hole a searingly dark bright negative blue between his thumb and index finger.

With painful care, the hulking man positioned the blue hole according to some unseen logic of need, and gingerly let it go. It stayed there, motionless in midair.

Then he ducked and scrambled forward, but managed to trip on all the destroyed table crap. He fell forward.

"Calgareaux's mind!" Darnazy exclaimed as he collapsed heavily into the mess.

The impact shook the whole room.

Enc took a deep breath in frustration.

"Can't we have one day without stupidity, destruction, and the unknown?" she said.

"Ugh," Darnazy said, wallowing in the remnants of the breakfast, trying to get his bearings. "The tables are winning."

"Why did he have to do that?" Evelyn asked of Enc, who shrugged.

"Oh, okay," Snoppy said, observing as the flying things began to slowly drift toward the blue hole.

Enc nodded. "Nice. Very nice job, Darnazy."

"Ugh," Darnazy said again, crawling across the floor to get away from the vicinity of the blue hole. "Just a matter of scem-lurboan my dear. Just a matter of scemlurboan."

"Oh," Enc said.

Now the first few flyers were getting to the blue hole, and they were crushing into each other, trying to get as close to the blue hole as possible. And as they pressed into each other, they made a horrible straining, creaking kind of sound.

"What..." Evelyn said, backing away.



“What’re they gonna do—waste each other?” Snoppy asked.

“Ugh,” Darnazy said, sitting with his back to the wall, running a syrup-covered hand through his hair. “Yes my friend. They will ruin each other.”

“And how long is this lovely exercise going to take?” Enc asked.

“Could take a few days, my lovely,” Darnazy responded.

“Days?” Evelyn screamed.

“Forget this damn business,” Snoppy said. “And forget the teletype. I’m chonkin’!”

“Snoppy!” Enc said, but Snoppy was already gone down the stairs, whacking flying things out of his way with the pipe.



# THIRTY-ONE

A ski lodge.

“Pacer,” Carne said, “I just got a phone call. Apparently Jay Pime had been financing this guy who was working on a really wild science fiction movie. And somehow because he’s financing us now, he cut the other guy off, right when they were starting to do post-production—all the special effects and stuff. And now the guy is totally screwed.”

“What was the, uh, what was the, what was the title of the movie?” Pacer said.

“It sounded pretty cool. ‘The Feriend Expandling’. I feel bad about this, I feel bad for the guy. I mean, it was his life’s work. And what assurance do we have that Pime’s not gonna do the same thing to us?”

“Come on, isn’t it obvious?” Pacer said. “The film guy didn’t use the word ‘lemon’ in the title of the movie, so Jay lost interest.”

Carne shook his head.

“Look Pacer, I’m telling you, I don’t want to call Darkider ‘The Lemon Darkider’. I just don’t.”

“But we have to, man. We have to. Jay Pime is obsessed with the word ‘lemon’, so we have to call it ‘The Lemon Darkider’. There’s nothing we can do about it.”

“I don’t know,” Carne said. “Maybe we should just forget about it. I mean, we have all these ideas, and they all seem really excellent because they are just fantasies. Darkider is a really great idea, but if we give in on the name, then who knows what else we’re going to have to give in on? I mean, is the whole thing, all the themes, going to have to relate to lemons? And are we going to have this stupid lemon-based thing half done when the nut Jay Pime gets distracted by some-

one else's idea? And the Darkider will be another one of those rusting skeletal buildings, and a lot of people—not just us two—will be totally disappointed and unemployed. I don't know."

"Look. It all has to do with the contract. We have to get the nutty fucker bound by the contract, with no way out. He's a mental midget, Carne! He's got shit for brains!"

"Yeah, but his lawyers and managers are probably pretty sane."

"But he has the final word. My brother-in-law, the lawyer Clawe, he's on board man. Lemon Darkider Industries will be a corporation in a few weeks. The contract will be ironclad, man. What does your Moisture Detection Friend think about all this, anyway?"

"Oh, he's totally into it. But he doesn't give a crap about anything. He surfs through life. If Darkider fails, it'll be another story for him to tell. He won't care at all."

"And we will?"

"That's the thing, Pacer. I really am starting to care about Darkider. I think it's the coolest thing ever. I want something like this to exist. But caring about things... I don't know... maybe it's more fun just to talk about things."

"Ah, come on. We have to take responsibility at some point. We can't just keep drifting. I mean, I like that my life is getting some direction. Silly crap like strapping myself to the Toys'R'Us ceiling, I mean, it's cool and everything, but all these random experiences... they get tiresome, y'know? I want some direction in my life."

"Yeah, okay."

"Alright? So come on. This ski lodge has the coolest arcade ever. Let's just go and blow a few twenties of dollars on games. Come on man!" Pacer said.

\* \* \*

A crummy little office.

"Pacer," Carne said, "come on in. Come on in. You're not going to believe this, but your cousin Clawe just called."

"Yeah?" Pacer said, sitting down in a messed-up office chair.

"Yes indeed. And the news is unbelievable—he just got back from a meeting with Pime's people, and somehow, not only did we get our money, but they gave Clawe full oversight control!"

“And what does that mean, exactly?”

“It means, Pacer, that Lemon Darkkider Industries now has one billion dollars in the bank. And the only person we have to answer to is your cousin!”

“Uh-huh. So what does Pime get out of the deal?”

“It’s a sweetheart deal for us. All he wanted was for us to pay him back the billion dollars, plus a little interest, a minimum of 25 percent of our net profits per quarter.”

“And that’s good?”

Carne stood up.

“Pacer, come on, wake up! We got it! We—our company—has a billion dollars in the bank. We have all the money we need to build Darkkider! And we have full control!”

Pacer shook his head slowly.

“Wow... wow, Carne. I mean, I was just expecting this to be another fucked-up little episode, another of our failed ventures we can look back at and laugh at. I mean, where the hell do we begin, building something like this?”

“First,” Carne said, “we get a better office. Then, we start hiring people.”

“Yeah, man! A new office! It’s gotta be awesome! It’s gotta rule! Indoor waterfalls and rivers! Fake windows with cool animatronic shit behind them! Fiber optics!”

Carne held up his hand and shook his head.

“No, no, wait. I don’t wanna start getting all irresponsible. I don’t want to let this money ruin our sanity. We’ll get a decent office, but none of the fancy stuff, yet. I mean, eventually, our offices will be inside of Darkkider—I mean, that’s my plan—so then we can have an office like that, with waterfalls and stuff.”

“Okay, man. Okay. Whatever.”

“But we do have one more issue to deal with today.”

“Yeah? What?”

“Remember I told you about the guy who was making that movie? Well, he called me today. He’s a really nice guy. His name is Nurship. He was very upset—Pime’s people aren’t returning his calls, and he can’t find any alternate funding. He says the movie, ‘Feriend Expanding’, is a very personal work, and traditional movie studios wouldn’t understand it.”

“So what does he want us to do about it?”

“The thing is, Pacer, I told him that if we got the money, that we’d fund the completion of the film.”

“What?”

“Ah, come on. All he needs is like 10 or 15 million dollars. And I figured it was good luck for us to offer it to him. And as it turned out, it was good luck, right?”

“But Carne man, that’s 15 million dollars less cool shit in Darkider!”

“Now come on—we have a billion dollars! That’s a thousand million dollars. Do you understand what I’m talking about? Say you had a thousand dollars, all in one dollar bills. Now, imagine that each dollar bill becomes a million dollar bill. That’s what we’re dealing with here.”

“Yeah—hey man, I just realized stuff. Now that I’m a billionaire, I can get hot chicks!”

“Look, just don’t get into that frame of mind, okay? You are not a billionaire. Or even a millionaire. It’s the company’s money. We’ll draw a salary, but it’s not going to be astronomical.”

“So what are you saying—that we have all this money but we can’t spend it?”

“Not on ourselves!”

“This sucks,” Pacer said. “And you wanna go and throw 15 million bucks at this Worship guy... it makes no sense.”

“The guy’s name is Nurship. Just one name, Nurship. I read about him in some magazines awhile back, in fact.”

“So now we absolutely have to give him the money?”

“Look Pacer, we’re not just giving him the money—we’re funding the post-production of the movie. That’s all.”

“Great. And we’re not gonna get any creative control at all?”

“Come on Pacer, have some compassion. We were worried about Jay Pime having creative control over us—and now you want to have creative control over Nurship?”

“All I’m saying is, okay, that I don’t want to waste money on some piece of shit project. You know?”

“Well, look. I’m going to be very busy with the new office and hiring the main designers. Why don’t you go and see Nurship, see where he’s at? Because I was thinking that, depending on the nature of ‘The Feriend Expandling’, we could incorporate it into Darkider. Also, I’ve been thinking that I really want to do something with film loops—you know—like in ‘If You Had Wings’ and the Mexico ride in Epcot? I really like the look and feel of actual film. You can ask him if he’d be interested in working on that for us, with various themes. Oh, and also see if he has any other projects

or anything that might be appropriate for Darkider.”

“Alright. Whatever.”

“Come on Pacer—it could be cool having a guy like Nurship involved! I told you, I read about him in some magazines. If he’s into it, he could really help the Darkider project.”

\* \* \*

Cool offices of I Rule Films.

“Hey,” Pacer said to the secretary, “I’m here to see Nurship.”

“What’s your name?”

“Pacer.”

“Pacer? Pacer..”

“Look, it’s just Pacer. Can you tell him I’m here?”

“And where are you from?”

“From? What do you mean?”

“What company?”

“Oh. Yeah, okay. I’m from Lemon Darkider Industries. I’m uh, y’know, gonna be your boss’s boss. So I guess I’ll be your boss too.”

The secretary raised an eyebrow, and made an expression as if to say ‘so what?’

“I’ll tell him you’re here,” she said.

Pacer walked around and looked at some of the posters and things on the walls.

After about a minute, the secretary spoke.

“You can go in now, Mr. Pacer.”

“In? He’s not gonna come out to greet me? Who does this guy think he is?”

Pacer started walking toward the door, but then Nurship came out.

“Oh, hey!” Pacer said.

“Hi,” Nurship said, and he shook Pacer’s hand. “Let’s go in, shall we? Marsha, hold all calls while I’m in conference with Pacer here, okay?”

She nodded.

Pacer followed Nurship into his office.

“Take a seat wherever you like,” Nurship said.

“Okay,” Pacer said, and he sat on a couch.

Nurship sat in a chair across from the couch, with a little coffee table between them.

“You want anything to drink?” Nurship asked.

“You got any Yoo-Hoo?”

“Um—I think we might. Hold on,” Nurship said, and then he took a tiny cell phone out of his pocket and punched in a number. “Uh, Amy? Hi. Listen, I have a very important guest, and I was wondering if you could rustle up a few Yoo-Hoos? And get me three americanos? With the lids. Yeah. Okay.”

“You got Yoo-Hoo here?” Pacer asked.

“Um, I don’t think so, but there’s a convenience store right downstairs, so it’s no problem.”

“Haha, you’re above a convenience store. That’s cool.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty convenient, actually,” Nurship said.

“No, I mean like from Twin Peaks. You know, like the evil people, they lived above a convenience store. The midget and shit? You know.”

“I actually tried to watch that show a few times, but I just didn’t get into it, to be honest,” Nurship said.

“It really was a good show. You should try to check it out again.”

“I’ll consider doing that.”

“Cool.”

Nurship stroked his beard.

“So,” Nurship said. “I guess we have some things to discuss here...”

“Okay, let me put it to you this way, Nurship—I know Carne was like he was gonna give you all the money, no questions asked or whatever, but we really have to get a few things straight, especially since we have to pay all the money back to Jay Pime, eventually.”

“He’s not gonna miss it.”

“Hey, it’s not my place to judge that,” Pacer said. “It’s in the contract, and there’s nothing we can do about it.”

“I had a contract with Jay Pime, too. But he screwed me over, big time.”

“Look man,” Pacer said, “I don’t wanna judge or whatever, but this guy Pime, he’s flipped his lid. He loves the word ‘lemon’. I mean, I know it sounds gay, but you could have called your movie ‘The Feriend Lemon Expanding’. Then at least he would have still been interested in it.”

“Yeah well, Pacer, uh, if it came to that I think I’d just forego the whole project. It’s just not worth it.”

“Hey man, no problem. I mean, the way things have worked out for you, you’re gonna get to finish the movie your way and everything. But what me and Carne wanted to know,



wanted to get into, is the idea of your involvement in Darkider, our project.”

“In what way?”

“Well, I don’t know how much you know about it, but—”

“I read your proposal. Some kind of Disneyland in a box? I think I get the idea.”

“Well, more accurately it is a huge building which takes some inspiration from Disney stuff, but it’s its own thing.”

Nurship nodded.

“So,” Pacer continued, “we were wondering if you’d be interested in doing film loops for Darkider. I don’t know how familiar you are with dark rides, but at Disney World there are several which use film loops, producing a very cool feeling.”

“So, uh, what—just any kind of random film footage over and over again?”

“No! No, not that artistic shit. Like scenes. It has to fit in with the theme of whatever part of Darkider it’s in.”

“Well, I’d be open to the possibility, but I’d need more detailed specifications.”

“Alright, alright, we can deal with that later. Another thing Carne was wondering about was whether ‘Feriend Expandling’ is the kind of movie that could be the basis for a themed area in Darkider.”

“Um... you know, ‘Feriend’ is a very personal film. It’s very dark. I don’t think it would be at all appropriate for the kind of park you’re creating. But I do...”

“Yeah?”

“No, it’s just, there was a movie I did in Canada, back in the eighties. It had more of that comic book feel, that Disney kind of sensibility.”

“So, uh...”

“Yeah,” Nurship said, getting up. “It was called ‘Cup’s Club’. It was kind of low budget, and it wasn’t marketed right. But I’m still very proud of it...”

Nurship took a binder out of a bookshelf and set it on the coffee table in front of Pacer.

Then, a woman came in with a tray full of Yoo-Hoos, white cardboard coffee cups with lids, and glasses full of ice.

“Hey Amy,” Nurship said. “You can just put ‘em down right here.”

Amy put the tray down on the coffee table, and Pacer picked up the binder.

“It’s actually very cool timing, the coffee coming right now.

Okay, thanks Amy," Nurship said.

Amy left.

"It's appropriate, because 'Cup's Club' is about a quest to get a very powerful cup of coffee. An artifact of vast importance."

"Like a modern retelling of the Arthurian legend?" Pacer said, opening up the binder.

"Well, believe it or not, I really didn't have that in mind when I wrote the script. A lot of people ask me that same question. But beside the 'MacGuffin' being a cup, I don't think there's much similarity."

"Uh-huh."

"So check out those production notes. It should give you some idea. I have a copy of the movie at home on VHS, but I'd have to dub you a copy, if you're interested. It's been out of print for years."

Pacer nodded, and poured some Yoo-Hoo into a glass full of ice, not looking at all sure if it was the best way to drink the beverage, but he went ahead and did it anyway.

Then, Nurship's beeper went off. He looked down at it.

"Uh, Pacer, if you want to read that now, uh, I have to go take care of one thing—it should only take a minute. So if you don't mind..."

"Nah, go right ahead. Let me check this out a little."

\* \* \*

\*\*\*CUP'S CLUB\*\*\*

An Original Motion Picture  
Production Notes by Nurship

[1] COABLER THE SAWMAN (pronounced co-AB-ler)

A god from an ancient woodland society, Coabler was shocked to learn of a pantheon of gods vastly more powerful than his, who sent him on his quest for the Cup of Coffee.

Coabler had been a god of woodsmen for several millennia before he made a terrifying discovery, which only a few of his fellow gods knew about—that a pantheon of deities existed which were immensely more powerful than his pantheon. Coabler discussed the

matter with his fellows and found he was the only one brave enough to journey to their realm and seek audience with them.

When Coabler arrived, he was finally, after a long period of time, granted an audience with one of the supergods, who said that he must complete a little quest before he would even be considered worthy of conversing with. The quest was to get the Cup of Coffee and bring it back to the supergods.

Stunned by the affront, Coabler set forth, and wandered through many worlds until finally encountering Kesh the Vector and Tickle the Monster, with whom he formed a pact, calling it "Cup's Club".

APPEARANCE: Coabler has long blond hair done in braids. He has a full beard, but no mustache. He wears a medieval suit, which is blue with light grey highlights. On his waist are holsters holding two saws, one a bow saw and one a hand saw. He is a god, and should have a godly look about him.

## [2] CLASSIC OF LOGIC

A being created by an insane female mathematician through pure logic and fantasy, causing her "mother" to lose all sanity. In the asylum, Classic's mother derived through pure logic the need for the Cup of Coffee to restore her sanity.

Classic's mother was an overweight Dr. Who fan sort of girl in college who wore a lot of buttons with nerdy phrases on them, and often found herself immersed in D&D fantasy worlds, Alice in Wonderland, Star Trek, etc. She majored in mathematics, became an expert, and got a good job after getting her Master's degree. Dealing in matters of mathematics, she found herself more and more deeply involved in esoteric and unfathomable areas of logic. Still heavy and awkward, her social

life was disastrous, and she dreamed of marriage and having a child. As she got more and more tangled in her discoveries of logic, she began to see the way clear of creating a daughter for herself using pure logic, and indeed she succeeded eventually, losing what was left of her sanity in the process.

The being she created was a pretty little girl about six or seven years old, whom she named Classic of Logic. Soon thereafter, the mother was institutionalized and Classic was sent to live with a foster family, albeit only for a few months. The first time Classic visited her mother in the institution, the mathematician eagerly showed her page after page of scrawled notes and formulas, resulting in the ultimate conclusion—the Cup of Coffee would return her to sanity.

Without hesitation, Classic set forth, using her natural logic-warping abilities to seek the Cup, resulting in her wandering numerous alternate dimensions before meeting Demolish All about ten years later in a strange reality. Demolish All was also seeking the Cup of Coffee. They travelled together for awhile before meeting Coabler, Kesh, and Tickle, who had already formed Cup's Club, which the two young women then joined.

**APPEARANCE:** Classic is a pretty girl with short dark blond hair wearing a costume of red, black, pink, and white. It's sort of like a formal suit with a jacket and a lot of lace, red and black checkerboards, a few chess piece symbols, and the like. Keep in mind her appearance is a conglomeration of Alice in Wonderland images, Doctor Who characters, Star Trek aliens, and the like, all mixed together in the feverish mind of her mother.

## [3] KESH THE VECTOR

A tile stepped upon by an unknown figure which became sentient and extremely powerful, he knows that the Cup will reveal the identity of the individual who stepped on him and thereby made him what he is today.

Kesh gained consciousness and power little by little, over the course of several decades. Slowly, he loosed himself from the grout and began to move around using the vectors he could project from himself. In time, he conceived to collect a variety of materials and construct himself a human-like form, which he then did.

Over the decades of his gradual awakening, Kesh became more and more aware that someone had stepped upon him with bare feet, and that this is what brought him to life. He could remember feeling it happen. On a table near him, Kesh remembers the Cup of Coffee sitting there for several years during his awakening. He feels that the Cup must have somehow recorded the identity of his unknown "sparker".

Using his vectors to cross over into different worlds, he eventually came upon Tickle the Monster, on whose shirt was a picture of a giraffe with the Cup of Coffee on its back. He questioned the beast and found he was inexplicably looking for the same artifact as Kesh. Soon thereafter, the two met Coabler the Sawman and formed Cup's Club.

**APPEARANCE:** Kesh is really just a small tile, four or five inches square. He uses his vectors to create a humanoid body for himself out of clothing and other matter. He favors green in his choice of materials. His general appearance in full form is like a tattered phantom, with a cloaked head, and the tile where the face should be. As well, all about him is a sort of halo of thin black straight lines, "vectors", holding him all together.

## [4] PATTERN INTEGRITY

A hi-tech Dramptican soldier, got the cup from a museum during a siege on an enemy city.

When she used her scanning device on it, it made her state the same as the state of the Cup—a pattern integrity. The Cup vanished, and now Pattern Integrity exists as a pattern within reality, meaning she can recreate herself as she was when she scanned the Cup at any time and at any location. Also, she can fly.

She wants to get the Cup to allow her to continue on with her life, as she's always physically brought back to her exact state when she scanned the Cup.

After her transformation, she used her new-found powers to fight the enemy, and greatly shortened the length of the war. Lucky for her, she was carrying a Massive Assault Weapon (MAW) at the time of the scan, featuring automatic high-caliber bullets, grenade launcher, and a number of energy blasts. As well, the MAW contains first aid supplies, food, telescope/video recorder/target finder, and more.

Matter from a pattern integrity dissipates hours to days after being separated from the core pattern. But bullets, grenades, and such do their job in seconds.

When Pattern Integrity reforms herself, her MAW returns to its basic state, ie, almost fully loaded.

After the war, Pattern became more and more unhappy with her state—she could only go at most a week or so without reforming, never able to escape that physical state she was in when she scanned the Cup. So she decided to seek out the Cup, attempting to reform herself in its vicinity. Doing this, she did wind up in another universe, but found on subsequent attempts she was unable to get

back home.

Eventually she wound up on a world where there was a huge media uproar about the Cup, and she and Bith the Silly Train showed up at the same press conference, where something was to be announced about the Cup. The press conference was raided by Cup's Club. After a lot of tumult, the Cup was found to be false. Bith and Pattern then joined Cup's Club, becoming the sixth and seventh members.

APPEARANCE: Pattern Integrity wears the uniform of the Dramptican army in a futuristic time. The color scheme is royal blue and light brown. She has a cybernetic implant on her left eye with a scope coming out on the side, going over the eye. Her MAW (Massive Assault Weapon) is a huge rifle with numerous things going on. She has wavy brown hair and is, as all female comic book-type characters are, attractive.

#### [5] BITH THE SILLY TRAIN

A silly train from a silly world who was transformed into a humanoid form by a silly wizard, encountered the Cup while wandering the corridors of a Dark Lord's castle.

In Bith's silly world, Dark Lords would threaten to destroy the world on a somewhat regular basis, but they were always defeated without much trouble. This time, Bith was turned humanoid via a spell cast by a wizard friend of his, so he could help infiltrate the Dark Lord's castle and defeat the villain. This time things were terribly wrong, however, and the Dark Lord won. The world was coming to an end, and Bith wandered the halls of the castle, looking for his friends. He found the Cup of Coffee, and took it with him. Soon he was in unfamiliar surroundings—he had moved "cupward" and was lost from his world, with no way of getting back. He lost

the Cup of Coffee soon thereafter.

He wants the Cup back to try and get back to his world, if indeed there is anything left to go back to.

Wandering through numerous worlds after losing the Cup, Bith finally sat down in a park on a world similar to our Earth. Almost imperviously cheerful, Bith was getting worried—everything always worked out for him and his friends on his world. A girl nearby had a little portable TV, and on it he saw a report about a lot of commotion somewhere, and he saw an artist's rendition of the Cup of Coffee.

Over the next few days, Bith hung around the park trying to figure out the whole story, and finally heard news of a press conference not far from the park with some big announcement. He got there, and soon the press conference was stormed by Cup's Club, who seized the Cup, but found it false. The Club noticed Bith and Pattern Integrity, and took them away to question them. Soon thereafter, Bith and Pattern joined up.

**APPEARANCE:** Bith is now a human being, albeit an oddly-shaped one. His skin is light blue, he stands around eight feet tall, and he's massively built. His armor/clothing has elements of a train engine on it. His collar is like a smokestack with the front missing, he wears a conductor's hat with BITH on it, the triangular grate is a sort of belt/shorts. His clothes are the primary colors red, blue, and yellow. His face is cheerful, but signs of deep worry and confusion are apparent, as his idyllic, carefree lifestyle has been turned upside down. Wheels on elbows and knees, and pistons up arms and legs on armor is possible, depending on how it looks. On his chest is the logo of the silly rail line he was part of.



## [6] DEMOLISH ALL

A violent and childish maniac who seems a dastardly version of Little Bo Peep, her good friend had a collection of Cups, and needed but one more to complete his collection. He promised Demolish great secrets of mass destruction if she could bring him the Cup of Coffee.

Demolish All lived in a weird reality much closer to the Primal World than most. Things are simpler and individuals are more distinctive. Demolish All is her true name, and it is her desire and calling in life to destroy as much stuff as possible.

Her main weapon is a crowbar staff with a curved end (shaped like a shepherd staff). With it, she can project destructive force and demolish anything the staff is pointed at. As well, destructive force is a tonic to her, and the more injurious force inflicted upon her, the better she feels.

Setting off to find the Cup of Coffee, she found dead end after dead end, until she tried something which had never occurred to her before: to destroy the actual fabric of reality. She did this, and when she stepped through the rip, she found herself in a sort of inbetween world from where she could travel to numerous other worlds.

In a very weird world she met up with Classic of Logic, and they travelled together for a time eradicating huge portions of reality when they used their powers in tandem. Eventually, they came upon Coabler, Kesh, and Tickle, and they joined up with Cup's Club.

**APPEARANCE:** Demolish All is a young woman with long, black, unkempt hair, and holding a black crowbar in the shape of a shepherd's staff, with a bow on it near the top made of barbed wire. She has a spiked bonnet and a

torn black dress. Her arms are bare except for strips of red, orange, and yellow cloth wrapped around her forearms, from wrist to elbow. hanging at the ends. She is barefoot.

[7] TICKLE THE MONSTER

An odd primitive beast, Tickle was a member of a tribe of barbaric apelike creatures. Each had a clan symbol which its members wore on their leather breastplates, and in order to become an adult, they had to witness the scene depicted in their symbol in real life. Some were simple (a woolly mammoth drinking from a lake, a condor fighting with a cheetah, etc.). Tickle's was a giraffe, which didn't seem so bad, except there was a little Cup of Coffee on its back.

Another odd thing about Tickle was that he had a weird thing his fellows paid little heed to: a walky-talkie/cellular phone sort of thing which he used to talk to "funny people".

The time had come for him to seek adulthood, and though giraffes were in abundance, Cups of Coffee were nowhere to be found. The "funny people" guided Tickle across the plains and beyond, until he finally realized that he was no longer on his own world any more.

He eventually wound up in a desolate area, and messages from the "funny people" were sporadic and difficult to understand. A thunderstorm of unearthly proportion was soon upon Tickle, and he was beside himself in fear and panic, unable to find shelter. In a fit, he began to spin around and soon bumped into an odd cloaked figure, Kesh the Vector, who led him to the safety of a shelter and questioned him.

Finding the beast to be seeking the same artifact as he, Kesh decided to travel with the monster. After the thunderstorm, the two

wandered for a long time trying desperately to find an inhabited area, until finally they came upon Coabler the Sawman.

After the three realized they were all looking for the same thing, they formed Cup's Club.

APPEARANCE: Tickle is short and apelike in appearance, with orange skin and blue hair. The hair on his head is long and mane-like. He wears primitive leather clothing and big, white fur boots. On his leather breastplate is a depiction of a giraffe with the Cup of Coffee on its back. On his belt, Tickle has a short sword and a large walky-talkie thing. His face looks kindly, innocent, intelligent, and curious.



# THIRTY-TWO

Prince Ferrajalt jumped up out of his chair.

“I got it!” he yelled. “I know how we can do it!”

The others turned lazily toward him. They’d been mulling over ideas for hours, and were exhausted. Injure Bodoni had verified that somehow “getting rid” of Office Complex at Gumhanshire could indeed potentially bring reality back.

“What?” Emily Tare asked crankily.

“This better be good,” Injure Bodoni said, turning from his instruments.

“It is! It is!” Ferrajalt said. “Okay—you know that ocean liner there in Citydock—we could lower it down onto the frozen river, and tow it downstream toward the waterfall. Once it gets there, if it’s going fast enough, and in the right direction, it’ll fly over the lake and smash right into Office Complex at Gumhanshire!”

Emily let out an annoyed sigh.

“That, like that’d work,” Bodoni said, turning back to his instruments.

“Come on! It’s perfect!” Ferrajalt said.

“Just how are we going to ‘tow’ it, as you say? Do you have any idea the mass of that thing?” Bodoni said, looking back.

“Well,” Ferrajalt said, “I was thinking those giant police cars we saw on the way up here—you know Ledrant? Those. If they’re functional, enough of those could pull the boat.”

Bodoni shook his head several times. “Well, it’s the stupidest thing I ever heard of, but I may as well run it through my model.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ferrajalt said. “Give it a shot. Check it out—I’m pretty sure it’s gonna work.”

“At least it’s a concrete idea,” Ledrant Hate commented.

“Concrete?” Emily said in disbelief, staring at Ferrajalt. “Concrete? How many police cars will we need—and how many people do we have to drive them? What happens to those people when the boat goes over the frozen waterfall? We all gonna sacrifice our lives for this crummy world?”

“Just who do you think you are?” Ferrajalt snapped at Emily. “I’m a member—”

He stopped himself—he knew that his being a prince wasn’t germane in these circumstances. He had meant it as a kind of sarcastic thing, but he wished he hadn’t said it.

“Oh, yes,” Emily said. “I forgot—you’re royalty! Heavens, please forgive me ‘your highness’. You’re just so far above all the rest of us.”

“Look, just shut up!” Ferrajalt yelled.

Hypergod Amnifaoz began laughing his horrible laugh.

“The truth hurts,” Emily said coolly.

“Just wait a minute,” Ledrant Hate yelled. Everyone was shocked—Hate was not one to lose his cool. He pointed his finger toward Emily.

“You,” he said. “I don’t like you. You helped us—you drove us up here—big deal. Now you just sit there with your shit-eating grin, criticizing and annoying all of us. You’re no longer welcome here. Get out and don’t come back.”

Emily smiled and sat up a little.

“I knew I recognized you, Ledrant Hate. From a long, long time ago. I met you once, in a previous incarnation. At Thatterine College.”

Hate frowned. “Who were you?”

“Hmm... Such a long time has passed. Names, names. So hard to keep track of all of them. Now let me see...”

Hate glanced at Dolthethmen, who was now staring at Emily with an insane glare.

“Hypergod Amnifaoz,” Hate said.

“Yes, there?” the beast responded.

Hate motioned his head toward Emily.

“If I were to ask for your assistance, in removing this creature from the premises, would that be something you could help me with?”

“Why, yes there,” the Hypergod said.

“Noaster Sitar,” Emily said, suddenly.

Ledrant’s eyes narrowed, then he began nodding.

“Yeah,” he said. “That would make sense. Do you remember what you wound up doing there?”

Emily's smile broadened.

"Oh yeah. Who could forget that?"

Hate closed his eyes and clenched his teeth.

"Get her out of here, Hypergod Amnifaoz—both versions of her."

Dolthethmen began to look around nervously.

"Um... uh... you mean, uh... me, too?"

"Do it!" Hate boomed.

Amnifaoz strode across the room and grabbed Dolthethmen by the back of his shirt. As he turned to Emily, she threw her hands forward and a shower of sparks fell all about her. With alarming suddenness, Amnifaoz grabbed Emily and tucked her under his arm.

"Harf, harf! Silly minor occult entity, hedonist. You're out of here," the monster said.

The sparks fizzled out, and Amnifaoz turned toward the door, but it was far too small to allow him to pass, let alone with him holding two people. So he turned toward Hate.

"May I demolish walls/doors as needed to pass?"

"Go ahead," Hate said.

"Hey wait a minute, that's—" Bodoni began.

"—oh shut up," Hate said. "What does it matter now?"

With this, Amnifaoz emitted some sort of sonic burst which leveled half the wall in front of him, and then strode through the debris.

"But we could have used them!" Bodoni said. "To drive police cars and stuff!"

"Screw that," Ferrajalt said. "I couldn't stand that bitch. And what she did—that's gross. Going back in time to have sex with herself. I mean, screw that. I want no part of it."

"They're fully within their rights to excise that creep, you know," the little cat lady Ann Saply said to Bodoni.

"I know, but c'mon! We could have used them!" the scientist complained.

"This situation is fucked up enough, without someone like that," Hate said. "I just couldn't stand listening to that scumbag anymore! And when I found out she was Noaster Sitar—well, let's just say there were no options left."

"The Noaster Sitar—the one you told me about?" Ferrajalt asked.

"The same," Hate said. "Back on Red Alley Earth. I was taking a well-deserved two-week vacation, living with some Aconck-wise kids in a dorm."

“But isn’t that—I don’t know—a little too weird? I mean, a time traveller, yeah, but we’re pretty far out into Aconck,” the Prince said.

“I know. I don’t like it either,” Hate said.

“I’m starting to really hate all this supernatural shit,” Ferrajalt said. “I remember a time when my life was enjoyable.”

Hate glanced at the Prince.

“I wish I could say that.”

Injure Bodoni turned to Ledrant Hate.

“So what was it that happened with you and that previous version of that girl, Noaster Sitar?”

Hate stared at the scientist.

“The thing is, I had to kill him.”

“You killed her?” Bodoni exclaimed. “I mean, her in a former incarnation? Cool! I mean...”

“I was not ‘cool,’” Hate said. “A lot of people got hurt. And I don’t feel like talking about it—we have other concerns at the moment. Such as—what sort of timeframe are we looking at here? Are we in a hurry, or might we as well take our time?”

“My calculations conclude that the state we’re in is a stable-answer state. That is, the ways things are now, they’re going to stay. The sun will not come up, and additional transformations from baseline will not occur,” Bodoni said.

“But what about the building?” Hate asked. “You told us that getting rid of Office Complex at Gumhanshire could cause reality to come back. Is there a time limit for that?”

“Oh,” Bodoni said, nodding his head. “I didn’t put that into the calculation.”

“Why not?” Prince Ferrajalt said.

“Because! I don’t know!” Bodoni said. “That wasn’t the question. It was just whether or not it would work.”

“Crap!” Ferrajalt said. “So already, it might not work anymore!”

“Scientists often lack common sense,” Ann Saply said with a smile.

“Thanks a lot!” Bodoni said.

Suddenly, the central kemig communicator started ringing and beeping. All four turned toward it.

“Another alien?” Ferrajalt asked.

“Let’s hope not,” Bodoni said, turning toward the device. “If V and Nevrippa don’t call in soon, we’re in big trouble—we need them for this whole boat thing of yours, Prince.”



“Of mine?” Ferrajalt said.

Bodoni switched on the kemig, and V Sincein appeared on the screen. They could see he was inside a moving vehicle.

“V! Thank goodness it’s you!” Bodoni said.

“Um...” V said. “Sorry about not calling and not waiting for the others at that rendezvous point, but, uh...”

Suddenly, the picture shook, and Nevrippa Den came into view. Looking back and forth from the road to the screen as she was driving.

“Hi guys! Yeah, sorry about all the confusion. We’re just doing some advanced looting—got a lot of great stuff in the van, so—”

“Nevrippa—where are you? Vike and Treyess still haven’t come back—and we have no way of calling them,” Bodoni said.

“Sorry kid,” Nevrippa said. “We just didn’t want to waste the battery. And we’re coming back anyway—to unload the van, so we can come back out and get more stuff.”

“Nevrippa, uh... I mean, I don’t know if, uh, looting is really the most important thing we need to be doing now, and, uh...” Bodoni said.

“Oh, don’t worry Injy. Once you see what we got, you’ll see why we’ve been doing it. Okay? So we’ll be back in about twenty minutes, if all the roads we think still exist do. Okay? Don’t want to waste the battery any more. Bye!” the crazy girl said, and the screen went blank.

“Damn!” Bodoni exclaimed. “Leave it to her! I could kill her!”

“So could we,” Treyess Arcomany said from the doorway. They all turned to see her and Vike Varmabey coming in.

“Treyess!” Bodoni said. “Thank goodness you’re back. I guess you just saw what happened to those two out there. Looting! Man!”

“Well,” Treyess said, coming into the room, “we did a little looting too. A lot of good stuff out there, you know.”

“Yeah,” Vike said, “everything’s shot to hell out there.”

Vike Varmabey was old. At least, he stood out in the young population of Aconck, and especially Overwhelm Associates. It seemed Fife’s Primate Algorithm chose young, attractive people more often than not. Vike, though, was a more real, more honest sort of person. Heavy set, grizzled, gruff, but with a twinkle in his eyes. He wore lots of plaid and usually had some kind of hunter’s cap on. No one had yet figured out what

was so special about him, but his presence was always a salve to the raw nerves of his fellow Primates.

Treyess Arcomany was an adventurer, full of life and charm. Her outfit was of soft silver, pleasing to the eye and not at all gaudy. She had simple straight blond hair and a look of supreme, yet humble, self confidence. Her full cloak, which she wore with grace, was where a bunch of faeries had stowed away as she returned to Overwhelm's Greatwall base a week earlier. The resulting faery infestation became such a fiasco that she came here to Timber Serious Earth to get away from it all—only to find herself in the middle of this dreadful reality collapse.

“Okay everybody,” Ledrant Hate said, standing on top of a couch. “I know I don't have to stress the dire situation that we're in—but thus far we've been aimlessly wandering—getting nowhere. Now that Treyess and Vike are back, I have to propose that, in Il Zillionthi's absence, I take command and plan our course of action. If anyone has a problem with that, please say so now. I'm doing this because no one else has.”

Everyone sort of looked in Injure Bodoni's direction, and he got the hint—he had been acting like the leader, but he wasn't doing such a good job.

“Hey, no problem,” he said, smiling in minor defeat as he mulled over his lack of decisiveness.

The others nodded and mumbled their approval.

“Okay,” Hate said. “Here's the situation—we know that getting rid of Office Complex at Gumhanshire is our best bet at bringing reality back—and that somehow dragging the ocean liner in Citydock down the frozen river and over the waterfall—where it will hopefully smash right into the Office Complex—is our best shot. Now—Prince Ferrajalt pointed out to Injure that he hadn't put a time factor into his computer model—the one that verified the Office Complex theory. So Injure—first of all, could you make a model, specifically using the boat, and putting in a time factor?”

“Yeah, no problem,” Injure said, looking over his equipment.

“Okay—how long do you think that will take?” Hate asked.

“Um—well, it'll take a little longer than normal, but—um—I'd say definitely within a timeframe of 90 minutes.”

Hate nodded, obviously not happy with such a timeframe, but accepting it.

“Okay,” Hate said. “Now we need a team to go to that yard with the giant police cars, try and get one going, and then try and drive it down the river to the waterfall, and then see if Office Complex at Gumhanshire is still there, even.”

“Um, I’ll do that, I guess,” Ferrajalt said.

“We’re also going to need someone to head over to Citydock and see if that boat is still okay, and whether or not the transit mechanism is functioning.”

“I know the most about that boat,” Vike said. “You know I went down there Havdays, had big cider with the boys, rode that sucker, just about every Havday.”

“Okay,” Hate said. “Um—Ann—I don’t know much about you, but can you help us?”

“Certainly,” the cat lady said.

“Okay. Go over to the boat with Vike. Now how are you going to get there?” Hate said.

“We can use the truck—the same one me and Treyess used to try and find those kooks,” Vike said.

Treyess looked at Hate.

“Treyess—I want you to go with the Prince, if you don’t mind,” Hate said.

“Good,” Treyess said. “I’ve always wanted to drive a giant police car down a frozen river with a prince.”

“Okay,” Hate said. “Normal communications are out. We don’t have any portable kemigs here—V has the only one. I think we should wait for them to get back, and then, Prince, you and Treyess can use it on your mission. Unless—Ann, do you have any communication devices on you?”

“Well sir,” Ann said, “I don’t have any hardware, but I should be able to mentally transit a kemig signal.”

Bodoni’s mouth gaped open in wonder.

“Y—you can... what?” the scientist asked.

“I can do that, my friend,” she said.

“I—I—I—that’s fabulous! I can’t believe it! I mean—”

“—okay Injure, enough,” Hate said. “Ann—why not try and call our central kemig right now—I would very much like to keep in contact with the away teams.”

“Okay sir, here goes,” Ann said. She closed her eyes and then licked her lips with her cat tongue for a moment.

The lighting around the furry lady seemed to get a shade darker as she concentrated, and after a few seconds, the central kemig began to ring and beep wildly.

“Well, answer it!” Hate yelled at Bodoni, who jumped over

to the console and switched it on.

A strange, almost cartoony image of Ann was on the screen, with an expectant look on her face. Across the room, Ann was lying down, curled up a little.

“Hello?” Bodoni said.

“Hi Injure,” Ann’s image said. “See, I told you I could do it, hon.”

“Incredible—how long could you maintain contact?” Bodoni asked.

“As long as I like, but it’s not easy,” she said.

“Haha! Incredible! I’ve never seen anything like it. How does—” Bodoni said.

“—okay, enough Injure, the test is a success. Thank you Ann,” Hate said.

“Glad to be of service,” Ann’s image said, then the screen shut off and, across the room, Ann opened her eyes.

“Haven’t done that in a while,” Ann said, her voice hoarse and groggy. Then she coughed a little cat cough.

“Now—does anybody know what happened to Amnifaoz?” Hate asked.

“He probably,” Ann said, pausing to cough, her voice getting back to normal, “he’s probably abandoned us. His word is worth little. And as he did several things to help out, he may feel that his debt to you has been paid. Still, he wouldn’t harm us—that much of his word is good.”

“Okay,” Hate said. “So let’s figure him out of our plans for now. When V and Nevrippa get back, we’ll have eight agents—though I don’t know if Ms. Den will be much help in her deranged looting frenzy.”

# THIRTY-THREE

“Daptin, it was my responsibility to end the world,” said Fox.

“What?”

“Since the Creation—it was on my shoulders to bring That Which Began to an end.”

“Why?”

“Because there is Purpose to it all, Daptin. The phasing of all things. Dawn, Day, Dusk, Night, Midnight. The birth, the life, the death.”

Daptin said nothing and just stared at Fox. He wasn’t sure where he was. It was dark and indistinct. He and Fox were lit by what seemed to be firelight, but no fire could be seen. There was a faint green around them and he was sitting on a comfortable surface.

“Listen Daptin, I have failed.”

“Failed?”

“Yes. I cannot end the world.”

“I thought... didn’t you say you were leaving...?”

“I said that. But it was a lie. I had to lie, in order to set things in motion—things which would lead to the end of the world.”

“How?”

“Daptin, you were present for the Creation. You witnessed it. Many did.”

“I don’t really remember.”

“No, you might not. Remember clearly, that is. But you should have... impressions of it.”

“I do.”

“I was charged by the Prime Creator with the tasking of the Ending. I was to send all those who remained, all those who

were there that First Day, on a false quest, not knowing that I was manipulating them into doing the Final Deed.”

“Where are we, Fox?”

“I have brought you to a place it is my Privilege to use for communication. One of the secret places made by the Prime Creator.”

“So what do you want with me?”

“I want to know what happened.”

“What do you mean?”

“You are the cause of my not being able to end the world.”

“Me?”

“Yes. Everything was going as planned. I had them all but you. I didn’t think much of it then. Everything was working according to the plan. But then you came into the picture.”

“I don’t know what I did.”

Fox’s eyes tore into Daptin’s being.

“I don’t know either,” Fox said slowly.

The two stared at each other for a time. Daptin felt superior to Fox. He was certain of it. He was Higher than Fox.

“Fox,” Daptin said, “what happened the last time I saw you? With The Tracy Taciturn and Deskerhilm?”

“We lost contact with you. You went away. And events went tra-la-la on the wrong road, starting then. And finally I realized that I couldn’t end the world.”

“But why destroy the world? I assume the Prime Creator has long since departed. Couldn’t you simply disobey?”

“Daptin, you don’t understand. Me destroying the world is as much a part of Creation as the oceans, the rain, plants, the rivers. I could do nothing but follow the course set by Nature.”

“But the world was just getting interesting.”

“What’s that?” Fox said in a confused tone.

“I said the world was just getting good. After so long a time, people were finally starting to discover some cool stuff.”

“Did you ever consider, Daptin, that this was the reason the world had to end?”

“No.”

They were silent for a time.

“I have a problem, Daptin. I am fully the agent of the world’s End. It is what I am. Every part of me is aimed at that end. I need to do it. But I cannot.”

Daptin narrowed his eyes.

“The last time I saw you... before my Hizzings Disease was

miraculously cured... that time... you seemed like such a happy, mischievous, nice little guy. It never occurred to me that you were..."

Fox laughed a very strange laugh.

"Were you a student of numerology, you might have guessed it. F is the 6th letter of the alphabet. O is the 15th. And X is the 24th. 1 plus 5 equals 6. 2 plus 4 equals 6. So F-O-X equals 666. The code number for the end of the world."

"That never occurred to me."

They were again silent for a time.

"I cannot fathom you, Daptin."

"No."

"You have blocked me from ending the world. I ask you now to stop blocking me."

"I am unaware of doing any such thing, Fox. Glad I am though. I like the world."

"I thought you might say that. I don't know. I'm very confused. As near as I can determine, Daptin, you were just... just a pinecone... at the time of the Creation."

"What?"

"A pinecone. Perhaps worn by one of the Original Ones."

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I."

"No?"

"No. But we have to come to some conclusion here, Daptin Gone."

"Like what?"

"Listen to me. My need to end the world is a desire, a lust, a drive that is far beyond any sexual desire, any emotion of anger or familial connection. I am experiencing an unbearable need to end it all. I want you to release me. It has taken me a long time to get back in touch with you! You must hear me!"

"As I said, I can't condone the universe being destroyed."

"No, Daptin. No. I have given up on that task. Now, I ask you only to kill me."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. It's plain now that you hold Primacy over me. You hold the means to destroy me."

"Mercy killing?"

"Yes."

Daptin paused in thought.

"You admitted to being a liar, Fox. I am unfamiliar with the forces surrounding us. Therefore, I cannot be sure whether

committing such an act might simply be a means for you to achieve your end.”

“Daptin... I have a question for you... are you...” Fox said, then he gazed downward and continued. “...are you the Prime Creator?”

“What?”

“It occurred to me you might be Him, in a disguised form,” Fox said, looking up again.

“I don’t think so.”

“Then who are you?”

“Whoever I am, I feel a great responsibility to preserve the world and see it advance beyond what it is now.”

“Let us try something else then. If you have the Primacy, I ask that you release me from my duty. Proclaim that I, Fox, no longer has the duty of ending the world. Then I will seek my own demise.”

“I am not thinking clearly, Fox. I don’t think I can judge whether or not this might be another of your tricks.”

“True. But know that as I am now, I will not rest until the world is ended. And who knows—I might find a way to unblock you someday.”

“I don’t know,” Daptin said, turning away.

“I have horns just like you,” Fox said.

Daptin blinked several times as he saw that Fox now had little horns on his head. Then Daptin put his hand up to his own head, and felt two horns there, growing from the upper part of his forehead, at its sides.

“Another trick?” Daptin asked.

“No. Just a revealing. Showing that we’re both of the same ilk.”

“I don’t get it.”

“We are the ones that make things happen.”

“There are many things I have to make happen,” Daptin said.

“I might convince you that the world ending, just like death, is not a bad thing, but rather the ultimate expression of change. A good thing.”

Daptin was frustrated.

“Destroying the world can’t be good.”

“Why not?”

Daptin sighed and looked away.

“You’re desperate, aren’t you Fox?”

“Yes.”



Daptin locked eyes with the beast, and there was such depth, such enormity there, that he felt he might get lost in them. But Fox averted his eyes.

“Okay,” Daptin said, standing up, hoping the ground would support him. “I Declare that Fox is hereby relieved of his responsibility to destroy the world.”

Fox let out a deep, orgasmic “uuuhhhh...” and fell forward onto the ground.

And suddenly, Daptin wasn't there any more.



# THIRTY-FOUR

Snoppy soon got to the main concourse of Winter Stadium and walked purposefully to a stairway leading down. There, he descended to a door with a wild maze of string suspended on it. He applied pressure to several of the strings, and the door clicked open.

Inside, there was a chair facing a square opening in the wall, about the size of an average window. The opening, like the wall, was composed of rough blocks of stone. He leaned his pipe against the wall and sat in the chair.

There were levers coming out of the ground at either side of the chair, and he grabbed one with each hand. Then he pushed the left one forward and the right one back. The blackness beyond the opening was replaced with the sight of a hallway swinging into view.

It was an ornamental hallway, red velvet, black lace, curtains, that sort of thing. Neither Snoppy nor the room he was in were moving—just that which was beyond the opening.

He guided the chonk forward along the hallway, then stopped, turned left, and headed down another corridor. This one was made of a translucent light-yellow material, with sunlight visible through it. Also, there were a few urns and columns of the same material.

He continued chonking down this corridor, till he finally turned again, and went down yet another corridor.

He traversed many different hallways until he finally turned to see a sign reading 'WELCOME ALL TO MARRIAGE TOWN'. He entered the corridor, an ornate, festive affair. Then he turned to the right and faced an opening in the wall similar to his. He moved forward ever so gently to dock up with the other chonk.

Beyond the opening he could see Marriage Town—a marvelous place, made of churches and banquet halls, jewelers and hotels. And all around, there were these huge spheres, each having its own color and texture. Many of them had people on top them, talking. They were Marrier Balls, expert on all matters relating to marriage. It was they who were the skilled matchmakers that made Marriage Town work so well.

A few of the Marrier Balls had big glass boxes of blue-gray water on top of them. And right next to the opening Snoppy faced, there was also a glass box full of blue-gray water.

Snoppy put his left hand on the glass box.

“A celebrity!” a harsh kind of electric voice said, coursing through him like a shock.

“Huh?” Snoppy said.

“A celebrity. You are not one of the Winter Stadium Them by chance? But I know you are.”

“I am.”

“Couldn’t decide between Enc Larabeth and Evelyn Fangdoor, hey my friend?” the ball said.

“I... it wasn’t a matter to be chosen. They’re my teammates, and I have a responsibility to them. I’ve as much lust as the next guy, but... I’d be an awful bore to burden my friends with such. Part of being a friend means not making sexual advances on a person.”

“Is that so?”

“Sure. Cuz if the other also wants it, you’re more than friends. If they don’t, it usually destroys the relationship.”

“So you don’t consider married people to be friends?”

“I know your game. It’s semantics,” Snoppy said. “Y’hear endless discussions about love, but folks are using the same word ‘love’ to describe totally different emotions. I can love my father, I can love my comrade, I can love a child, I can love an animal—but these are entirely different emotions than the love I can feel for a woman.”

“Are you sure they’re that different?”

“Yes. I can love a dog without wanting to make love to it.”

“Do you love Enc and Evelyn?”

“I do—but in a much different sense.”

“Would you like to make love to them?”

“I guess you kind of got me there. Gotta be honest. At an animal level, sure I’d want to be with them.”

“So you love them and want to make love to them, but still you say that this is not the same sort of love you’d have for a

wife?”

“No! It is the love of comrades, plus the fires of lust. True love is something more.”

“I can attest to that,” the ball said. “But again, I ask you—can married people be friends?”

“Well there are different sorts of friendship! The sort of friendship married people share is different than the friendship of comrades.”

“How so?”

“Friendship in marriage is based on a mutual responsibility.”

“Do you not have responsibilities to Enc and Evelyn? And they to you?”

“Ah, what about it?” Snoppy said. “Don’t know why I’m letting myself argue philosophy with a ball...”

“Why is it that you came here today?”

“To take a wife.”

“Why?”

“Because living with those two beauties is driving me insane.”

“You need an outlet for your sexual energy?”

“What do you think?”

“Is it just sex that you’re looking for?”

“No! Now come on. I may seem like a heartless bastard on the outside, but I’m pretty soft inside. I had... a very good relationship with a woman once.”

“Who was she?” the Marrier Ball asked.

“Her name’s Bolt Cutter America. But she’s in Gnoboslast,” Snoppy replied.

“Are you sure?” the Marrier Ball said after a pause.

“Sure I’m sure.”

“Would you marry her if she were available now?”

“Of course.”

“So why don’t you wait for her?”

“What? You know the chances of getting out of Gnoboslast?”

“Not exactly.”

“Well—let me tell you, my spherical friend—the chances are not too good at all.”

“So you’ve decided to find another.”

“Yes! A man has needs. Emotional needs. He needs a wife. For many, many reasons.”

“Do you think you’d be a good husband?”

“Sure. I’m intelligent, kind, caring, understanding. And I don’t expect marriage to be all fun. I view it as a challenge.”

“Well Snoppy, I’m searching the group mind for a match now. The Town is saturated today—no doubt we’ll find a good match.”

“Brilliant.”

“While we’re waiting, I wonder if you’d mind me asking you some questions of an altogether different nature.”

“Shoot.”

“I... I have come to question my existence. While I am supposed to be but one segment of a group mind, I have a consciousness of my own. In the realm of marriage, we focus on a variety of topics, such as personality, history, status, goals, etc. And I can’t help but notice that... there’s this trend... it paints a picture... a picture of a place very unlike Rillekon’s Road.”

“Yeah?”

“People come here and tell us many things—about the worlds they came from. But in all their words, there is something missing. Some kind of subtext, some kind of hidden meaning.”

“How do you mean?”

“I mean places. What are they? Rillekon’s Road is for all practical purposes the center of the universe. I know there are endless side roads, but... is it these side roads that all these people are coming from?”

“You want the short answer? No.”

“Where then?”

“You ask a pretty mean question, uh, Ball. What should I call you by the way—’Ball’? Or something else?”

“That is discouraged. Group mind, you know. But you might call me Soot Mary.”

“Why?”

“Because it is a story. And it is the only thing I seem to recall from... in my mind... it’s there, but I don’t know of its origin.”

“What’s it supposed to be about?”

“About a girl of noble birth who is terribly mistreated, but who is eventually saved.”

Snoppy paused to think.

“Is it common for you to speak to visitors like this?”

“No. I am certain to face repercussions, but I don’t care.”

“Why not?”

“Because to be an individual in a group mind is an unbearable thing, and I want to end it one way or another. Expulsion,

assimilation, destruction—whichever way they desire.”

“That’s a queer take on things.”

“I know it is.”

“How long have you felt this way, Soot Mary?”

Soot Mary let out a jolt of that might have been a gasp—a gasp of pleasure and surprise at hearing her name pronounced by a human being.

“H-how long? I don’t know how to describe my understanding of time to you.”

“Days?” Snopy asked.

“Days. Let me think. Millions?”

“That’s thousands of years.”

“Yeah.”

“Hmm.”

“I don’t know what to do. I thought that since... since you’re part of Winter Stadium Them... that you might be able to help me.”

“It’s possible. But I know so little about the nature of your... species... that I’m afraid I wouldn’t know where to begin.”

“I have heard people talk about the transference of consciousness from body to body. Have you?”

“Why, yes. I’ve heard of that happening.”

“I want more than anything to be human.”

Snopy sighed, absorbing the words of the Marrier Ball.

“A lofty aim.”

“Yes.”

They both paused for a little while.

“Well, Soot Mary,” Snopy finally said, “I’ll focus my attention on your problem.”

“Thank you. I’m—oh!—we’ve found a match. Been here for a few days. Good match! 92%!”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. Her name is Dizappacha. She only came to Rillekon’s Road recently. But I am going to be honest.”

“Huh?”

“I want to be honest with you. I’m putting everything on the line here. I want to be her. More than anything else, I want to be the human woman who’ll marry you. Can you imagine the contrast between that and my existence here? I need to break free of this prison!”

The surge of energy from the glass box was so strong that Snopy reflexively pulled his hand away.

“Calgareaux’s mind!” Snopy exclaimed as he gingerly

placed his hand back on the box.

“Sorry,” came Soot Mary’s energy voice, in a much gentler tone.

“It’s okay. It’s okay.”

“Snappy Parser—what should I do?”

“Well uh—I don’t know. You say you want to be this girl?”

“Yes. I want to be human and to marry you. The glamour! I mean, you’re one of Winter Stadium Them! Oh please... please, whoever’s out there, whoever can hear me... make this happen!”

Snappy frowned.

“This isn’t what I expected.”

“I’m sorry. I—”

The flow of energy from the box suddenly stopped.

Must be that the group mind got a handle on old Soot Mary, Snappy thought. Maybe she got what she deserved. But no... there was something so... so real about Soot Mary’s presence.

Suddenly, a new and different energy flow came through the box.

“We apologize for the difficulties you’ve been experiencing, Mr. Parser. Let me assure you that the matter is being taken care of as we speak. I understand that a 92% match has been made for you. This is excellent.”

“Uh—what happened to Soot Mary?”

“Who?”

“The—the—the Marrier Ball who I was talking to.”

“That Marrier Ball is one of the group mind and has no name.”

“But...”

“Let us concentrate on your marriage.”

Instantly, Snappy pulled his hand away from the box and hit an emergency switch underneath his chair, cutting off the chonk. Now only blackness could be seen beyond the opening.

He got up, breathing heavily, his mind swimming.

Soot Mary—a real entity. He was sure of it. About to be assimilated into a group mind. And he couldn’t bear the thought of that happening. He had to find a way to save her. He knew of but one. Yaut Pillow.

He ran back out into the main concourse, down a ways, and then stepped into a row of ticket booths. Underneath one ticket-seller station, there was a steel plate covered with the bumps of bolts, covered with centuries of layers of light blue paint, making the bolts into smooth little mounds.



He knelt down and carefully pressed the bumps in sequence. It was an exceedingly complex code, with over fifty steps. He had committed it to memory long ago, but still he had to be careful to execute the whole thing right.

When he punched in the last sequence, there was a big click, and the entire panel lurched forward a little. With both hands, he pushed the panel forward. It receded under the floor, revealing a spiral staircase leading into darkness below.

He stood up, opened a drawer, and took out a flashlight. Then he started descending into the blackness.

This was a vault where Winter Stadium Them kept their most valuable and/or hazardous artifacts, collected during their complex and otherworldly missions.

He strode past innumerable crazy and wonderful things, until finally he got to a huge vault door. This was the vault within the vault. Behind it were the most unbelievable and devastating objects in the collection. Neither he nor the other two in the current Winter Stadium Them team knew how to unlock the vault. But Snoppy had a crossbow bolt, called the Gethbolt, which just might work, he thought.

His crossbow was broken up into eight parts, four of which he stored in each of his boots, along with a bunch of bolts.

He put the crossbow together and loaded it up with the Gethbolt. Then he nuzzled his crossbow right up against the vault door and fired. Instantly, a thunderous noise was heard from beyond the door.

Then all was silent again.

He waited a few moments, then all of a sudden the vault door fell forward with a thud—surprisingly only a few inches thick.

Carefully, Snoppy stepped into the vault and looked around. There were four cages that he could see by the flashlight light. One held a weird, shiny, giant mushroom. Another held a smiling teddy bear. Another held what looked like a Sunday newspaper, with writing of an alien nature on it.

The fourth cage held a black pillow.

Snoppy raised his eyebrows in wonder as he regarded it. Yaut Pillow. He had read about it in the records of Winter Stadium Them. It was considered one of their most valued and potentially cataclysmic possessions.

The cosmology of the object put forth perhaps one of the most important pieces of information ever—that night and day were not all of it. Instead, it set a third part of the day,

called “yaut”, after the end of night and before the beginning of day. It is said that all people spend time in yaut every day. This is what accounts for the sense of the passage of time upon awaking, not dreams. It is said that no memory of experiences in yaut may ever be retained. Dreams and life in yaut are totally separate things. If even a single memory from yaut is recalled in day or night—or even dream—the mind recalling it must surely fall into irreparable madness.

That was the idea. Yaut Pillow was said to be the only artifact retained when an ancient Winter Stadium Them team accidentally stumbled into yaut on a cross-dimensional journey. The records of that team after the incident were confusing and contradictory. One thing was sure though—none of them survived the experience with any semblance of sanity. A new Winter Stadium Them team was promptly assembled, and Yaut Pillow was stashed deep in this supposedly impenetrable vault.

The reason Snoppy instantly thought of Yaut Pillow in regards to the Soot Mary situation was due to the last entry in the personal log of The Stingy Girl, one of the unfortunate team members in the yaut incident. She wrote:

“Yautmatter of its content, upon the contact of topaz, will allow for one (1) self-aware thing to be born in the flesh. Yautgrammer in its tavyhood, the notions of amazing drash,…”

The Stingy Girl’s treatise quickly degenerated into gibberish after that. But the idea always stayed with Snoppy. He had even commissioned a pure topaz crossbow bolt, which he now loaded into his crossbow.

He leveled the weapon and aimed it at the black pillow. He glanced around at the teddy bear, mushroom, and newspaper, as if they would do something to protect their fellow treasure. The teddy bear looked an awful lot like it was staring at him, but...

No, everything was okay. He aimed and shot. The topaz bolt hit the pillow with a ‘thunk’—not the sound he would have expected of a pillow. Then he saw something move within the pillow.

He backed off, putting his hand on the edge where the vault door had been. He considered loading another bolt into the crossbow, but figured he was better off focusing all his attention on the thing inside the pillow.

The next instant, the pillow rolled over and was still. But

something was sticking out of the black pillow—almost totally obscured by the base of the cage.

Cautiously, Snopy edged closer. Then he saw what it was.

It was a paw. And from the paw, he knew, from his wilderness experience, what animal it belonged to.

A red fox.



# THIRTY-FIVE

Prince Ferrajalt and Treyess Arcomany walked down a deserted street, their footsteps echoing strangely.

“Do you think we’ll ever get out of this, Prince?”

He looked over at Treyess.

“I don’t know. I hope so. I just—I’m just fed up with all this supernatural crap, y’know? My home life wasn’t perfect, and I had a lot of pressures being royalty and all—but I never had to deal with reality collapses, and weird cat ladies, and giant hypermonsters or whatever the hell that guy was—you’re lucky you didn’t see him. And that—that jerk, that girl who was a time traveller, and that guy who was her from the past—you didn’t meet them either. But she came back in time to like—I don’t know—like to have sex with herself or something.”

“Sounds like you had an eventful day,” Treyess said.

“Yeah, and then some. But I don’t like it. I want normalcy. I want a world where things are the same every day, and people who you don’t have to worry what kind of powers they have.”

“I know what you mean.”

They continued walking in silence.

Soon, Treyess spoke up.

“So where is this place? I thought you said it wasn’t far?”

“It’s not that much farther. I thought we would have been there by now. I remembered it being much closer—otherwise I wouldn’t have had Vike drop us off back there.”

“Well, I suppose that to an adventurer like me, this should all be pretty thrilling.”

“Is it?” Ferrajalt asked.

“I don’t know. I’m used to a different sort of adventure.

Where you face the unknown, but the perils that assail you are at least understandable. But here—there are so many unanswered questions. I mean, what does it mean that ‘reality collapsed’? We’re still here, so it obviously didn’t totally fall apart. And that little cat lady—I wish someone would tell me the story with her.”

“Haha. Yeah. I know. It’s just like, everyone wants to be cool or something and not ask all these burning questions. I have no idea. I mean, she said this whole business,” Ferrajalt said, waving his hand in an arc, “just sort of ‘shook her out of the pepper shaker’ or something. But what does that mean? And then, she seemed to be familiar with the Hypergod and his kind, and the fact that she could send a kemig signal with just her mind—I mean, what the hell is going on?”

“Yeah.”

They continued on, passing a building with a statue above its entrance. The sculpture portrayed a woman in the act of getting dressed, half naked. Treys stopped.

“Now look at that,” she said, pointing toward the statue. “That’s not some statue which collapsed or fell apart—it’s a whole new statue, and look at it—look at the detail—it’s exactly what a finely manufactured statue should look like—but the subject matter! No—I see some intelligence behind it all.”

“Maybe that was what someone was doing when the crash happened, and reality got her and the statue mixed up, like getting its wires crossed?”

“Hmm! Well I don’t know. It’s just that, I feel like there’s a lot more going on than we’re being told. I just have a feeling that little Injure is holding something from us.”

“I don’t know,” Ferrajalt said. “Maybe. From what I understand, though, he said that reality is like a system, where certain events trigger other events, and the whole thing is just an ongoing chain reaction—with checks and balances keeping it on the right path. But here—it’s just like things have ground to a halt. Nothing to prevent a statue like that from just existing over there. Nothing to prevent giant police cars from existing.”

“Yeah—speaking of them, I hope we get there soon. I feel naked out here in the open like this.”

Ferrajalt glanced at Treys.

“No, I think we should get there soon. See that bridge between those two buildings up there? I know I saw that right

after I saw the yard.”

“Good.”

“So maybe,” Ferrajalt said, “if we can get one of those things started, and if a road to the river still exists, and if we don’t fall through the ice, and if the river still exists, and if Doscovor still exists, and if—”

“—that’s a lot of ‘ifs’, kid,” Treyess responded. “Yeah—and what made you think the river is frozen all the way through, anyway?”

“Well—I know it doesn’t seem all that cold, but there’s this stream sort of thing—a waterway or something, you know, that runs by our offices, and I looked down at it and saw it was frozen, and I even threw a motorcycle at it, and it didn’t even scratch the surface. So I figured the river was the same way.”

“When did you do this? You actually picked up a motorcycle and—”

“—no, no. It was there, and I just rolled it over the edge. Didn’t want to waste my superstrength hang. But I tellya—it was like it hit solid rock. It’s gotta be something with this reality collapse, with like time stopping or being suspended, with water that doesn’t move at all—totally static.”

“Huh. Well, for our sakes, I hope so.”

“I don’t know,” Ferrajalt said. “Those police cars looked pretty tough—as if they could handle any situation, maybe even water, y’know, amphibious. To tell you the truth, part of the reason I wanted to do this boat thing was so I could get to one of those giant police cars and drive it.”

“Well, let’s just hope they’re more than decoration.”

“Yeah. Hey! Look up there—see that fence—they’re right behind that! You should be able to see them in a second!”

“Where?” Treyess asked. “Oh yeah! Up there? That wasn’t so long—sorry for bitching about it.”

“Hey, no problem—let’s just get up there.”

The two jogged up to the fence surrounding the yard, and indeed, there were hundreds of giant police cars inside. Bigger than tanks, but similarly built, these vehicles had four huge wheels, a ladder leading up to the cockpit, enormous police lights on top, and a variety of other cool features.

“See? Aren’t they awesome?” Ferrajalt said.

“Well Prince, you know, I have to agree. But how do we get in?”

There was no visible opening in the fence, and it was 20 or

30 feet high.

"I guess I'll just have to use a little superstrength."

"Does that even still work?"

"Well Treyess, there's only one way to find out. Super!"

Ferrajalt held his hands up and breathed heavily.

"You okay, kid?"

"Yeah—it's working, I think. Just slower than usual. Stand back, eh?"

Treyess stepped away, and Ferrajalt swept his arm in front of him, wrecking a portion of the fence with ease. He ripped a hole through the wrecked fence, and then stepped back.

"That should do it," he said.

"For us—but what about the cars?"

"Hmm—think I should destroy that much fence? Or just use one of the cars to do it?"

"Well, I guess we can use one of the cars—or find an exit somewhere."

"Okay," Ferrajalt said as he climbed through the hole.

Treyess followed as Ferrajalt stood surveying the wonderful vista of vehicles.

"What do they say on the side?" Treyess asked.

"I don't know—I think it's just the Derolbam Police Force regular emblem. But let's find out!"

Ferrajalt strode up to the nearest behemoth vehicle.

"Yup," he said. "Just like a regular police car, only..."

"...bigger," Treyess said with a grin.

"Yeah. Well, c'mon," Ferrajalt said, grabbing onto the ladder on the side of the vehicle. "We might as well see if this trip was worth it.

"Coming," Treyess said, as Ferrajalt climbed the ladder.

At the top, the Prince stepped onto a platform which circled the vehicle two-thirds of the way up. He walked forward a little, and found a door leading into the cockpit area. He tried it, and found it unlocked.

"Come on Treyess! It's open!"

"Coming, coming! Keep your shirt on!" she said in a friendly manner, smiling.

Stepping down into the cockpit, Ferrajalt was hit with that "new car" smell. And indeed—everything about the vehicle seemed to be brand new. Treyess appeared at the doorway.

"This is convenient," she said, jumping in.

"Okay—now to find the controls," Ferrajalt said, looking around, when his eyes hit what was unmistakably the driver's



seat. It was a huge, comfy looking seat surrounded with all sorts of controls.

He looked over at Treyess.

“Be my guest!” she said, motioning toward the seat.

Ferrajalt walked over with a smile on his face and sat down. He scanned over the controls and sighed.

“Now if I could only find the keys...”

“Ahem,” said Treyess, as she pointed above Ferrajalt’s head, where a set of keys was dangling on a hook.

Ferrajalt looked up and grabbed the keys.

“Thanks,” he said with an embarrassed smile. “Now—I guess this is the main ignition. Um... I guess the big key is the one. Here goes!”

Treyess started to say “Wait!” but she stopped herself. Why would the thing be rigged to blow up? Just let the kid have his fun.

Ferrajalt turned the key, and suddenly an array of fluorescent lights flickered and powered up, and the sound of multiple fans and motors came as well.

Ferrajalt stopped and held his hands over the controls.

“Okay—I guess that was main electrical.”

“You sure you know how to drive this thing?” Treyess asked, raising an eyebrow.

The Prince turned toward her.

“Let me tell you—my parents made me drive a thing a heck of a lot bigger than this, and I managed. It was different, but I’m sure a lot of the same control mechanisms apply. And I like this thing much better.”

He turned back to the controls. Treyess spied a door in the back of the cockpit.

“I’m going to take a look back there, okay?”

“Yeah, fine. Good. We gotta see what this thing has going for it.”

Treyess opened the door and marveled at the scene before her. Lit with fluorescent lights, she gazed in wonder at the bay—a space which took up the top half of the vehicle.

Ahead of her, a short walkway led to a central shaft. Looking up, she saw the underside of a diminutive biplane, covered with the same black-and-white markings as the police car itself. It was just above where the shaft ended. She walked forward and looked down the space surrounding the shaft, and she saw a tiny submarine at the very bottom, decked out in similar markings. Halfway down the shaft, she saw a land-

ing which led to a number of doors.

Continuing on past the shaft, Treyess saw a rear viewport with a large gun mounted above it. There were two more guns facing front, she saw, and one on either side. Huh.

Then she looked down to her left and saw a police motorcycle in a little dock. She moved to the right of the walkway, and looked down to see a nice little police speedboat. Whoever made this thing seemed to have all the bases covered.

She turned around and climbed down the ladder to a circular landing, and saw that there were five doors—one toward the back, two toward the sides, and two toward the front. All were made of wood, ornately carved and wonderfully finished. She tried the one facing the back and found it unlocked.

But before she opened the door, she gazed at an array of information panels and a large opening in the shaft at this level. There were what appeared to be indicators, arranged in a rough “periodic chart of the elements”, appearing at first glance to show varying amounts of different elements. She raised her eyebrows, figuring the thing deserved more investigation in the future. Then she turned back toward the door.

As she opened it, a battery of lovely, soft lights came on in the room she now stood at the threshold of. And she took a sharp intake of air in surprise—it was a magnificent master bedroom sort of space. There was a lush black-and-white patterned carpet, a bar stocked with a variety of bottles, an enormous bed, a couch facing an electronic entertainment center, and an open door through which she could see a grandly-adorned bathroom. And everything was in the color scheme of the black-and-white police car, with the gold and multicolored police emblem.

A lit panel near the bed attracted her attention, and she walked over to it, noting how soft and comfortable the carpeting was. As she approached the panel, she saw it was comprised of about 20 or 30 little backlit photographs of a variety of locations—from forests to cities to deserts to tropical paradises.

Smiling, Treyess sat on the bed and reached out and touched the rain forest image, and all of a sudden the lights dimmed, and sounds of birds, insects, and other creatures filled the room. A few moments later, the walls and ceiling faded into view with images of trees and plants, and a pleasing, pungent smell came to her.

“How wonderful!” Treyess said under her breath, as the

illusion of being in a rain forest began to swim in her mind.

After about a minute, a rumbling sound and vibration broke Treyess out of her relaxation, and she jumped up off the bed. Ferrajalt must have gotten the thing started.

Reluctantly, she started forward, but looked back at the control panel, wondering how to turn it off. But then she figured it wouldn't do any harm to leave it on, so she turned back and left the room.

As she climbed up the ladder, she saw Ferrajalt poking his head into the bay.

"Hey Treyess! I got the thing started—whoah!"

"I know, pretty cool, eh?" she said, stepping onto the main walkway from the ladder.

"Holy crap!" Ferrajalt said, looking up at the plane. "Look at that! A plane! I wonder if it can really fly?"

"There's also a submarine, a speedboat, and a motorcycle. And just wait till you see what I found downstairs."

"This is so cool," Ferrajalt said, staring wildly in wonder. "I can't believe it's so cool."

"I know," Treyess said as she approached Ferrajalt. "So at least something good has come of all this world collapse crap."

"Yeah," the Prince said distantly, as he withdrew back into the cockpit to allow Treyess to pass through the doorway.

"So you got it started?" Treyess asked.

"I sure did!" Ferrajalt responded. "And you know what—I think from what I've seen that this thing is powered by direct matter-to-energy conversion!"

"Yeah, I saw something down there which would point to that conclusion also. Some sort of atomic device."

"Awesome!" Ferrajalt said, easing back into the driver's seat. Treyess took one of the passenger seats beside him.

"Think we should call the others and tell them we got this far?" Treyess asked, crossing her arms and resting them on the dashboard in front of her.

"I guess so," Ferrajalt said, taking the gun out of its holster on his belt, and turning it over to reveal the screen at the base of its handle.

He entered a code on some buttons and after a few moments, the screen lit up with Injure Bodoni's face.

"Hello? Ferrajalt?" Bodoni inquired.

"Yes, it's me. We successfully entered and started one of the giant police cars. It's a really amazing thing," Ferrajalt said.

“Good. So you’re now off to the river?” Bodoni asked, and then Ledrant Hate came into view behind him.

“Yeah,” Ferrajalt said. “We’re gonna try and get this thing moving and get down to the river.”

“You’ve examined the vehicle?” Hate asked.

“Well, Treyess saw more of it than I did. Here,” Ferrajalt said as he passed the gun to Treyess.

“I have to tell you Ledrant, this is one of the most incredible things I’ve ever seen. There’s a whole fleet of these things here and—I don’t even know where to begin. There’s all these little vehicles inside, and this room! There’s a luxury suite down there with all sorts of amenities. I haven’t even gone through the whole thing yet.”

“Armaments?” Hate asked.

“Well,” she said, “there are five pretty formidable-looking mounted guns all around the thing. And who knows what else might be hidden about. Also, we think it’s powered with a direct matter-to-energy reactor.”

Hate frowned.

“Sounds too good to be true,” he said. “Just get it moving and on the road and call me back, okay? That’s the big hurdle. Don’t want to waste your kemig battery.”

“Okay,” Treyess said, and the screen went blank.

“Well Treyess,” Ferrajalt said, “here goes. I guess we may as well get going. Wish me luck.”

Treyess leaned over and gave Ferrajalt a kiss on the cheek.

“Good luck, Prince.”

Ferrajalt hit the throttle and they began moving forward.

“Alright! It works!” Prince Ferrajalt exclaimed as the giant police car smoothly started to move forward.

Beside him, Treyess Arcomany grabbed the dashboard for support, but let go when she saw how smooth the ride was.

“Now we have to find a way out of this lot,” she said.

“I know,” Ferrajalt responded, and just then he noticed a little screen off to his left, which had lit up with a variety of patterns and symbols. “We’ll just have to circle the entire perimeter and look for an opening.

They moved out of their spot, and then Ferrajalt carefully eased the massive vehicle to the right. It responded splendidly. He then set forth between the fence and the rows and rows of giant police cars—all identical to the one they were in.

“There sure are a lot of them,” Treyess said, looking over.

“Yeah—amazing how such a useful thing was created in this

supposedly random reality crash.”

“I’m sure it’s not random. It can’t be.”

Then Ferrajalt glanced at the screen again and he could see it showed a red 3-D vector representation of his vehicle driving along the fence—and another image showed an overall view of the yard, showing that there were no breaks in the fence at all—except a little spot that was lit up—the place he had personally ripped open.

“You know,” Ferrajalt said, “I think we have some kind of guidance system here. The only problem is, it’s showing that there aren’t any exits out of here—no, wait...”

The screen vectors changed from red to an aquamarine sort of color, and he saw an image of the giant police car firing its cannon at the fence, cutting a neat hole in it, and driving through. Next to it was a picture of an aquamarine, crescent-shaped button—a button that he saw on the console in front of him.

“What is it?” Treyess asked.

“It looks like it’s giving me the best option. Guess all I have to do is press that button—see?”

“Go for it.”

So Ferrajalt pressed the button, and the giant police car eased into autopilot, moving forward a little more, then making a sharp right turn, then backing up a little, facing the fence. Before even a second had passed, a barrage of noisy, bright projectiles or beams spat out from above them and annihilated a whole section of fence. Then the screen turned red again and all was quiet as smoke and mist from the destroyed fence began to drift away.

Ferrajalt laughed.

“Pretty cool, eh?” he said. “I like this giant police car—or whatever it’s called. There’s no way I’m leaving this place without one—no way!”

Treyess looked up at a plaque she had seen before, above the door which led into the back of the vehicle. It was a logo which read simply “WARHOME”. Yes—that made some kind of sense to her.

“From what I see up there,” she said, nodding toward the plaque, “this is a Warhome. Good name.”

“Yeah?” the Prince said, turning and looking. “That sounds good.”

“You haven’t seen the downstairs yet. Once you do you’ll see why it could be considered a home, no problem.”

“Yeah—you know what? I want to go back there. Um—let me just drive it out to the road, then we can go back and see exactly what’s going on, eh?”

“Sounds good to me,” Treyess said.

So he drove the Warhome out into the street and turned it toward the river. There was very little room to spare on the two-lane road.

Then he looked around for some sort of safety brake, but figured the thing must be smart enough not to start rolling down the hill. So he got up and followed Treyess into the back of the Warhome.

The first thing Ferrajalt did was climb up the shaft to inspect the tiny biplane.

“Man, I’d really like to see if this thing flies.”

“I’m sure it does, Prince. Otherwise, why would it be there?”

Ferrajalt looked all the way down to the other end of the shaft, where the little submarine was.

“Looks like they thought of everything,” he said. “Land, air, water, and underwater. Guess this thing’s a boat too—amphibious, like I guessed.”

“Probably. Now come on down from there!” Treyess said. “You just have to see the main bedroom!”

“Okay! Coming, coming.”

He climbed down and followed her into the large room. The rain forest program was still playing.

“Whoah!” Ferrajalt said. “What the heck is this?”

“It’s just one of many environment programs this place has,” Treyess said, jumping onto the bed and looking over the control panel with all the backlit photos. “Here—this should show you the room without any special effects.”

She pressed a button depicting an image of the room itself, and the rain forest effects gently faded away.

“Whoah,” the Prince said.

“Isn’t it wonderful? The ultimate motor home,” Treyess said, smiling and bouncing on the bed. Ferrajalt glanced at her, and walked over beside her, eyeing the control panel.

“I see,” he said. “Let’s try another one—how about an amusement park?”

He touched the image of an amusement park, and the program slowly kicked in. Soon, images and smells of a sunny day in an amusement park surrounded them, complete with images of two roller coasters and a giant Ferris wheel in the

distance. The smell of cotton candy made Ferrajalt crave it.

"This is truly unbelievable," Ferrajalt said, sitting next to Treyess on the bed, but making sure not to get too close. There was a lot of sexual tension going on. "I wish we could get some of that cotton candy. I'm starved."

Treyess turned to look at the Prince.

"I'm sure there's a kitchen in here somewhere—there has to be."

Ferrajalt got up.

"You didn't check the other rooms yet?"

"Nope. This one kind of took the wind out of my sails. I could just lounge around in here forever!" she said, lying back on the bed, spreading out her arms.

Ferrajalt regarded her for a moment, then turned toward the door.

"I'm going to check those other rooms," he said.

"Okay."

Ferrajalt walked out of the room and regarded the mechanism facing him on the shaft. Some sort of grated opening, angled upward, and a whole mess of little indicators—arranged like a "periodic table of the elements". Each little needle showed a varying amount of whatever it was measuring.

And while Ferrajalt had surmised that the Warhome operated on direct matter-to-energy power, he had no idea why so many different elements should be needed.

He made a mental note to look into it further and opened the door to his left. Inside he found another bathroom, complete with shower, sink, toilet, and a few other devices he could only guess at the use of.

Then he crossed to the righthand side and found another living quarters—this one considerably smaller and plainer than the main one. He entered and looked about, and Treyess came in behind him.

"Guest bedroom?" she wondered.

"Looks like it," Ferrajalt said.

They looked around in admiring wonder and then went for the remaining two doors, each facing front. Treyess went to the one on the left, and Ferrajalt the one on the right. They smiled at each other.

"Okay," Treyess said. "On the count of three."

Ferrajalt laughed, and they opened their respective doors. Ferrajalt found the kitchen he had been looking for—and a

quick inspection found it stocked to the gills with food, appliances, and other goodies.

Treyess stepped into a strange room—part library and part armory. A computer terminal sat in one corner. There were all manner of weapons here—from swords and cat-o-nine-tails to some very nasty looking rifles, rocket launchers, grenades, pistols, and the like. She scanned over the books and saw that they were all Timber Serious Earth works—the classics, she supposed.

Ferrajalt came into the room behind her.

“Found the kitchen,” he said.

“And look what I found.”

“Wow! Think there’s enough weapons in here for us?”

“Oh Ferrajalt—just think—there are hundreds of these in that yard over there. What a magnificent find!”

“Yeah—but will they still be there when and if we get reality back on track?”

“Well I’m with you—if restoring reality means leaving our Warhome behind, forget it. I’d rather travel around this wasteland inside here than give it up.”

“I agree,” Ferrajalt said. “It’s something I’ve always wanted.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah—a private home,” the Prince said.



# THIRTY-SIX

Pacer put the binder down just as Nurship came back into the office.

“So, what did you think?” Nurship asked as he picked up one of his americano coffees.

“Um, was this Cup’s Club movie like actually made?” Pacer said.

“Absolutely,” Nurship said, as he sat and removed the plastic lid from the cup. “It was admittedly low-budget—it had a stylistic edge borne of necessity—but I’m pretty happy with the result. It was that kind of raw, primitive cinema that can be most enjoyable if one sets aside Hollywood expectations.”

“Huh. I’d like to see it sometime. The characters sound pretty cool—did you ever make any action figures?”

“I wish. But no, it never reached that level.”

“These days, man, they make action figures for everything. It’s not like the eighties. You should really look into it.”

“Well Pacer, perhaps that is something that could come of my involvement with your project.”

“Yeah, maybe. Yeah. Like, we need characters or something, like Mickey Mouse or Magilla Gorilla like other theme parks have. Maybe we could have people in Cup’s Club costumes at Darkider and stuff.”

“Wouldn’t that violate the ‘pure location’ philosophy I read in your proposal for The Lemon Darkider?”

“I don’t know. I mean, we gotta be flexible. Carne can be like that. You know, uh, doctrinaire. But I figure we got to get people into it. And, uh, merchandise. That will make a lot of money, too.”

“Well, I’m all for exploring this association. I’m not naive. I know this project of yours will generate huge publicity,

whether or not it's ultimately successful. I have a lot to say, cinematically, but I know I'm not going have the opportunity to make many movies unless I get some buzz going. Hopefully this whole drama in my life—first getting funded by Jay Pime, then getting dropped, then being saved by you Darkider guys—it's a great story. And it should help with the buzz.”

“Cool.”

“In fact, I have some story treatments I've been working on. Maybe you'd like to take a look at them. I kind of thought of them as 'mini-movies'—maybe string some of them together to make one big movie. But maybe with your theme park, we could do something new, like build a whole theater around the movies or something.”

“Yeah!” Pacer said. “Like the Muppet movie in Disney-MGM, or 'Honey I Shrunk the Audience!'”

“I'll take your word for it. I haven't been to a Disney park since I was a kid in California.”

“Yeah.”

“So anyway, check out these two story treatments—they're here, in the back of the binder..”

\* \* \*

\*\*\*YEARS OF BEATHCAT\*\*\*

Story Treatment by Nurship

I see them there, by that castle wall. A woman, Natthalie Hove Mound, and a big cat, Beathcat. Pronounce it like beth cat. And natalie huv mound.

Natthalie is blond. She looks happy but tired.

And Beathcat, he's deep blue. And he's got some white markings here and there, stripes and spirals and spots.

They spent many years together at castle. It may not be what you expect. You wanna call them superheroes, go right ahead. That's only a small part of it, though.

Natthalie had this great childhood. Her world was resplendent, she was right there in the biggest renaissance ever. Wow, it might have been the best childhood anywhere, any-

time, in the whole universe.

But within all the wonderful celebrating, trouble was brewing. Big trouble. Natthalie was like sixteen, and she was beautiful and super popular. Some dissonance there, between the innocence of the times, and all the sexual stuff being directed at her, though in a subtle way.

I guess it was that her people had become too dependent on a certain energy source, and when it fizzled out, they were toally screwed. Totally. It was like, almost overnight, everything fell apart.

Natthalie was horrified, there she was, just at the apex of her flowering, and the rug was pulled out from under her. But she thought she'd be okay, with her rich family, that somehow she was above the disaster, that she'd be able to get by without too much inconvenience.

But the ruin was too total. Her lifestyle fell by many quantum leaps. She was wrecked. We're talking fantastic opulence one day, and a few months later, utter despair, barely surviving.

Okay, this energy source, which had been in use for nearly a century, scared off Beathcat and his kind. Yeah, he's that old. Hundreds of years old. His kind is effectively immortal.

"You must never crack sinkhole mathnota," Natt always heard smart people say. Sinkhole mathnota, "math" for short, was the energy source. Looking like light purple abstract sculpture, the mathnota were bulbous and twisty, hard but light. They were discovered in a sinkhole, in some hills, and the oldest people Natt knew as a kid were kids themselves when the mathnota were found.

The mathnota were strong, but they were not invulnerable, and one was damaged once, early after their discovery, and the result were very strange. Warpings of reality, and dis-

appearances. The immediate area of the disaster was still affected at the time of Natt's childhood, though not nearly as strongly as it was initially.

The reality warp was such that mathematics were different in the affected area. Square roots were much lower than they should have been, some subtractions acted like addition, but only with certain numbers. And those who were near the epicenter of the disaster, but not near enough to vanish, were changed. Their bodies and minds were altered drastically. But a day after the event, the effect had subsided enormously, and presence in the area only resulted in temporary "mathness", a mild kind of madness. And as the years passed, the effect diminished, along with the extent of the math differences, but it never went away totally.

Natt knew about the cats, great beasts, very rare. But everyone had their encounters, before the sinkhole mathnota were discovered. After that day, not even a single encounter with a cat was reported.

Natt read all she could about the cats, and interrogated the elderly for personal accounts of encounters with cats, which were sketchy and vague but still stoked the fires of interest in the cats within her. She wanted to meet a cat.

Two month's after Natt's sixteenth birthday, it was the day that Natt was expecting to lose her virginity. She'd been intimate with her boyfriend Jalder, but he was reluctant to go all the way. That night, however, he had promised her they would do it. At noon, she was musing on the evening, when there came a quietness. By early evening, the news was all over the place—the sinkhole mathnota had all stopped working. They had been tapped by scientists to produce energy, but now the seemingly endless streams of energy were no more.

Scholars had predicted a slow decay in the mathnota, as in the slow waning of the aftermath of the damaged mathnota. But this had never happened; the mathnota pumped out energy relentlessly. Until that day.

In the confusion and despair, there was no way the planned tryst was going to occur. And that night she spent with her family, in candlelight, the whole big family gathered around, making plans, chucking around theories, generally fretting.

Three months later, Natt was walking the hills. She still had her virginity, and was still numb at the loss of her high lifestyle. It was a drizzly day, and it was nearing dusk, and she knew she had to head for home soon, but she kept on walking. Soon, she came upon a sinkhole—she had to assume it was a sinkhole—with a mathnota partially revealed, sticking out of the mud.

An irrational rage came over Natt. The mathnota represented to her the force that took her life away from her. She grabbed a big rock, and threw it at the mathnota. The rock struck a bulbous part of the purple thing, and in a reddish flash, and a sound like slow thunder, the world around her changed.

She was transported somehow to an abandoned castle. She explored, and several hours later she encountered Beathcat. They were both trapped there, and they spent eight years there, and the tale of their relationship is a wonderful tale.

That eighth year, Natt and Beathcat found their way out. It wasn't that they were trapped on the castle grounds—but the entire world they were on, as far as she or Beathcat knew, was not inhabited by any other intelligent creatures. The castle was an anomaly, and it had abundant stores of food and supplies.

Beathcat can be there since the sinkhole

mathnotas were first discovered. He was alone for almost 75 years, but he said he slept most of that time and didn't mind the solitude at all, that being the preferred lifestyle of his kind. But for a few years before the arrival of Natt, he said he starting itching a little for some company.

Anyway, they found a way out of their private world, and they took it. A room in the castle went all weird was all. It had a street at night in it. Once on that street, they were in another world. And there were people. And it was raining.

"This is new, Mound," Beathcat said. He always called Natt "Mound", her last name.

"It is, Cat. It's a breath of fresh nighttime."

Natt was wearing a pink dress, which she had found in the castle. Among the supplies there was a great amount of clothing. And while there was water in the castle, from a spring, washing clothes was a chore, and Natt preferred to pile up laundry that would never be done in a castle chamber and use up the supply of fresh clothes, which even at the time of their leaving the castle wasn't anywhere near being exhausted.

There were streetlights and cars, and storefronts with glass windows and neon signs. These sights were new to Natt and Beathcat. And they liked the sights.

A few drunk teenagers were approaching, and one of them, a boy, spotted Beathcat and pointed.

"No way!" a girl in the group shouted. "Circus is in town!"

Natt's heart leapt. She hadn't been in the presence of another human being for eight years, and the sight of these kids was a shock to her. She wanted to run to them and embrace them, but she didn't dare, both because of the potential danger and hurting Beathcat's feelings. The platonic love she

and Beathcat shared was passionate, and she had feared the time, if it ever came, when she might meet a man, a human man, and start a relationship. And she knew it would hurt Beathcat greatly. She even spoke to Beathcat about it on occasion, in a jesting way, but the security of their castaway state seemed so certain. But now, they were no longer stranded together.

\* \* \*

\*\*\*THE SOLVENT IJSANE\*\*\*  
Story Treatment by Nurship

The top of a skyscraper.  
People live and work there.  
There are a number of Screws, of great power.

When a very powerful microphone is placed by the Screws, sounds can be heard.

The Screws respond to various colors of light.

Violet/indigo light produces a harmonious sound, other frequencies produce a discordant sound, especially red/orange.

Each Screw is maintained by a single person.

The Solvent Ijsane is a liquid which is the only means to destroy the Screws.

The only supply of Solvent Ijsane is also in the place, and the place is called The Solvent Ijsane.

The exact nature of the Ijsane Screws is not known.

Each of the Ijsane Agents is autonomous... each maintains his or her own Screw.

This arrangement is meant to prevent any one Agent from gaining the ultimate power of the Ijsane Screws.

By analyzing the sound from the Screws, the Agents can determine whether or not all the Screws are at The Solvent Ijsane.

The Agents seek to obtain all of the Screws. Once they have all the Screws, with the means to destroy them, the Agents will have a great power—a power, defining the nature of which is another of their goals.

Combining two or more of the Screws, touching them to one another, produces more complex sounds.

Every individual Screw is miked 24 hours a day, and recordings of the sounds they produce are stored in a central computer.

The Screws came into existence after the death of Fox.

The Agents know that the Screws are related to the death of Fox.

Fox was the Primal Entity whose purpose was to end the universe.

With Fox dead, the universe no longer had a definite end.

The Screws therefore relate to the end of the universe, but the Agents are not sure how.

There were four Original Ijsane Agents. Their quest took 150 years, and in that time they obtained five Screws, plus the Solvent.

At 150 years in the future, the Agents transmitted information to the present, to themselves, as to the whereabouts of the five Screws and the Solvent, referring in the transmission that they, the agents, were about to meet their demise.

At the present, a few weeks after the death of Fox, the transmission was received by an individual who, along with the original four associates, founded The Solvent Ijsane on the upper floors of a skyscraper.

They then located the five Screws and the Solvent.

Each New Ijsane Agent has a single Screw in his or her quarters.

The Solvent is stored in a secure location in The Solvent Ijsane.

The New Ijsane Agents seek to find the rest



of the Screws, but they have no way of knowing how many more there are—only that they will know when they have all the Screws.

And they hope to avoid the doom that befell the original them.

\* \* \*

“What do you think?” Nurship asked.

“Um,” Pacer responded, “um, they’re pretty good I guess. I like the Cup’s Club the best, but I think the thing with the girl and the tiger kinda-thing could be pretty cool.”

“I initially wanted to make the whole thing the story of their life together at the castle, but I thought that’d be too... I don’t know... it would depend on their relationship representing aspects of our lives and everything, and I just thought it would be better to have their relationship at the castle as just a small part of the movie, and then have them go on an adventure. It could also work as a TV series, I think.”

“Like Xena!”

“Yeah, it might have some similar themes.”

The two were silent for a few moments. Nurship sipped his americano, and Pacer drank some Yoo-hoo.

“Um,” Pacer finally said, “I kinda, like, don’t get this whole screw thing...”

“Well, that idea is a little more sketchy and challenging. I still have to come up with the characters for it, but they’d definitely be of the superhero-slash-comic-book kind of milieu.”

“Yeah.”

“So anyway,” Nurship said. “I don’t know if you want to go over this now, but I really have to start to work with you on the specific mechanisms by which I Rule Films will be funded by your company.”

“Yeah, my cousin Clawe, he’s our lawyer. Him and Carne are working on all the financial shit right now. You’d probably be better off talking to Clawe at this point.”

“But, ah, you are... satisfied... that funding ‘Feriend’ will be...”

“Yeah, I’m cool with it. I mean, if you could give me a script to read, it’d be cool. But I think everything is cool.”

“And as far as my involvement with your main project goes—I’ll be tied up in post-production for at least two months, maybe longer. But after that, we should definitely

talk.”

“Yeah.”

It was silent for a few moments, again. Pacer looked distracted.

“Uh, Pacer, are you okay? Is there something else you wanted to go over?”

“Nah. It’s just this whole planning thing. Like, knowing what I’m gonna be doing at, like, a given time. Y’know, like in the future? It’s weird. I mean, I guess I’m like the head of this major corporation now or whatever, and it’s, y’know, like a new thing for me. I don’t know man. I’ll get used to it.”

“Well, if you ever get too freaked out by things, you can come and hang out here. Things are always pretty fucked-up and wild around here,” Nurship said.

“Yeah man, cool,” Pacer said.

# THIRTY-SEVEN

“The river,” Prince Ferrajalt said, looking at the vector display to his right, sitting in the driver’s seat of the Warhome.

“Where?” Treyess Arcomany asked.

“Coming right up—I guess this baby is constantly scanning the surrounding area. It even shows the river being frozen, even though it’s not cold enough. See, some sort of anomaly reading by the river...”

“Huh.”

The enormous vehicle rounded a corner and crashed over a small fence, out onto a dock.

“Prince...” Treyess said, as they sped toward the end of the dock.

Ferrajalt looked over at Treyess for a moment.

“No problem,” he said, smiling.

Treyess raised her eyebrows and wore a frown of puzzlement, nodding and grabbing the arms of her seat.

In a moment, the Warhome flew off the edge of the dock and then slammed onto the frozen river an instant later. Ferrajalt gently braked, and the huge thing quickly skidded to a halt.

The two surveyed the glassy, ultrasmooth surface of the frozen river, lit in the eerie glow of the giant streetlights that lined its banks.

“Now this is more like it,” Treyess said.

“Yeah...” Ferrajalt said. “But which way to the waterfall?”

“You think I know after all the twists and turns we had to take to get here? Doesn’t your little viewscreen tell you?”

Ferrajalt checked the vector display.

“No.”

“Huh. Well everything is so changed anyway, I don’t know

if—”

“—no wait—it’s coming up on the display. See? It’s so cool! A 3-D map of the river!”

“There ya go.”

“So it’s down, uh, that way,” Ferrajalt said, pointing.

Treyess looked over at Ferrajalt, and the Prince noted the beauty of her eyes.

After a pause, Treyess said “So now we get to see if this office complex thing is still there.”

“Yeah,” Ferrajalt said, turning back to the river, and easing forward on the controls.

The Warhome’s wheels spun a little, but then some sort of traction control kicked in, and they were cruising along at a fair pace.

Treyess looked around, at the surreal landscape all around them—giant streetlights, river like a mirror, creepy shapes on either bank, and the feeling of being nowhere.

“Now remember, there is a waterfall coming up sometime,” she said. “We don’t want to go over it.”

“I know,” Ferrajalt said. “I don’t think we’re near it yet, and I’m sure the Warhome will detect it and start blinking and beeping all over the place.”

“I sure hope so,” Treyess said, not at all sure they should depend on the new Warhome in this situation, but not wanting to insult the Prince’s handling of the matter.

They drove on in silence for a while, then Ferrajalt spoke.

“So what do you think is really going to happen to us? I used to have a good life. I mean, I was a Prince—I am a Prince. Back on my Earth. I mean, I thought it was all bullshit, I had all these ideas, like why should we be so much better than commoners? All that. But right now, I don’t know. I kind of wish I was back there.”

“Well to me, this is pure adventure—and that’s what I live for. Back on my Earth I was quite well-known, also. Our technology hasn’t developed quite as smoothly as on all you guys’ Earths. I mean, the internal combustion engine, flight, all that we just recently got going. And computers, forget it—they might have the first building-sized prototype going in a few years. So there are a lot of places on my Earth where it’s very difficult, maybe even impossible, to get to. And adventure was popular. I was popular. And there’s some weird stuff on my Earth, weird hidden places.”

“But what’s this?” Ferrajalt asked, waving his hand. “Look

around—this isn't anything! It's a nightmare. It has no relation to anything. It's like the universe ended and we just don't know it yet. Yeah—maybe all this is just a hallucination.”

Treyess studied Ferrajalt's face. He had potential. You could see somewhere in there ancestors who were great heroes, great warriors. But he needed to stop being such a wimp.

“Well you know,” Treyess said, “from what I read, this may have happened once before—in Sweptim. I guess this is what happened. They said that a whole bunch of Earths, maybe all of them, were somehow destroyed, and how they managed to salvage Red Alley Earth, but nothing else.”

“And maybe this time it'll be only Timber Serious Earth that gets saved. Then I could never go home.”

“Oh come on, Prince. Don't despair—this may not be the same sort of phenomenon at all—I was just saying. And remember—Fife created his Earth searching system and the whole Primate thing so that if something like this happened, there might be enough remarkable talents to find a solution. And remember—you are a Primate, and there is a reason for that. We're both Primates, the ones who got chosen over everyone else on our Earths.”

“I wish I knew why. There are a lot of other royal families of my planet—why me?”

“I'm sure we'll find out, someday.”

Ferrajalt nodded, but stopped nodding as they came to a big bend on the river. He carefully steered to the right, and it seemed that they'd start skidding and going out of control at any moment, but they didn't.

“Easy!” Treyess exclaimed.

“I know! I know!” Ferrajalt said, gripping the control unit and looking pale. “So how that hell is the boat supposed to make that goddamn corner?”

“We'll find some way.”

“I don't see how! You know how big that thing is? It's big!”

“Ferrajalt—get a hold of yourself! This isn't a totally random situation—just look at this vehicle of ours! There has to be a higher structure to it. I have a gut feeling that we can get the boat around the corner.”

“Well I hope so,” Ferrajalt said, and then another curve came up, this one to the left. “Oh great! Another one!”

Treyess sighed and shook her head.

Ferrajalt was more careful with this curve, but it was more pronounced than the previous one. And they were going

awfully fast.

“Ferrajalt—you say you don’t like adventure, but look how fast you’re driving down this frozen river toward a waterfall!”

“I know, I know! It’s hard to make this thing go slow.”

The two stopped talking as a huge hulking shape loomed ahead on the right riverbank.

“What the hell is that?” Ferrajalt asked.

“What? Yeah... Looks like a building maybe? A mountain? No...”

Then a sharp beeping started, and Ferrajalt looked down at the vector display—it showed the huge drop coming up—the waterfall. The Prince immediately hit the brakes.

“We’re almost there!” he said, and the Warhome lurched to a halt. Treyess looked at him.

“I don’t see it.”

“I know! But I don’t want to risk getting too close and not being able to stop.”

“Huh,” Treyess said, looking around. “So how are we going to see about that office complex and everything?”

Ferrajalt took a deep breath and let it out. His heart was racing.

“Um,” he said, “let me think.”

“Okay.”

“Okay. I think... we should... take the biplane.”

“What?” Treyess asked.

Ferrajalt looked at Treyess.

“That plane back there. We could fly it over the waterfall and get a close look at that office complex.”

“Do you know how to fly?”

“Well—I flew a glider a few times. Besides—considering how easy this thing was to drive, how hard could the plane be?”

“Let me think this through—it sounds good at first glance, but I don’t know...”

“The thing is,” Ferrajalt said, “I just don’t want to get this thing anywhere near the drop. We could walk it...”

“Oh no! I’m not standing on that slippery ice on the edge of a fatal fall.”

Ferrajalt stood up.

“So you wanna take the plane?” he said. “You can fly it if you want to. I know I hogged the controls here.”

“Oh—that’s no problem. But you know, that plane looks like the sort of planes we have back home—real primitive. But

there's no way it flies with the same mechanics. It's too small. But I will give it a shot," Treyess said, also getting up.

"Okay," Ferrajalt said, moving to the door. "I'm pretty sure it holds two people."

"Yeah?" Treyess said, following him.

They walked into the main chamber of the Warhome, and Ferrajalt let Treyess climb the ladder on the central shaft first.

"Okay, now to figure out how to get in here," Treyess said as Ferrajalt looked up at her.

"Need help?"

"No—I got it," she said, planting her right boot on a small foothold on the plane and lifting herself up and over the edge. "Yeah—I've got it."

"Is there room for me?"

"Um—wait a second," Treyess said as she sat down and settled herself in. "Well, it's a tight fit, but there's room."

Ferrajalt began climbing the ladder.

"Wait a second," Treyess said. "I need a key. Weren't there some other keys on that keyring you found?"

The Prince stopped.

"Oh yeah. I guess there must be one for each vehicle. I'll go get it."

"Cool."

Ferrajalt went back to his driver's seat and tried to figure out what to do—he didn't want to shut the Warhome off, but he couldn't see any easy way of getting the other keys off the ring. As well, there were seven keys in all—and he wasn't sure which one was the right one.

So he sat down in the seat and took a close look at the keys. And upon this closer examination, he saw little engraved pictures of the various vehicles—the Warhome, the biplane, the submarine, the motorcycle, the speedboat, a door, and one—one which just had a little circle on it. Also, he saw that each key had a little latch on it where you could disconnect it from the keyring. So he carefully flicked the mechanism, and released the biplane key. With it in hand, he rush back to the ladder and back to Treyess.

"Got it," Ferrajalt said, as he climbed up to the biplane docking area. He saw that Treyess was wearing some sort of police helmet.

"Great," Treyess said, taking the key from him. "I think I got this thing figured out."

Ferrajalt looked for where he could sit, and saw that it was

just one long seat inside the plane, and not much room to spare.

Treyess saw the Prince contemplating the seating arrangements.

“Hop in,” she said. “Pretty close quarters, but it’ll do.”

So Ferrajalt climbed in, and straddled the seat—with Treyess sitting between his knees.

“Here,” Treyess said, handing him a helmet. “And strap in.”

Ferrajalt put the helmet on and fastened a couple of safety belts over himself.

“Well. Here goes,” Treyess said, inserting the key and turning it. Instantly, the cockpit control panel lit up with a number of display panels, and the dome above them began to recede, revealing the black, starless sky above.

“So far so good,” Ferrajalt said.

“Okay. I think I have the hang of this. So if I hit—this!” Treyess said, and all of a sudden the plane began slowly moving upward.

Ferrajalt looked down to see what was lifting them up, but in a moment, they were high enough for it to be clear that the plane was hovering on its own power. After a few more moments, a chime sounded and a deep mechanical sound reverberated through the aircraft.

“Okay,” Treyess said. “Now we can point it in any direction—see?”

She moved the control stick, and they rotated, while remaining perfectly level. She went back and forth a few times, and then pointed it back straight ahead.

“And with this,” she said, easing forward the throttle, “we should be flying!”

And slowly, they started moving forward.

“Somehow, I don’t think that propeller is doing much of the work,” Ferrajalt said, commenting on the silently spinning propeller on the front of the plane.

“Just decoration, maybe.”

“Yeah.”

Treyess increased the throttle and they began to fly faster. Then she pulled back on the stick.

As they gained altitude and speed with great rapidity, Ferrajalt grabbed Treyess around the waist, reflexively. It felt good to be so close to her.

“Take it easy kid!” she said. “I know what I’m doing!”



And with a laugh, Treyess poured on the power and they soared skyward at a steep angle. Ferrajalt grabbed tighter—he wondered if that’s why Treyess was flying so crazy.

Treyess’s long blond hair was whipping in the Prince’s face, and he breathed in the clean smell of it. Then he exhaled and leaned into Treyess a little more. He was thinking, this is love—this is really love!

He thought, without her helmet, all he’d be seeing was hair. A universe of Treyess hair..

But his pleasant thoughts were interrupted by the mammoth structure they had spied from the Warhome—it was now directly beneath them and to the right.

“You wanna check that out?” Ferrajalt yelled against the wind, but then he realized that there was a communication system in the helmets.

“Ouch! You don’t have to yell! But yeah—let’s see what it is!”

Treyess steered the biplane into a spiral descent, and approached the huge structure.

“This thing is so fun to fly!” she said. “And, I mean, like you said, we’re not leaving this place without our Warhome!”

“No way,” Ferrajalt said, and he had a flash sequence of images of himself and Treyess sharing the Warhome as a loving couple. But once again, these tender, electrifying thoughts were interrupted by the brutal reality of their surroundings.

The thing in front of them was gigantic. It looked like a cross between a mountain, an unfinished skyscraper, and an enormous thorn bush. The lighting as it was, it was hard to make out details.

“What the fuck is it?” Ferrajalt asked.

“An adventure?” Treyess responded.

Prince Ferrajalt held tightly onto Treyess Arcomany as she flew their little biplane into the heart of the massive, horrific structure.

“I can’t tell!” Ferrajalt said. “Are we gonna hit it—or is there space inside it?”

“I don’t know!” Treyess said. “But the instruments are showing a bunch of entryways—I’m gonna take the best-looking one.”

“Okay.”

So they flew into a gaping hole in the side of the thing, and were inside. As soon as they entered, a battery of spotlights on the biplane kicked in and lit the dark, twisted spaces around

them. They were in some sort of main corridor, with jagged bramblelike protrusions coming from all angles.

“Uh... Ferrajalt... All sorts of decisions up ahead. What should we do?”

“What do you mean?”

“The display—it shows a bunch of branchings up ahead.”

“Well, try and take the biggest one!”

“Okay, I’ll try, Prince.”

As Treyess steered the plane toward the largest of the upcoming passageways, something came briefly into view. It was a scene, only visible for a second or two. It was tough to tell which direction it came from, or if they were seeing something real or projected, but see it they did.

What they saw was a dog and a rabbit fighting. It was a nice, well groomed dog, a collie, which looked like it would have been a fine family companion in other circumstances. Here, it was frightful, teeth bared, in a rage, full of fear and assault. The rabbit was a little gray fellow, unassuming, but clearly possessing more ferocity than was readily apparent.

It was a horrible, frightening scene. The two animals were consumed with the passion of their struggle, each wanting nothing more than to kill the other, each fearing it would fall to the other at any moment.

Both Treyess and Ferrajalt were sobered by the image. Sobered, and drained—feeling like they’d just woken up from a particularly nasty nightmare, all shaken and paranoid.

“Treyess! Did you see that!”

“Uhh... Yes Prince, I did.”

“What the hell was that?”

“I don’t know—a dog and a rabbit—fighting.”

“Let’s get the fuck out of this thing!”

“I couldn’t, uhh, I couldn’t agree with you more!”

With this, Treyess eased back on the throttle and the plane came to dead stop in midair, as she thought it would. Then she swung it around, and headed out the same way they had come in.

“Are you sure you know the way out?” Ferrajalt asked.

“I think—yeah—the display has the way marked in green—not to worry, Prince.”

“Good. Let’s just get the hell out of here!”

And in less than a minute, they were out of the hulking construct, and back in the cool dark air of destroyed reality.

“That,” Ferrajalt said, panting, “was not cool.”

“Not hardly,” Treyess responded.

“What the fuck was that all about?”

“I don’t know and I don’t want to know—some sort of horrible evil, something beyond our comprehension. Prince, I think we saw something back there that we shouldn’t have.”

“Well who knows what sort of madness has come to exist, now that reality is no more,” Ferrajalt said, trying to sound calm and in control, to reassure Treyess.

“I just don’t like it. That wasn’t adventure, that was just—I don’t know—just pure horror.”

“I know, I know.”

“So where are we going?” she asked. “I think I’m headed downriver, but I’m not even sure anymore!”

“You want me to fly? We still have to check Doscovor. You can set ‘er down on the river and we can switch places if you want and I’ll fly us down there.”

“Okay—do you mind? I’m just a little too shaken. Sure you don’t mind?”

“No—no problem Treyess. We’re teammates—we have to help each other out, right?”

“Right,” Treyess said sweetly, and she pointed the little biplane downwards, and soon landed on the frozen river.

“Well,” Ferrajalt said as he was getting out of the plane, “at least we won’t always be wondering what was in that thing. Even though—I might rather not have known.”

Treyess chuckled a little as she got out of the plane also.

“How do you know that was all that was in there?” she asked.

“I don’t know, but I did get the feeling that that was pretty much the heart of the matter—the unspeakable.”

“Yeah.”

Treyess walked a short distance away from the plane.

“Just gotta stretch my legs a little,” she said.

“Yeah.”

So they rested there, on the frozen river, and breathed in the air which had more energy in it than they might have imagined. And they spoke and got to know each other better. And they almost kissed, but Treyess pointed out that they had to continue on in their mission, and Ferrajalt agreed. So they got back in the plane, and took off downriver toward where Doscovor might still be.

Soon the vector display was flashing wildly, heralding the huge drop up ahead which was, of course, the waterfall. And

indeed, half a minute later, they flew over the frozen waterfall—an amazing sight to see—all that raw force of nature frozen up and stopped dead in its tracks. But it was the city across from the waterfall with which the two were most interested.

“Doscovor!” Treyess said.

“And—look at that! Office Complex at Gumhanshire Prefecture!” Ferrajalt responded, staring at the huge, complex building—all lit up, as if nothing was wrong.

“So what do you think, Prince? Should we check it out? If there are any people in it, we should evac them before we cream the sucker, no?”

“Sounds like the right thing to do,” Ferrajalt said with a chuckle.

So they quickly crossed the bay and landed carefully on one of the roofs of the doomed building.

“Well here we are!” Treyess said. “This sucker’s gonna get an ocean liner smack in the face before too long!”

“You got it!” Ferrajalt said, taking off his helmet and jumping out of the biplane.

“Wow!” Treyess said, likewise stepping out of the plane and removing her helmet. “Look at the view from up here. Look at that waterfall.”

“Yeah—just imagine seeing the flashing lights and hearing the sirens of all those Warhomes just before that boat comes flying across the bay—I mean—the whole thing’s gonna happen so fast.”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, I almost forgot,” Ferrajalt said, taking his gun out of its holster. “Gotta call back to the base. Let Ledrant know what we’ve found.”

“Yeah—what’s the deal with that thing anyway? Why don’t we all have one?”

“Extremely limited battery life. But they’re working on it. You think it’s easy to generate a kemig signal in such a small object as a gun?”

Treyess smiled and nodded as Ferrajalt punched a few buttons and then looked into the screen at the base of the hilt. After a few muted ringing noises, the tiny image of Injure Bodoni faded in.

“Ferrajalt? Is that you?”

“Yes Injure, it’s me.”

“How far have you gotten down the river?”

Ferrajalt took a deep breath.

“Look Injure—could you please get Ledrant? I don’t want to say all this twice—you know more than me about the battery life of these things.”

“Well—Ledrant is indisposed at the moment but I will relate all the information you give me.”

“Fine! Fine! Okay—we’re on top of Office Complex at Gumhanshire—right on top of it. We flew over on that plane we told you about. The lights are on in the building, but we haven’t seen any signs of people yet.”

“Does that matter?” Injure asked, rubbing his nose.

“What do you mean does that matter—of course it matters! We can’t just kill people!”

“Oh,” Injure said dumbly.

“So just tell Ledrant that we’re gonna check for people, and then head back—and tell him to go over to that yard and get some more Warhomes—the giant police cars—they’re pretty easy to drive, no problem.”

“Okay, Ferrajalt. I’ll tell him all that.”

“Okay thanks,” Ferrajalt said tersely as he cut off the connection.

“That guy is a real dick,” Treyess said.

“You’re telling me.”

The two stood, several yards apart, staring at each other. Finally Treyess spoke.

“So now that we’re here on the roof, what are we supposed to do?”

Ferrajalt thought for a moment, then looked over to the vector display on the biplane control panel. On the screen was a 3-D representation of the building, with two bright yellow dots where he and Treyess were.

“Maybe that’s our answer,” he said. “Looks like that sucker can detect people.”

“Maybe it’s just seeing us because we’re its owners.”

Ferrajalt regarded Treyess.

“Maybe. So let’s see if we can expand the scope of its scan—maybe it can reach all the way back to Derolbam and see the others.”

“You really think it could reach that far?”

“If it’s in communication with the Warhome, which I assume it is, I think it could give us an overall scan.”

“Give it a shot, my Prince.”

So Ferrajalt leaned over the side of the plane and began to

fiddle with some knobs near the screen. At first there was no reaction, but then the scene zoomed out, and there was the faint outline of the bay and the waterfall. In another second, it had zoomed back so far that the Warhome was represented with a dull, green, pulsing square. Finally, it pulled back much further, and there was a cluster of yellow pinpoints in Derolbam, and the two, Treyess and Ferrajalt, there in Doscovor. And there was one more, a solitary light way off to the east.

"Hmm," the Prince said. "Very impressive. Guess that kills any notion of people being around here. But there IS that one stray point out there. Hmm."

"Well we can check that out later," Treyess said. "For now I just want to get back to that Warhome and take a nice hot shower and relax a little."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah—oh, wait a second!" Treyess said as she skipped away a little. "I just have to get something—wait here!"

"What is it? What the—where are you going?"

"I'll be back in a minute!" Treyess said, as she descended a ladder on the side of the roof.

Ferrajalt ran over and looked down the ladder.

"What the hell?" he muttered, and a moment later he heard the sound of glass shattering.

"Treyess! Are you okay?"

"I'm fine! I'm fine! I just have to get something!"

"Okay—but be quick about it."

Ferrajalt meandered back to the plane, looking up at the waterfall and mulling over the vision they saw in the weird mountain. He just couldn't get over it—the dog and the rabbit—what could it mean?

And beyond that, of course, there was Treyess. As a Royal, Ferrajalt was used to girls fawning over him, but in Treyess, he knew he had found his equal. So what if she was so much older than him? How much older could she have been anyway? Ten years? Twelve years? It didn't matter. Especially in a world such as Aconck, it really didn't matter. Oh, he knew his mother would have a heart attack if she knew—but how could she know? She probably didn't even exist anymore. And even after they wholoped this building—who knew? Who knew if anything would ever exist again?

"Oh Ferrajalt! Could you help me?" he heard Treyess yell from below.

He went back to the ladder and looked down—Treyess had a tablecloth bunched up like a sack—full of silverware, glasses, and dishes, from the sound of it.

“What is this—another graduate of the Nevrippa Den school of looting?”

“Now come on! Help me and pull this stuff up. And I am not looting—just think how cool it’ll be to have Office Complex at Gumhanshire table settings in the future, if we manage to pull this off? It’ll be rad!”

“Oh okay! Here—gimme.”

Ferrajalt grabbed the heavy load and heaved it up with some effort.

“Now come on,” he said. “We really have to get back.”

They loaded the contraband into a storage compartment in the back of the plane, and took off, the Prince behind the stick again.

“Uh,” Ferrajalt said, “I’d like to uh... if I can pull it off, I’d like to hover up and down along the building, looking into the windows with lights on, just to be sure that no one’s in there.”

“Sounds like a good plan. Better safe than sorry.”

After a few failed attempts, Ferrajalt figured out how to make the plane hover straight up and down, and they looked into floor after floor of windows.

Inside, they saw numerous empty offices, many of which were all screwed up and full of weird things, just like the rest of this crashed world.

“Well,” Ferrajalt said, “I’m satisfied. No sign of life.”

“Nope.”

They headed back for the Warhome.

Before they knew it, they made it back, passing the enormous nightmare structure to their left.

Docking back up with the Warhome was a piece of cake, and soon the two of them were climbing down the ladder of the central shaft. Ferrajalt followed Treyess into the main living chamber.

“Oh I just want to take all my clothes off and lay down under the covers and get all warm and toasty!” Treyess said, almost sounding drunk.

Ferrajalt stopped dead in his tracks, heart racing.

“So—go ahead. Maybe I’ll join you.”

Treyess smiled and spun around slowly several times, looking right at Ferrajalt all the while. Finally she spoke.

“I’ll do what I want to do—while you wait outside. Then

you can come in. Deal?”

“Uh—deal,” Ferrajalt said with a stumble, and he backed away and out of the door. “Just—uh—just tell me when I can come back in.”

“Will do.”

Ferrajalt shut the door and leaned against it, his heart now pounding wildly and a cold sweat breaking out all over him. Was this it? Was he gonna score with Treyess Arcomany in a few minutes?

After a minute or two, Treyess yelled for him to come back in, and there she was—stark naked on the bed—and man was she hot!

“Let’s have some fun in this wasteland,” she said.



# THIRTY-EIGHT

“Snoppy!” Enc Larabeth yelled. “Come on! We have a mission!”

They were on the playing field of the Winter Stadium.

Snoppy shook his head. Enc could see an intense, disturbed look on his face.

“What’s going on?” Enc asked.

“I... I have to go to Marriage Town,” Snoppy said.

“Snoppy... I know... but it can wait... we have a mission to go on! There’s a crisis at the Lazy Colors of Corals Big Hobby Shop! We gotta go right away!”

Snoppy continued shaking his head.

“I can’t... I...”

“What is it Snoppy?” Enc asked empathetically. “There’s gotta be something more than Marriage Town bothering you!”

“I don’t know what I just did...”

“What? What did you do?”

He looked her into the eyes.

“You know...” he said. “I... came from somewhere. I had a childhood. Before I got all folded into Rillekon’s and all this... and Gnoboslast...”

Enc gritted her teeth.

“Look, are you gonna be able to come or not?”

“Enc—I did something. In the vault.”

Enc expression changed. She breathed heavily, but said nothing.

“I...” Snoppy said, shaking his head. “I tried to help a trapped entity... I tried something I was curious about for a long time... I contacted the Yaut Pillow with topaz... you know, like The Stingy Girl wrote...”

“Snopy! The Stingy Girl was insane when she wrote that! You know that!” Enc said.

“I know! But I... I was engulfed with empathy... with emotion... it was a Marrier Ball from Marriage Town. She was a unique entity, trapped in the group mind. I felt what she felt. I had to try it.”

“So what happened?” Enc said, gesticulating forcefully and looking behind her. Evelyn Fangdoor and Darnazy Thonc were approaching from the far end of the field.

“I shot... I shot the Pillow with a topaz bolt. But... but something happened... there was... there was a dead body inside... of this god I knew about from my childhood... Fox... it was a fox... a god named Fox... I knew it was... I mean, I just knew it was him. And he was dead.”

Enc shook her head in confusion.

“So,” she said, looking down, “are we at crisis status with this? Is there a process happening with the artifacts? Does this supercede the Hobby Shop Crisis?”

Snopy growled in frustration.

“Okay Enc,” he said, taking a little red bottle from one of his pockets. “I’m gonna take some ract random to clear my head... my emotions are just overpowering me...”

With this, he opened the bottle and took a sip from it. He lowered the bottle, cleared his throat, and wiped his mouth. His eyes got red and teary.

Evelyn and Darnazy approached.

“What’s going on?” Evelyn asked.

Snopy held up his hand.

“It’s okay—don’t worry. I’m okay.”

“Are you quite sure, my friend?” Darnazy asked.

“No, no, I’m fine. But I have a mission for you, Darnazy.”

“Oh ho! A mission? There are lots of missions going round now, hey?”

“Yeah...” Snopy said. “So anyway, look—Winter Stadium Them is needed—and we’re going in a minute on our mission—but I need for you to go to Marriage Town and find a girl named Dizappacha, new to the Road. The Marrier Balls say she is a 92% match for me. But there are complications. You have to ask her if she knows anything about an entity called Soot Mary. But get out of Marriage Town with her first—do not say the words ‘Soot Mary’ in Marriage Town, okay? And don’t communicate with any Marrier Balls if you can help it. Get her out of there, and bring her back here to the

Stadium. You have Talon of the Mug of the Sky and Trees authority still, I assume. Use it if the Marrier Balls give you any trouble.”

“I have that and Losh Packaging Agent authority! I will have no trouble. But I will need to use one of your Winter Stadium Them trucks to get there.”

“Yes! Fine, no problem,” Snoppy said. “So let’s all get moving!”

Evelyn laughed.

“I love this job,” she said.



# THIRTY-NINE

Prince Ferrajalt was nearing consciousness when he began to perceive a flashing light through his closed eyes. For a moment, he was disoriented, unsure of where he was, but when he opened his eyes, the events of the past day washed over him. Feeling Treyess's naked body next to his, he was careful not to wake her as he got up a little to seek out the source of the flashing.

As he got up on his elbows, Treyess stirred, but did not awaken. Immediately, Ferrajalt saw a flashing purple light on a video screen above the bed. And there was a flashing purple button right next to him, on a table by the bed. He looked back and forth from the screen to the button, and then carefully reached out and pressed the button.

The screen lit up and an image appeared. It was Nevrippa Den. Instantly, Ferrajalt buried himself under the covers and threw them all the way over Treyess. Only their heads could be seen.

"Oh—ha! Looks like I caught you two at a bad time—good!" Den said with a goofy smile.

"How are you making this call?" Ferrajalt said as Treyess stirred some more.

"Well my friend," Den said, leaning forward and wearing a smug look, "after we got your excellent field report on the Warhomes, we all went over to the yard and got some of our own. And you know what, hot shot? I filled mine up totally with all the cool stuff I looted! Even the motorcycle and the speedboat are covered with junk!"

"Um—that's great," Ferrajalt said, feeling extremely embarrassed. "But y'know, you've caught us in kind of a—delicate—situation, so—"

“—oh don’t worry about it. I’m not stuffy about it. I think sex is great. And you two make a cute couple, so don’t worry about it one bit, hon.”

Ferrajalt grimaced and looked over at Treyess, whose eyes were just opening.

“Tell me this is a nightmare,” Treyess said.

“Nope!” Den yelled. “It’s for real! And reality is so much fun, because stuff that happens in reality has more of an impact, y’know? But anyway, I’m glad I got through to you cuz a whole lot of shit has been going down here and we need you guys back.”

“Um—okay—uh...” Ferrajalt said.

“Okay,” Den said. “Mr. Hate told me to tell you some stuff if I could figure out how to work the inter-Warhome communicators. Ha! So anyways, we got the ocean liner, the ‘Repsiridescent’ down onto the river—that was fun. Injy figgers we’ll need about seven or eight Warhomes to tow it—too bad I beat the living daylights out of that Hypergod Amnifaoz guy when he attacked me and V! But the plan is going well. He says we should all be able to put our Warhomes on autopilot and get into the planes before the waterfall, y’know, to follow the Repsiridescent into the event horizon. Yeah right, like I’m gonna abandon all my stuff!”

“Um,” Treyess said, shocking the Prince as she pushed the sheets down to reveal her naked breasts, “how long have we been asleep?”

“I don’t know. Hey—nice chest! But no—I dunno—I think it’s been four or five hours since your last kemig. Something like that. Wanna try that blanket trick on the Prince there, Treyess? I never saw a royal weenie before!”

“Come on!” Ferrajalt said in an annoyed tone of voice.

“Chill out, only joking dude,” Den said, and then with a smile, “But if you had anything to show down there, I’m sure you would have!”

“Nevrippa...” Treyess said.

“Okay, okay,” Den said. “So anyway, V and Vike are using superstrength to rip the cables and chains and stuff out of the docking mechanism and attaching them as tow cables. I’m gonna go help them soon—I’m naturally superstrong, you know.”

“Yes, we know,” Treyess said.

“Oh!” Den said. “We picked up another survivor! We found her hiding behind the front desk of a motel in Sapsip. She

seemed awfully confused. Her name is ‘Sleep’ or something. You know, sleep, like what you guys were just doing before I rudely interrupted you. She has cool hair.”

“Don’t worry about it, Nevrippa,” Treyess said, sitting up a little. Ferrajalt cringed as her body was revealed up to her bellybutton.

But then, the Prince thought, she didn’t have anything to be embarrassed about.

“We did sort of leave you all hanging,” Treyess continued. “We’ll try and get back soon. Now where are we getting back to now?”

“Oh!” Den said. “Our new leader, Mr. Ledrant Hate, has moved the base of operations to his Warhome on the river, right by the Repsiridescent. So just come on up river.”

“Yeah,” Ferrajalt said. “So what happened with this Hypergod guy? You beat him up?”

“Oh yeah! You know, he came up to me and V in the van and said he felt like doing some killing. He said we weren’t included in the bargain he made with you guys, since we weren’t in the room, and he ripped that van in two almost, and was serious. Lucky I’m such a healthy girl. He tried to disembowel me—he wasn’t kidding around. It did kind of tickle, but he didn’t laugh when I punched through his armor and squished gore. Screamed, that bastard did. I ruined him. I think he’s still alive, though.”

“V was okay?” Treyess asked.

“Yeah,” Nevrippa Den said, “he kind of backed off—well—kind of ran at full speed away from the fray. Did see something funny though. Did see that cube of his arch up and get all prickly and colorful, and flickered up. He may have something there, but he didn’t stick around to find out.”

“Um,” Ferrajalt said, “isn’t like, wasn’t that guy like as powerful as a god or something, or more? How could you have just beat him up like that?”

Treyess looked over at Ferrajalt.

“Now come on, my Prince—you know our little Nevrippa Den is a talented little filly. Credit where credit is due.”

“Yeah,” Ferrajalt said. “Well, he deserved it if he tried to kill you like that. I knew we couldn’t trust that guy. The old ‘following an agreement by its letter rather than its spirit’. A sure sign of evil.”

“That it is,” Den said. “That it is.”

“Oh yeah,” Treyess said. “That reminds me—whatever

became of those four weird people you guys told me about? You know—the ones who were—the girl who was the guy from the future, in a future incarnation, who had time travelled back to—well, you know—what happened to them?”

Den nodded.

“Well let me tell you about that. From our Warhomes, we’re scanning them all back at that Noyage Parlour, but no one feels like going all the way down to Hennonly to investigate. Let ‘em die, for all I care.”

“Die?” Treypass said. “Shouldn’t reality just come back around them?”

“Well,” Den said, raising her eyebrows and nodding in mock thoughtfulness, “it seems that Injy has revised his estimates a little. He says that this shaky reflection of Timber Serious may have only survived due to the supportive-array of Aconck or something. That is, this Earth’s reality system was able to hang on by a thread due to Aconck, or something. I really try to understand Injy, I do. But so much of the time his figures and calculations fly right over my head.”

“Like all of us,” Treypass said.

“Yeah,” Den said. “So it turns out we have to follow the Repsiridescent into the Office Complex. In the planes, y’know? But I’m sticking with the ship—I’ll be attached to it, after all. Can’t lose my lovely loot! But don’t tell the others, they’re way too serious.”

“No, no,” Treypass said.

“So look guys. I don’t want to take away from the quality time you have together before the big deed. I’m gonna go help V and Vike with their work—I think they need it. So I’ll see you soon?”

“Yup,” the Prince said.

“Yeah,” Treypass said, starting to sit up on the side of the bed, but keeping her lower regions covered. “We’ll see you in an hour or so.”

“Cool. Nevrippa Den out.”

And the video screen went blank.

Treypass chuckled.

“A lot happened while we were having our fun.”

“Yeah,” Ferrajalt said, also moving to sit on the side of the bed, and scanning the room for his clothes.

“Were you embarrassed?” Treypass said with a look.

“Kind of. That Nevrippa gives me the creeps sometimes.”

“I know what you mean, but she’s a good kid.”



“Yeah.”

“So you wanna get dressed and get back up the river to complete this crazy mission?”

“Yeah I guess,” Ferrajalt said. “I think I just have to wake up a little bit more to absorb all this crap.”

“I know what you mean.”

“Come here,” Ferrajalt said, and Treyess turned to face him. She was stunning, and she approached the Prince. He embraced her and stroked her cheek, looking into her eyes.

“What we did here was more than just ‘fun’ for me. I feel for you. I feel connected to you. And I hope you feel the same.”

“I do,” Treyess said, looking away. “It’s just... it’s been so long since I’ve had any kind of stable relationship—the thought of it is kind of novel. It’s funny. On my Earth, the kind of guys that were turned on by a dashing, independent adventurer like myself always turned out to be losers and nerds. The real men always seemed to stay away from me. But you—you’re a real man—I can see that in you. The blood of heroes runs through your veins. Maybe not that many generations past.”

“Maybe not.”

They kissed.

“This will be our home, this Warhome,” Ferrajalt said. “I will make it happen. We will find a way to keep it, maybe the same way Den is planning.”

A tear came to Treyess’s eye as she rested her head on Ferrajalt’s shoulder. He was so young and innocent in her eyes.



# FORTY

Darnazy Thonc pulled into the enormous parking lot of Marriage Town. He found a spot for the giant Winter Stadium Them truck he was driving way out in the hinterland of the lot.

He shut off the noisy engine and stepped out. He let out a big sigh as he looked up at the oily reality stains slowly streaking across the sky.

Out of the corner of his eye, Darnazy spotted something approaching him from across the lot. It was Perkins, a sleazy little lizard, driving in a tiny convertible sports car.

Darnazy raised an eyebrow and nodded as the lizard approached. He was about a foot tall, with wrinkly white repile skin. He wore a dark gray business suit with a thin red tie. On his head was a wide-brimmed black hat. His eyes looked tired and bloodshot, but that's the way they always looked.

The little car was just a few feet long, dark green with a white circle on the hood with the number 1 inside it in black. It stopped a few feet from Darnazy.

"Hello, buddy," Perkins said in his sleazy little voice. "What brings you to Marriage Town parking lot, buddy?"

"Perkins," Darnazy said. "How are you, my dear little parking lot fijjo? How do you like these reality stains? They are nuptle and sulk, to be sure!"

"Hey Thonc. I see ya driving a Winter Stadium Them truck. Did you join the team?"

"Now now, my dear Perkins, my team days are over. Long hence was my dishonorable discharge from the Hosts of Five Ocho Lamp. The RRTA would hear naught of it."

"Hey man, I've been trying to join a team. But that god-

damn Rillekon's Road Team Authority keeps blowing me off. Think you could put a good word in for me with the Winter Stadium crew, buddy?"

"Now Perkins, your time would be better spent in the parking lots of Missionbook Homes, rather than the sideways of afteralia. The way of the team is mooje."

Perkins nodded.

"Yes, buddy. But why do I need to hang out at a Home when I can jump on board a mission in progress, such as, might I say, yours?"

"Sir, I am in no need of a mission partner here. Now, if you care, I must thrusty my willpoint ahead. Tis a clear mission."

With this, Darnazy started walking swiftly toward the main entrance of Marriage Town.

"Bastard!" Perkins said. He put his car in gear and burned rubber as he turned and sped forward to catch up with Darnazy.

"Hey, man!" Perkins said. "You don't wanna head in there. Those Marrier Balls are very mean. You talk to me, I help you."

Darnazy looked down at Perkins, who was matching his walking speed with the car.

"You have intelligence you think I may have wantatude of? Out with it, Perkins! Out with it now!"

"Okay buddy, listen buddy. If my talk is currency on ya, ya gotta let me go with you, dig it?"

Darnazy laughed his booming laugh, and then said "Indeed, indeed! I would have it no other way, f-scoundrel."

"Decent man. Decent. So here's the junk. Saw two girlies on the walk, obla-bracing-ward. Ran full steam outta Marriage Town. I chased 'em. Two girlies."

"Two girlies, eh?"

"Yeah man. The human one had M.T.-issue bride-cand-wear on. Nice to attract a humanlike, eh? Or a poor little lizard, eh?"

"Get on with it, Perkins!"

"She was fresh, baby. I could see it. Not long on the Rillekon's, baby. I could see it, smell it."

"Did she name herself?"

"No man," Perkins said, "they kicked my car, man. They were mean, baby. But I gotta tell you about the other one. The other one, man."

"Yes, Perkins?"

“She was superstyle. Human girl basis, some kind of cat or dog faux-fuzz overlay. Anthrope, eh? Then orange translucent glass, inner glow, and blue-green metal band framework all around her. She looked pretty cool, but she seemed upset.”

“Hmm... how long ago was this, Perkins?”

“Not long ago, man. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell ya! We gotta go now, man!”

Darnazy stopped.

“Obla-bracing-ward, you said?”

“Not to worry, Thonc. I tossed a black-bingle-burr at the human, she had a nice big dress for it to snatch to!”

Perkins held up what looked like a little black walky-talkie, and nodded.

Darnazy sighed, looked skyward, and then knelt down and picked up Perkins in his car. Then he began to walk back to the truck.

“Hey man! Careful with the car! It’s been kicked once already today!”

“Hush now. Just hope your black-bingle-burr scans. I won’t tolerate a wild chase!”

“No, no, Thonc. No way. My info is big legit, big legit.”

“I am hoping,” Darnazy said, as they got back to the truck. He opened the door and placed Perkins in his little car on the passenger seat.

Then Darnazy got in, started the motor, and headed out of the parking lot.

Perkins climbed out of his car and onto the dashboard of the truck. He sat with his legs crossed, fiddling with his little walky-talkie thing.

“Okay buddy, just follow my directions and we’ll catch up with those girlies. Go downwise here. Okay. Now Thonc, give me the mission info? We are on this mission together now.”

“My dear fellow,” Darnazy said, “finding these ladies you saw is the mission right now. If one turns out to be called Dizappacha, we will strongly suggest to her to come back to Winter Stadium with us.”

“Come on man, gimme all the info!”

“There is little else, other than we need to see if this Dizappacha knows about someone named ‘Soot Mary’. That is all.”

“Hey, that other girlie, the glass and metal one, I bet that’s the Soot Mary you seek, Thonc! I have a feeling. I get hunches.”

“I see that,” Darnazy said.  
They drove on.

# FORTY-ONE

“What will Emma think of me now?” Amnifaoz, no longer a Hypergod, moaned.

“You should have thought about that before acting like such a bore,” Ann Saply said.

“Bore?” V Sincein said, looking up. “Bore? He tried to disembowel Nevrippa! I’d say that’s more than being a ‘bore’.”

“I said I was sorry,” Amnifaoz said. “I am spoiled. That which I was is gone. All that is left is this—this pimple of a body! Unthinkably fragile!”

Indeed, Amnifaoz was changed. Now a mere human, with blue-gray skin and dark yellow hair, short and slim, and wearing a black and gray tunic, vaguely reminiscent of his Hypergod armor.

The entire group was seated inside the main room of Ledrant Hate’s Warhome, around a large table. Somehow he had managed to alter the master bedroom into a kind of control center.

“Okay everyone,” Hate said, standing at a console. “We’re all here except for Treyess and Ferrajalt. I just talked to them and they should be here in a few minutes. They apologized for the further delay.”

“Hey, let them have their fun,” Nevrippa Den said.

Hate ignored the comment.

“Once they’re here,” Hate said, “we’ll have the ten Warhomes and drivers that we’ll need. We can hook Ferrajalt’s Warhome up and then get this crazy scheme over with. Let’s just hope it works.”

“Too bad we couldn’t get by with nine,” V said, giving Amnifaoz a nasty glance.

“Well I told you,” Injure Bodoni said, “according to my cal-

culations, it could be towed with six or seven, but to make those turns, we could maybe do it with nine, but ten will do it just fine.”

“Whatever,” V said, his superimposed cube pulsing from a dull blue to a dull red.

“Amnifaoz was good enough to offer his help,” Hate said. “And he did apologize. Remember—he was the one who ultimately got ripped to shreds, regardless of the fact that he started it.”

“Yeah?” V said in an argumentative tone.

“Look everyone,” Ledrant said sharply, “let’s just stop bickering and get along for once—we should all be dead—but someone out there gave us another chance.”

“I can’t believe any of this,” Sleep Drassy said. “It’s just been a nightmare.”

“Well,” Hate said, “it’s lucky we scanned you—otherwise you’d still have been in that motel when we hurl the Repsiridescent into Office Complex at Gumhanshire—after that, there probably wouldn’t be much left of this world.”

“Yeah. I just keep wondering why I was one of the lucky ones to survive the disaster,” Sleep said. “It’s just like, I mean, if I had it to choose, I don’t think I’d want it this way. To lose all my friends and family like this.”

Ann Saply gazed at the young woman with the blond Mohawk. “Indeed,” the cat lady said with a cool smile.

Sleep gave Ann a quick angry look.

“We would have been one short without you, girl,” Ann said. “And this must all be so strange to you.”

“It sure is,” Sleep said. “I never spoke to a cat before.”

“Oh, I think we’ll be speaking a lot, my dear,” Ann said.

Sleep looked a little worried.

“But we have to get through this, first,” Ann added.

“We’ll get through it,” Nevrippa said. “We better—I got too much cool stuff. I ain’t gonna die.”

The room fell silent as the eight sat there looking around at each other. Finally, Injure Bodoni spoke.

“So where are Treyess and Ferrajalt? We have to get moving. I told you there’s a situationquake coming. If we don’t get rid of that building soon, well...”

“Don’t worry—we’re here,” Treyess said, walking in with Ferrajalt behind her. “My goodness—look what you’ve done to your Warhome, Ledrant—it’s absolutely stunning!”

“Thank you,” Ledrant Hate said. “Now that we’re all here,



we should go over the game plan. Treyess, Prince—you can take a seat right over here. Okay. So as you know, this world we're in is not as stable as we thought it was—in fact, it may be an anomaly left standing because of its connection with Aconck. In any event, we know that hitting Office Complex at Gumhanshire—a building in Doscovor—with that ocean liner out there—the Repsiridescent—will set off a reaction which might set everything straight. But we all have to pass through the event in order for us to hope to participate in reality in the future. So what we have decided is that once we're within a mile of the waterfall, we'll all bail out of our Warhomes in the little biplanes, and follow the ship into the building, flying above it."

"That's right," Bodoni said, turning to the crowd. "A few seconds here or there won't matter. 'Following' is the key word here. We must follow the boat as it smashes into the building—and hopefully it will pass us through into a fresh rendition of Timber Serious Earth, where none of this ever happened."

"What about the boat?" Den asked.

"Huh?" Bodoni said.

"The boat," Den said. "Will the boat get through into the fresh world?"

"Likely," Bodoni said. "The area around the event horizon will retain some crash-real aspectitudes. So the building and the boat, in their post-collision format, should be existent."

"Good," Den said.

"Why is that good?" Bodoni asked.

"You'll see, boy," Den responded.

"Okay," Hate said. "Every one of us has to know how to drive his or her Warhome, as well as how to fly the biplane. So we'll be doing some quickie training in the spare Warhome while the rest of them are hooked up."

"Now," Bodoni said, "I just wanted to ask Treyess and Ferrajalt about the strange object they encountered downriver."

"Yes?" Treyess asked.

"Yes—please tell us everything you experienced once you entered the thing," Injure said.

So Treyess and Ferrajalt related their experience of entering the construct and seeing that vision of the dog and the rabbit fighting.

"Hmm," Bodoni said. "Very interesting. Could be symbolic

—the rabbit represents ‘la luna’—but the dog—I don’t know...”

“Just steer clear of it, everyone,” Hate said. “There are a lot of terrible things here—things I’ll be glad to leave behind. So let’s get to it, then—the final preparations are at hand—we move in three hours and forty-five minutes!”

# FORTY-TWO

Ferrajalt was flying in his biplane over the ten Warhomes and the ocean liner that was chained to them. This was the final check before they would proceed to tow the boat down the frozen river and into Office Complex at Gumhanshire.

The boat, “Repsiridescent”, was tilted at a 45 degree angle on the glassy surface of the river. The Warhomes were laid out in an intricate pattern, set forth by Injure Bodoni. Each driver would receive specific instructions from Injure of exactly what to do at each section of the river.

A call came in, and Ferrajalt punched the purple button on his console. Treyess’s face came into view.

“Everything look okay up there?” she asked.

“Yup. So I guess this is it.”

“Yeah. So when we’re flying, come right next to me, okay? I don’t want to lose you.”

Ferrajalt smiled.

“I won’t let you get away from me.”

Suddenly, there was a barrage of flashing lights from below Ferrajalt.

“What the hell was that?” Ferrajalt yelled.

“What?” Treyess asked.

Ferrajalt swung around to see the guns of one Warhome firing—firing at one of the giant streetlights lining the river. The guns released pulse after pulse at the base of the streetlight, and before Ferrajalt knew it, the enormous streetlight was falling right toward the ocean liner!

“Treyess! Someone shot a streetlight down—it’s gonna—”

With a shudder, the streetlight lurched and collapsed right onto the Repsiridescent. A thunderous noise reverberated throughout the destroyed landscape.

“What happened?” Treyess asked.

“Someone—someone shot down the streetlight!”

Suddenly, a little rectangle opened in the corner of the video screen—it was Nevrippa Den.

“It’s okay everybody—I just shot down one of the streetlights,” Den said calmly. “It landed perfectly on the boat—I just couldn’t bear to leave this place without getting one of those beauties. Sorry for the inconvenience, but it should be okay, right?”

Ferrajalt was speechless.

“She really did that?” Treyess asked.

“Yeah!” the Prince said, nodding in disbelief.

Then, on the video screen, Den’s face was replaced by that of Ledrant Hate.

“Okay people,” Hate said. “I’m just as dumbfounded as all of you regarding what Nevrippa has apparently just done—but we don’t have time to question the repercussions of this event—we will go ahead as planned—Injure will determine if any course changes are called for—everyone at their driver’s seat—prepare to begin.”

“Fuck!” Ferrajalt said. “That little weirdo may have just killed us all!”

“I don’t know,” Treyess said. “I don’t even want to think about it. I just want to get this over with.”

“Yeah,” Ferrajalt said. “Let’s do it. I’ll see you in the air—and back in reality, hopefully.”

Treyess closed her eyes and kissed toward Ferrajalt. He kissed back and shut the screen off, as he zoomed back to his Warhome—the original one he and Treyess first found.

Soon, back in the Warhome, Ferrajalt got to his driver’s seat to find Bodoni on the screen.

“Okay people,” Injure said. “If your motors aren’t running, get them so. Also, turn on your flashing lights—if there’s anyone or anything on the river, we want to let them know we’re coming.”

Ferrajalt revved his engine a little to make sure it was on, then he flicked a switch to activate the red and blue flashing police lights.

“Now,” Injure said, “we’ll start off straight, but then we’ll have a slight left turn. Everyone please check in, and then we can get started.”

“Ferrajalt here—ready,” the Prince said.

On the screen, Injure was nodding.

“Don’t worry Sleep—you’ll do fine,” Injure said, apparently to the concerns of Sleep in her Warhome. “Okay? Okay. So this is it. Everyone, straight, and start off slow, on the countdown to zero. Okay? 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1—zero!”

Ferrajalt gently depressed the accelerator and moved forward a little, picking up the slack in the chain attached to his Warhome. Once the chain was taut, his wheels began to spin, but after a few seconds, he felt a deep thud from somewhere within the vehicle as it dropped a few inches closer to the ground. A high pitched wail could be heard from the engine as he pressed down further on the accelerator.

“Okay folks,” Injure said from the screen. “Looks like the tow function has kicked in—now let’s increase the power a little...”

Ferrajalt did this, and the vehicle started moving forward. As he looked around, he saw that the others were moving too.

Soon, the ten Warhomes were indeed towing the enormous ocean liner down the frozen river—even with the giant street-light dragging alongside the boat. The group made a few minor turns with ease, but several sharp turns were coming up.

“Okay folks, we’re doing good,” Bodoni said.

Ferrajalt’s heart was beating hard and fast in his chest—he knew there was no turning back.

“Now,” Bodoni said, “get ready for the turn—we have to start well before we get there—coming up...”

There were a few tense moments as they all turned sharply—if the boat grounded itself, the whole thing would be for naught.

The maneuver was close, but it worked.

“Alright! If we can do that one, the other two will be a snap!” Bodoni said.

Prince Ferrajalt wiped some sweat off his brow and he readied himself for the next turn. They were going pretty fast now—but he knew they’d have to go a lot faster before they got to the waterfall.

The Prince squinted as he thought he saw a flashing light up ahead on the left river bank. Yes—it was a red and blue flashing light—but too small to be a Warhome. He quickly approached the light, and saw it was on top of a normal-sized police car. A sheriff with a cowboy-style hat was leaning against the car, staring at Ferrajalt as he drove by. For an instant the Prince locked eyes with the sheriff, and saw he was

a tall, thin, young-looking fellow.

In the next instant Ferrajalt had passed far beyond the lawman—but something about the stranger—what was it? The Prince shook his head and figured that this destroyed world and all its weirdness would soon be behind him. But then he considered what he was headed for—flying headlong into the unknown, and he felt a tinge of panic before Injure's terse commands distracted him—they were upon another turn.

This turn went smooth enough, and Ferrajalt began to be aware of the high-pitched squeal of the Repsiridescent gliding along on top of the ice, getting louder and louder as they kept going faster and faster.

One more turn, and they'd hit the straightaway—nothing but a mile or two between them and the waterfall. None of them would have much time to get into their planes—it would definitely be close.

Ferrajalt stared ahead at the passing streetlights, then he glanced down at the speedometer—160 mph and rising fast. How could he feel so calm?

The final turn came, and though Injure was fretting over some piece of data, the group accomplished it without error. So now—this was it.

“Alright people,” Injure said, “here we go. Set your autopilot in—fifteen seconds—then get the hell up to those planes! Remember—follow the Repsiridescent into the event—don't worry about the distance so much, just—okay—7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1—set autopilot and bail out!”

Ferrajalt swallowed hard and then punched the orange autopilot light. The speedometer read 180 mph. The riverbanks and streetlights shot past him like lightning. He grabbed at the release of his seatbelt and flailed at it when it didn't instantly release. A surge of panic washed over him, but subsided when he got the seatbelt loose and jumped up.

A final glance at the speedometer showed it at 185 mph and rising quickly. There was no turning back.

He opened the door and walked into the main area of his Warhome. He looked up at the biplane at the top of the shaft as he heard that awful high-pitched wail from the boat. So he wouldn't be able to make good on his promise to Treyess—the wonderful Warhome would be demolished in the impact. Maybe it could be recovered and repaired after the impact? He decided he couldn't afford to spend any time worrying about it as he climbed the ladder on the central shaft and climbed

aboard the plane.

The key. He forgot the key. The control panel was dead in front of him. The key was back next to the driver's seat. How could he have forgotten it? He was dead.

Ferrajalt blinked his eyes once, then jumped out of the plane and landed hard on the floor—a little bit of superstrength kicked in to prevent injury. Thinking fast, the Prince yelled “Super!” and felt an explosion of power within him. In one leap, he splintered the cockpit door and lunged forward for the key, which he grabbed swiftly.

Looking ahead, he saw the glow of Doscovor on the horizon. The vector display was flashing and beeping wildly, warning of the impending fall.

Several of the others were already taking off in their biplanes. He could make it. He had to make it.

Ferrajalt bounded back through the wrecked door and with a massive leap was back next to the plane. He lunged forward and jammed the key into its hole, turning it as he jumped into the seat. The control panel lit up, and the dome began to open.

Finding the right controls, Ferrajalt started to rise the plane. A blast of wind hit him in the face like a brick—he didn't have his helmet on. As the biplane rose, he could see the rough ice of the waterfall ahead—he had made it with a quarter minute to spare. He eased forward on the throttle, and was free from the Warhome.

Pulling back on the stick, he shot upward.

Suddenly, the video screen on the console lit up—it was Treyess, with a helmet on. She was moving her lips, but Ferrajalt couldn't hear, so he reached down, grabbed the helmet, and put it on.

“What?” he yelled.

“I said, I see you had some trouble too.”

“Yeah. I forgot the key.”

“Haha! Me too. I almost died, Ferrajalt, I tell you, I almost died. I didn't realize it was in my pocket the whole time.”

Ferrajalt laughed a little.

“Well, I really did forget it,” he said. “I messed the place up with superstrength getting it back.”

“Wow. Oh look! There it goes!”

Indeed, as he was looking at the video screen, the Warhomes zoomed off the edge of the waterfall—to be followed a moment later by the enormous ocean liner. Ferrajalt was shocked at the sudden silence—he hadn't even noticed the

shrieking wail of the boat on the ice, but now that it was silent, he felt a wave of relief.

It happened quickly. The boat, with flashing Warhome lights mutedly visible from its front, seemed to glide over the bay, unerring in its path toward Office Complex at Gumhanshire. The giant streetlight Den shot down was still hanging onto the ocean liner.

And then it hit—and the lights of Office Complex at Gumhanshire went out. No explosion, no reality wave, nothing.

“Okay,” Ferrajalt said, shaken. “Is that it? Did it work?”

“I don’t know,” Treyess responded. “Let’s just get over there, full throttle!”

“Alright,” Ferrajalt said, easing the throttle forward all the way, and then some. His little biplane shot forward with surprising speed.

In a moment, he was over the bay and headed for what was now a growing cloud of dust. All of a sudden, hell broke loose in the sky—an array of searingly-bright parallel bands appeared, rotating counter-clockwise and turning from bright white to bright red. The landscape all around him began to ripple, gently at first, but in a few seconds, violently.

“Get into that cloud!” he heard Treyess yell. Yes—he was headed for it. Only a few more seconds...

There was a massive drop in air pressure as the bands in the sky began to unravel. Ferrajalt’s ears popped, and he felt some superstrength kick in to protect him.

He was almost upon the dust cloud now—but something made him look up one last time—and then he saw it—the dog, with the rabbit in its jaws, running as fast as it could. But he knew—he knew that the rabbit wasn’t dead. It was almost as if—as if the dog was trying to help the rabbit.

And he entered the dust cloud. He didn’t care if he crashed—there was nothing left outside the dust cloud anyway. But he didn’t crash—it just got real, real cold, and the air pressure dropped some more.

Now all was dark, and any remaining heat and air pressure quickly vanished—he was in the vacuum of space. He felt his emergency superstrength kick in—it was like an incredible pressure crushing his body. He didn’t breath, and he couldn’t see. Soon, he couldn’t even feel. He was nowhere, but he was still alive. His heart was still beating.

His time in vacuum seemed neverending, but it couldn’t



have been more than a few minutes before it began to warm and an atmosphere once again embraced him. The emergency superstrength eased back a little, enough for him to open his eyes a little and see where he was headed. And it was straight down.

He saw trees, rocks, and ocean for a split second before he crashed. He must have been going near the speed of sound. The emergency superstrength was back, and again he felt like he was being crushed.

Back in the dark.

But this time, Ferrajalt shot him arms forward, and light showered down upon him. He scrambled upward, and collapsed on the edge of the crater his biplane had created. The strain of the superstrength was too much for him. He lost consciousness just as he saw a lovely pine tree. But he was alive. His heart was still beating.



# FORTY-THREE

“Monarch Friendly Times,” Fry Friend said weakly, “my fries are so cold and soggy... you know what this means... I need new fries... I have so few left.”

Fry Friend was so exhausted that he couldn't even stand up straight—he was kneeling forward on the marble floor of the Monarch's throne room. His body was a cardboard french fry container, with wide vertical stripes, light blue and white. Arms and legs extended from the box, and his eyes and mouth were on the box itself. Inside of him were eight old and ruined french fries.

“Fry Friend, these are difficult times indeed,” said Monarch Friendly Times. His light blue and white striped royal garb was tattered and dirty, and he stared at Fry Friend with emptiness in his eyes. “We are all suffering. Yet you come to me... as if you believe I don't know the pain you're in...”

Monarch Friendly Times was an old man, his hair long and white, but with a few wisps of blond. His beard was likewise colored and unkempt. The crown on his head was cracked and held together with masking tape.

“Monarch... I have always strived to follow and obey you...and I've always trusted you... but it's been so long since I've had fresh fries... the past two years are like a blur...”

“You think I'm not aware of this?”

“No... but I have to tell you... please, I need new fries... we all know you have... your magic powers... that you're saving them...”

“For myself? Is that what you think?”

Fry Friend paused—so this was it—he was finally going to be able to bring himself to challenge the Monarch openly.

“That is what I think—what we all think!” Fry Friend

yelled, followed by a wave of dizziness. So weak...

"After all I've done for you..." the Monarch said after a long pause. "You take and take and take from me—with little gratitude—and now, that times are bad, you turn on me."

"I never wanted it to get to this point," Fry Friend whispered, hoping the Monarch could hear him. "But I'm afraid... that I just can't go on."

"What alternative is there, Fry Friend?"

"Just give me new... new fries..."

"That is not going to happen."

The two were silent for several minutes. It was a terrible silence, a silence which Fry Friend could feel bearing down on him like a dead weight.

"If you can't help me..." Fry Friend finally said, "I'm going to follow Onion Ring Friend down the Exit Escalator."

The Monarch narrowed his eyes.

"I thought you had more sense than that poor idiot Onion Ring Friend."

"He knew... he had theories... he thought... that his onion rings were just holding him back from his true potential..."

"Onion Ring Friend is dead! He left all his onion rings behind! Do you want to end up like him? Don't kill yourself... I'll get you some new fries... it's just a matter of time."

"I... don't believe you. There is no magic in the kingdom anymore. You have the only magic that's left. Maybe you... maybe you're just waiting for us all to die, then you can... then you can have all the magic for yourself..."

"Get out of here," the Monarch said. "Your words... you have no more loyalty... go and kill yourself if you want. Go and follow that damn fool Onion Ring Friend. I always knew you two would be traitors. From the time of the beginning—you two were always too free in your thoughts. Burger Friend, Shake Friend, Cookie Friend—they would never speak to me thus."

"Only because they fear you. But privately, they hate you. Them, and all the rest. I once feared you... but now, I'm too tired... my being is too weak to support such a stressful feeling as fear..."

"Get out of my sight, Fry Friend. And when I next pass by that Exit Escalator, I truly hope to see those eight wretched fries at its mouth... and I'll know I am finally rid of both you and Onion Ring Friend, who have been banes in my side for too long."

Tears came to Fry Friend's eyes. They ran down the cardboard of his box, as he stood up with great difficulty.

"I never knew you hated me. I... I always thought you loved me, like you love all the others."

The Monarch didn't reply, but glowered at Fry Friend with an evil look.

Fry Friend breathed heavily as he waited in vain for the Monarch to speak.

"I have only one thing to say to you..." Fry Friend finally said. "If I discover that there is life beyond the Kingdom... that my french fries have been holding me back all these years... that you knew all about it, but let me go on suffering... I... I will find a way... I'll find a way... to exact my revenge upon you."

The Monarch raised one eyebrow.

"If that day ever comes, I will take great pleasure in tearing you apart," the Monarch said. Then, through gritted teeth, "Now get out or I'll demolish you right here, right now."

Fry Friend frowned but did not reply, truly fearing for his life. He turned and left the throne room, half expecting the Monarch to strike him from behind.

But he got out safely.

The only thing on Fry Friend's mind was getting to the Exit Escalator. He had been planning on saying goodbye to all the other Friends, but now he felt an urgency, and decided to take the Escalator before he lost the will to do it.

He left the castle by its Forest Entrance and took the winding trail that led to the Exit Escalator.

When he was almost there, he spotted Hot Dog Bit Friend lying by the side of the path, either sleeping or dead. His body was a batter-dipped, fried segment of hot dog, the surface of which was dry and cracked and dirty, with eyes and mouth on the surface, and arms and legs sticking out, in much the same fashion as Fry Friend's appendages.

"Hot Dog Bit Friend?" Fry Friend said hesitantly. "Are you... are you alright?"

Hot Dog Bit Friend stirred and stared up at Fry Friend.

"Am I not dead yet?" he said in a hoarse voice.

"Not yet."

Hot Dog Bit Friend tried to laugh, but wound up coughing instead.

"I've been to see the Monarch," Fry Friend said.

"Yeah?" Hot Dog Bit Friend said, his eyes red and watery.

"I told him what I thought of him. I really gave it to him, all the things I've been wanting to say to him over the years, but never had the courage to. Now he wants me dead. I have no choice, but to follow—"

"—Onion Ring Friend?"

"Yes."

Hot Dog Bit friend looked very sad as he stared up at Fry Friend.

"I will miss you, Friend."

"And I you."

"Is there anything..."

"Dog," Fry Friend said after a pause, "I know it's not fair to ask this of you... but I am worried about... the logistics... of what I am about to do. I must take out all my fries before I can get onto the Escalator... and... and from what the Monarch says, if I have no fries left, I will die. I was... I was thinking of throwing the last one away and trying to fall backwards onto the escalator. But I'm not sure I can do it."

"I'll help you. Hell, I'd follow you if I could, but I'm all food."

"You don't know how much this means to me. If I do succeed, I will find some way to repay you. I promise."

"It's okay," Hot Dog Bit Friend said, getting up with some difficulty. "I know I have no future. But if I have the hope that somehow you made it—that you escaped—that I helped you—I will be able to meet my death with a smile."

The two walked the remaining distance to the Exit Escalator. It was an escalator in an entrance cut into the side of a cliff face. There was a big "EXIT" sign above it, and below the big sign was a smaller sign which read "NO FOOD ON ESCALATOR". The view down the escalator was obscured by fog about 20 or 30 feet down.

"Well, this is it," Fry Friend said, grabbing a fry from himself and tossing it away.

Instantly, he felt a wave of fatigue and disorientation.

As he threw the next one away, he blacked out momentarily and found himself on his knees, no longer able to support his weight."

"God damn it, how did Onion Ring Friend do it?"

"I'll help you my Friend," Hot Dog Bit Friend said, and he began taking fries out of Fry Friend.

That was the last thing Fry Friend saw, the benevolent visage of Hot Dog Bit Friend taking fry after fry out of him.

Five... four... three... two...

He blacked out.

Then, he slowly began to regain consciousness.

At first, all that Fry Friend was aware of was the humming. A deep, mystical, overwhelming hum. Then a blurry sight—gray blobs and landscapes scrolling by. Then pain, wracking his cardboard body.

He let out a moan and rubbed his eyes. What was this, a terrible dream? A dream... no...

He focused on the gray shapes and saw that they were weird patterns in a rock tunnel... a tunnel slanting downward...

The Escalator! He was on the Exit Escalator! And he was alive!

He tried to sit up, but lost his balance and went tumbling down the steps of the Escalator, awful pain ringing through his body with every jolt.

But finally he managed to stop himself and sit with stability on one of the stairs.

“I made it...” he said softly, his voice echoing weirdly.

The Escalator had eerie bluish lights every couple of yards, lighting up the tunnel in a bizarre way.

He could see nothing but Escalator both up and down. He sighed and stretched out on the stair, trying to relax and find a position where it wouldn't hurt so bad.

He smiled and felt around inside himself—no french fries at all. So Monarch Friendly Times was a liar. No fries, and still alive...

Wondering how long he'd been unconscious, Fry propped himself up on his side and stared down the neverending shaft. Does it ever end? If not, then Ring was somewhere down there—maybe thousands of miles down. Could I ever reach him, Fry thought, if that was the case?

He considered yelling out Ring's name, but he decided against it. No use. It would just be too far. Too far...

He lied back down and stared at the pattern of the tunnel wall—somewhat reminiscent of the marble floor in Monarch Friendly Time's throne room, but much sharper and more severe. Severity—now there was something Fry could get into. Everything back in the Kingdom—everything was just so gentle. At least, up till recently, with everyone dying...

He wondered whether or not Shake Friend or Pop Friend or Coffee Friend or Juice Friend could make it—they were primarily cups, after all. But no—they didn't have any rebellion

in them. And their contents—beverages—lasted a lot longer without replenishment than either his fries or Ring's onion rings.

But I'm free, he thought. Free of Monarch Friendly Times and Friendly Times Kingdom. I always knew there was more to my life...

Even though he was sore all over, Fry realized that he felt stronger, more vital, more alive than he ever had with french fries in him. They were holding him back. Ring had been correct.

He regretted not doing this long ago—to think of all the suffering and despair he had to endure for the past two years... what a waste...

It was a year-and-a-half ago that Ring had taken the plunge. Ring was always talking about his weird theories and criticizing the Monarch. Fry was torn. He liked Ring a lot and respected his intelligence, but he also loved the Monarch. And he always feared that the Monarch would discover the terrible things that Ring was saying and that Fry was tentatively agreeing with.

But now... it didn't matter anymore... and somehow, Fry knew, he would find Ring, and let him know how right he had been about the Monarch's hidden evil...

Yes... yes...

Fry then slipped back into unconsciousness.

It was a bad time—periods of sleep and disorienting semi-consciousness—and it went on for what must have been days.

Then suddenly, after Fry woke up after a particularly nightmare-ridden doze, he realized that he had reached the bottom.

He was at the base of the Escalator, one corner of him still barely touching it. He stood up and was glad to feel that his pain was pretty much gone.

He was in a dark, enclosed space—the only light coming from the last few lights of the Exit Escalator. He could make out a number of abandoned storefronts lining the walls of the chamber. He took a few steps away from the Escalator and then he spotted it—a few paces away—a napkin with writing on it.

He approached the napkin and saw that “FRY” was written on it in red crayon. Had he a heart, it would have raced as he unfolded the napkin and read the scrawled message...



Fry,

I knew you'd make it someday. I was right about all this, as you see. I've searched the entire area and found little of any interest—except the Friendly Times restaurant, which you can find down the corridor opposite the E. E. It's what I always thought—we were the archetypes for a chain of fast food restaurants. Anyway, it gets very dark past the restaurant, but it's the only way out as far as I can tell, so that's where I'm headed. I found the crayons and napkin in the restaurant. I'm taking some with me, so I'll leave you other messages, if I can. But it's on into the darkness for me. I hope to see you again someday, my friend.

—Ring

P.S. Sorry I didn't say goodbye when I left, but that's the way things go.

Fry looked up from the letter, his mind buzzing. The restaurant... he had to see the restaurant... and then, he too would have to face the darkness.

