

Part I

The excitement in the air was so thick, you could spread it like custard on a crumpet. What a marvelous summer day it was to be a child, whisking through the knee-high rye, bounding over the hills with a smile challenging one's face to contain it. What a marvelous day it was... for magic!

Scampering youths contributed to a gulf of human confetti. It was a surge of robes and floppy hats, broomsticks, mops, even a few dustpans and soap buckets. Giddy young hands clutched wands, scepters, staves, rods, switches, swizzlesticks, batons, and even an uncooked strand of spaghetti here and there. A menagerie of prospective familiars squawked and murmured a generic din of animal noises. The creatures were in various states of being caged, restrained, tame, disease-free, alive, and the opposites of all those things, in many, many permutations.

The children had propped up makeshift tables and set kettles to boil, as the lads and lasses were not ones for sparing afternoon tea. The shrill cacophony of whistling kettles and clinking sugar spoons barely overshadowed the racket produced by no less than four dozen impromptu cricket matches. Wicked googlies sliced through the air and laughter, much like, let's say, an elusive winged golden projectile fluttering about, oh, a field in a fictional magical sport played on brooms. It doesn't really matter what it's called.

Quid itching to flee pockets and purses was wagered generously on games of skill and chance. Dartboards awaited darts whizzing towards them on trajectories perpendicular to the googlies. Union Jacks flapped gallantly. Giant pictures of Prince Charles and Margaret Thatcher were hoisted to the heavens, their likenesses made bleary through the children's tears of pride. A vigorous vocal treatment of God Save the Queen boomed at a jarring volume, muffled patriotically through mouthfuls of meat pie and blood sausage. Somewhere in the crowd, several bobbies chased a man in fast-forward time to the tune of a humorous kazoo. The children were enamoured of their newfound lot in life, and savoured every moment of it.

This is exactly what happened. Every bit of it. Or that is, it is exactly what would have happened if the children were British. In fact, not a bloody one of them was British. They were all bloody Americans.

This requires admittedly a slight modification of the depiction of events thus far. It is not without chagrin that some of these accounts will be rescinded. Though let the record show that a

certain easing into the possibility that a reality may exist in which young people who are not British may also be enamored (sensibly spelled, without a “u”) of magic and witchcraft. You are being asked, boldly, to peer through a rare looking glass into a strictly incredible universe in which the United Kingdom’s stranglehold on youth-based occult and whimsical childhood sorcery is marginally less like the grim vice grip of a pit-bull on a mailman’s groin. Much is being asked of you. This is fully conceded.

Though the abject silliness of tea and googlies and such may have been a cruel literary bait and switch, the rough picture still holds true (though there may have been a spare picture of Margaret Thatcher somewhere in the crowd by pure chance). There exists somewhere on a grassy landscape a teeming horde of youngsters, all sorcery enthusiasts and quite eager in a general sort of way. There is among this horde a singular boy who will be the subject of our attention. We will note two things in particular about this boy. Far from exhibiting the enthusiasm of his fellow children, he was mystified by the gayety, and more than a little alarmed as well. Additionally, far from hailing from Great Britain as the preceding deluge of bullshit might have had you believing, this boy was from the state of New Jersey.

This boy’s name was Wizardy Herbert.

Herbert scanned the crowd from behind his eye patch. Was he missing something here? The robes, the floppy hats... Was this a pajama party? That kid over there, he was chasing after an iguana. And another was attempting to coax a very grumpy badger into a magnificently undersized cage. Between the jubilant cheers, outbursts of song, and dispersed chatter of nonsense one makes when speaking in tongues, Herbert concluded every one of these children must be on drugs.

He began noticing a common thread among the kids, aside from the shared trait of exhibiting clinically psychotic episodes. Most of them were armed with books. Children’s books. Tales of marvelous imagination and adventure, and above all, magic. The most popular series were there. “Rutherford Trick, Volume Three: The Whooping Ghoul of Flatulan”, “ALASHA-ZAMMM! UP IN SMOKE!!!”, and some volumes in one of Herbert’s personal favorites, “Vera Valera and the Secret Sorceress Sorority”. This was a clue. It all started clicking in his mind. It was all starting to make sense...

No it wasn’t.

Herbert thought about the uninspired contents of his suitcase. Clipboards, an adding machine, some yellow notepads, a visor... a visor, of all things. That kid over there was wearing a billowing rainbow-patterned hat. It would almost look Rastafarian, if it weren't so flagrantly homosexual. He hadn't thought to bring anything magically-themed. Not even in a half-assed way, like the kid over there in his father's robe, with stars and moons smeared on it with asphalt paint from the garage. Why should he? He thought he was going to Accounting Camp.

But then, he suspected something was askew from moment-one, with kids prattling on about magic and the repeated mention of some guy named Thundleshick. The name rang a bell for Herbert. It might have been the name of the man he guessed was the head... accounting guy, or whatever you wanted to call it. But the way the kids spoke of him was not how one expected any Chief Accounting Honcho to be spoken of. Usually the phrases "great magician" and "wise beyond the great cosmic manifold" did not appear in sentences pertaining to accountants.

All aside, it was a beautiful day. High spirits and good cheer were abundant, and it was difficult to anticipate anything ominous. Difficult to anyone there, except for Herbert (who found himself wondering what Office Depot's refund policy towards clipboards was). Call it intuition. Also right in lockstep with this grave intuition was a girl. Though you wouldn't know it by the playful expression she wore as she approached Herbert from behind. She tapped Herbert on the shoulder.

"You look lost," she said.

He turned, startled to see someone wearing ordinary clothes. "Me? No, not at all. I just seem to have misplaced my enchanted scepter. Not to mention my potbelly pig familiar. He's all I have, and I'd be crushed if I lost him."

"I know what you mean," she commiserated in the silently agreed upon language of sarcasm. "My magical flamingo freaked out and just... took off. I'm Beatrix, by the way. Beatrix Tipplepot."

"Wizardy Herbert. Nice to meet you." She made a peculiar face at this, and Herbert knew what was coming. It was the story of his life.

"So, your last name is Herbert? Do... do people call you Wizardy?"

“No. They call be Herbert. It’s my first name.”

“What is Wizardy, then?”

“It’s like... a first-first name. A pre-first name, I guess.”

“So what’s your last name?”

“I don’t really have one.”

There was a moment of awkward silence, one to which Herbert was accustomed and heavily inured. He allowed it to pass like a noisy ambulance before continuing with the conversation.

“That’s a nice... uh...” Herbert wasn’t sure what it was hanging from Beatrix’s neck. A kind of locket? He was no jewelersmith, nor was he sure such a trade existed.

“Thanks. I’m not sure what it is either,” she said holding up the odd accessory. It was a silver disc, hollow in the center like a donut, and very much did look as if it opened up like a locket. “My sister gave it to me. This ring too!” She held up her hand, flashing an ornate silver ring with a pink jewel. “... Before she died, that is.”

“Oh. I’m sorry to hear that. I’ve lost family too.”

“It’s tough, isn’t it? Getting by without parents...” she said with a conversational melancholy.

“Huh? I, um... I never said I didn’t have parents.”

People were always assuming he was an orphan. Was it something about his demeanor? His looks? It was almost as if Herbert fit some profile for a type of person others needed to believe in. A person who’d lost his parents in a terrible, ominous event. A person who’d walk the earth as a lone, troubled soul, one day unraveling the threads of that event and colliding with destiny. One whose entire star-crossed existence would prove to be the epicenter of a dire evil which would either fall or flourish depending on the degree to which he’d realize his own inner greatness.

But he did have parents. They were two very loving parents who cared for him, and usually gave him what he wanted. When he revealed this to those who supposed otherwise, he was met with incredulousness, and frequently the additional query, “Are you sure you’re not adopted?”

“Oh... Are you sure you’re not adopted?” Beatrix asked, hemming.

“Very. Really, I wish I was sometimes.” Herbert said nonchalantly, as if to quell her flustered embarrassment by downplaying his attachment to his parents. She frowned. Herbert mistook it for sadness, and it was his turn to feel like a social imbecile. “Oh, sorry. I mean, no offense, if that is your situation. I kinda gathered you were implying you didn’t have parents, with what you said earlier. I hope I didn’t make you feel bad by saying I wished I didn’t, and... wow, I...”

Herbert didn’t have time to continue his ingratulatory blithering, because that is when some really exceptionally magical stuff started to happen. The grassy hills and blue skies were suddenly seen as if holographically projected onto luminous, all-surrounding silk drapes. Those drapes billowed and fluttered in a magical breeze, then dissolved, giving way to a new surrounding. It was now a dense forest, a lush, mossy, exceptionally magical forest. Gnarled vines and creepers wrapped about each other in taught spirals, tickling mammoth leaves, molesting bulbs and fondling toadstools. The thickness of the surrounding wood produced an element of claustrophobia, with all views obscured except directly upwards, which offered a look at the night sky so saturated with stars, it resembled a prolific thief’s cache of diamonds spread on dark velvet.

Herbert had to admit, it was magical. He noted all the other kids, including Beatrix, were as spellbound at the sight as he was. Or as he would be, at least, if he weren’t so cynical about magical affairs.

Through the splendor of illusionry and the muscle spasms of hysterical facial expressions, almost went unnoticed among the crowd was the silent work of nimble monkeys in dapper red suits. They efficiently gathered the children’s luggage, brooms, coats, wands, animal cages and the like, and heaped it all into one big pile in the center, ostensibly for later transport to somewhere else.

From above, echoing footsteps descended from a quietly manifesting stone staircase. It was as if a piece of a castle were being dangled from the sky, terminating with a stone platform suspended high above the pile of luggage.

A pair of old brown shoes clicked onto the platform. In those shoes were sweaty feet, and attached to those feet was a pair of chubby, elderly legs. Mercifully, they were mostly concealed by ancient rags you might have called a robe, if you were feeling daring with language. Emerging from rags was a chubby, smiling head with twinkling eyes and a greasy beard which had achieved dominance over the face long ago, and now only sought to make a perpetual and ostentatious show of military strength. It was as if someone had forced a gray Muppet through a paper shredder and glued it to the man's face.

"Thundleshick," was a whispered chorus among the awed children.

Elwin Thundleshick was a kindhearted man of good humor and renowned benevolence. A special wisdom and tranquility had been etched deep into his soul, much like the lines etched deep into his paunchy face, both in ways that uniquely stem from countless years devoted to magic and children in a venerable life (a life which has lasted no fewer than ten thousand years, we are to believe unwaveringly). He was the type of sage who could say volumes more with his smile than his words, and sometimes even answered questions with the odors emitting from his body. Such was his magnanimity that he'd sacrifice all worldly pleasures if it meant the enrichment of even one benighted child. And it had seemed that such a barter arrangement had been made for the luxury of bathing some time ago.

The children stood in silence, their heads craned upward. Crickets had their say, for the first time not drowned out by the fanfare of excited youth. The scepter rested gently on the stone, while a doughy, spotted hand raised itself with the import of one belonging to a person about to speak. The children held their breath. Even the beads of sweat rolling down their faces came to a standstill at the pregnancy of the moment.

Thundleshick's face broadened, revealing hard boiled egg yolk-colored teeth. "Children," said a surprisingly melodious voice. "With the authority vested from the spirits of this sacred land upon this humble servant, and with all due pomp, ceremonious circyooitry, and pontifical profundosities, I hereby decree this summer camp of whimsy and the occult to be... in session!"

For a moment, you could hear a pin whistling through the air like a bomb. But you wouldn't hear it hit the floor. Because at that very moment, the children detonated into a mushroom cloud of noisy exultation. Children's interlocking arms served as axels for spirited pinwheel dances which broke out spontaneously like bar fights in a saloon. Jittering hands collaborated to hoist a crudely scribbled banner declaring, "WE LOVE YOU THUNDLESTICK!"

It wouldn't come as a surprise that the kid whose luggage was filled with tools of the accounting trade was not among those celebrating. Herbert always had a distinct mistrust for those who claimed magical authority. The beards, the robes, the mystifying smirks, it all ran against the grain of Herbert's good graces. He could never explain why, but it possibly was an extension of his general distaste for the idea of magic.

Herbert glanced at Beatrix. Though she was clearly bemused and titillated by the surrounding events, he could tell she shared some of his cautious reservations about what was unfolding.

Thundleshick, as if reading Herbert's mind (magical fellows love doing that), turned and beamed at him like a satellite dish, channeling the full vector of his oily complexion towards him. And then, through the intractable thicket of hair, beard, and eyebrows, which long ago lost the right to distinguish themselves from each other (hairbeardbrows), he winked.

The wink squeezed out a white, pulsing dot of light. The light ambled lazily like a firefly, drifting downward. Straight downward, towards the luggage. It nestled in the heart of the pile, unnoticed to all but the boy and girl we've been observing.

The fireball was blinding, and the shockwave knocked each child to the ground. The mountain of belongings was instantly incinerated, one could only presume, inside the raging, blood-red bonfire. Herbert looked up to see Thundleshick and his floating castle-part vanishing into thin air. The children were too stunned to scream, or even contemplate fear. All that was heard was the roar of the fire.

The deafening sound of the explosion was suddenly one-upped by the clap of thunder overhead. Rain fell in angry, biting stabs, and soon all that was heard was a steady rush of water. The rain extinguished the fire, leaving behind dreary, black soot, and nothing remotely resembling a piece of luggage, a broom, a wand, a book, or a caged creature.

Beatrix adjusted the makeshift umbrella, providing relief from relentless barrage of ice water. The sound above was uncomfortably loud, like a stampede of tiny horses thundering across the cardboard. Herbert squeegeed his face as he surveyed the smorgasbord of human misery that was the legion of sopping, disappointed children. He didn't merely pity them. In looking at these drenched kids in their silly ensembles, scared, cold and defeated, Herbert noted that pity had stepped up its game. A large, round boy a few yards from him, inexplicably dressed in a Sailor Moon outfit, struck Herbert as an acutely tragic case.

"I'm glad I travel light," said Beatrix with a wry optimism regarding the incineration of their belongings.

"Wish I could say the same." Herbert made an unpleasant face, but on thinking about it, felt he wouldn't lose much sleep over a few clipboards and visors. But still, there was at least one thing he wished hadn't burned...

"Let me guess. You don't have a clue about what's going on here, do you?" she asked.

"You mean, like, the fact that this was some kind of magic thing?" He ventured. She nodded slightly and smirked.

He continued, "You mean like a largely un-chaperoned magic thing? A possibly deadly, sort of child endangerment-themed magic thing? A kind of wet, hypothermia-oriented youth-jam magic thing? 'Cause no, that all caught me by surprise."

"Ah..."

"How about you? Did you know it was a magic thing?" Herbert inquired.

"I had some idea," she said. "I will say, the other stuff I did not see coming."

"I don't suppose many would show up willingly if all that stuff was billed in the brochure." Nor would many kids in their right minds show up willingly to a camp celebrating the joys of accounting, thought Herbert.

A nearby kid whose flesh tones could be seen through his moist, clinging white robe was sobbing heavily into his floppy hat, further dampening it with his tears.

“So what now?” Beatrix posed.

“I guess we stay dry until the rain stops. Look for shelter, find a phone to call home, then get the hell out of this place.”

“Sounds good. Except the part about leaving. I plan on staying.”

“What?” Herbert stared for a moment at the puzzling girl, who said nothing. His eye drifted upward to the surface of the cardboard overhead. Printed on the board was a corroded, mud-caked image of Great Britain’s former Primer Minister, Margaret Thatcher.

“Who’s that?” Herbert asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe one of the Golden Girls?”

Herbert nodded in tacit agreement. They both trudged into the damp woods in search of shelter. Herbert ruminated on his fate, and that of every child there. This was by no means fun, sure, but at least the rain would subside, and maybe as a whole they could figure out how to survive. There was probably not one child there who hadn’t fantasized about a Lord of the Flies situation, in which authority was absent, children ruled, and fun was rampant (bear in mind that very few of these children had actually read Lord of the Flies). Maybe they could do it. They could pick up the pieces after a cruel old man’s hoax, restore some basic humanity to their situation, and find a way home. At the very least, they did not seem to be in immediate mortal peril. Just a little rain. No wild animals, no lurking child predators, it seemed. It was not as if they were being hunted by a pack of ferocious skeletons.

Herbert almost began to feel optimistic.

That’s when the children were attacked by a pack of ferocious skeletons. Gigantic, shrieking, angry, angry skeletons.

On a balmy evening in a New Jersey suburb, a faint shuffling could be detected in the waning daylight. The kind of shuffling you might hear from grandpa in the middle of the night when he makes his way down the hall to the bathroom. This shuffling however belonged to a hunched form negotiating the sidewalk, pausing in front of a house. The form coughed, then opened the lid to a trash can. It picked something out of the garbage, smelled it, then tossed it back in. It turned towards the house and shuffled towards the door. A fat, ancient-looking finger squashed against the doorbell like a greasy sausage.

Elwin Thundleshick was a shallow bastard of a man, a man of dodgy morals and renowned pettiness. A special miserliness and rapacity had been etched deep into his soul, much like the lines etched deep into his paunchy face, both in ways that uniquely stem from countless years devoted to swindling children in a unprincipled life (a life which has lasted no fewer than ten thousand years, we are still to believe unwaveringly). He was the type of sage who could say volumes more with his staggering and brazen deeds of kleptomania than his words, and sometimes even answered questions with lewd gestures. Such was his conniving that he'd sacrifice the enrichment of all the world's children if it meant easing the discomfort of the stubborn rash on his backside. And it had seemed that he was already working on the former without even the promise of the latter, as a kind of twisted pro bono arrangement.

A cheerful woman named Donna opened the front door. The ragged form on her doorstep animated itself and smiled, providing the first decent evidence that it might be a person.

“You must be Mr. Thundleshick,” Herbert’s mother said warmly.

A herd of Pikmin stormed across a log bridging a river, when a cluster of the band foolishly corralled themselves into the water. Falsetto pleas for help preceded a cascade of little ghosts elevating from the plant creatures’ tiny drowned carcasses. When the dust had settled, twenty-one were lost.

Herbert muttered something vulgar. The sound of the doorbell did not divert his attention in the least from his GameCube playing. Something dreadful filled his nostrils. It must have been coming from downstairs, wafting beneath his door.

His parents earlier had mentioned something mysterious in passing about a visitor tonight. He hadn't asked, but sensed the encounter had something to do with his fate. This sense tingled whenever others made plans for him behind his back. It happened often enough, usually involving his parents' good intentions.

Herbert was reaching the age when the instincts for contrarianism were spiking. For most teens, to get through those turbulent times most easily, it helps to be in an environment which offers them actual problems. Things like being denied what they want, or being told to behave a certain way, or if it's really not too much to ask, to be beaten once in a while. Such measures give a teen the feeling that his hormone-based antagonism complex is at least somewhat justified.

This was Herbert's problem, though he didn't know it consciously. His parents tended to give him what he wanted.

Unfortunately for Herbert, his teenage insurgency would take the form of an unwitting rebellion against fun itself. He rejected most of the predilections of his peers. He yawned as kids in his class chirped about their favorite books full of children's magical adventures (though he did read one series, a guilty pleasure he'd never tell anyone about. There was something about a Secret Sorceress Sorority full of svelte, lightly-clad teen girls that spoke to him). Sure, he watched a lot of TV and played video games, but while those activities may appear recreational to most, to Herbert it was a form of self-imposed monastic vegetation.

In spite of himself, Herbert's habits had the designed effect. It drove his parents crazy. They tried fruitlessly to get him involved in fun things hoping to rekindle some childhood enthusiasm. Herbert speculated their efforts had something to do with the absence of their other two sons, but he wasn't about to crack the psychology books and sleuth that one out. It was certain that these kinds of shenanigans were afoot downstairs, but he wasn't about to Sherlock that one up either. Though to be fair, the weird stench permeating the house was the most compelling case against the idea.

Herbert's thumbs fidgeted as his loyal army slaughtered a hapless beetle and carried it home for sustenance.

"Would you like something, Mr. Thundleshick? Some coffee or tea?"

“Oh, do call me Elwin.” He wished she had mentioned scotch in the list. But he thought better of it to ask. Best to stay focused on the task at hand. “You are very gracious, but no thank you, madam. About this boy we spoke of earlier... your boy, Herbert?”

“Ah! There you are. Thundleshick, is it? So good to meet you.” William strode across the room to shake his hand. He was the kind of guy who would shake anyone’s hand, no matter what. “Donna, have you offered our guest a drink? Coffee? Or maybe scotch is your drink, eh, Thundles?” He said accompanied by a jocular pat on the back, releasing a cloud of particles which would make a HAZMAT team weep.

Thundleshick cleared his throat looking flustered. “You’re both so kind.”

“So, Elwin,” Donna began. “On the phone we were talking about your summer camp. It sounded quite... unique.”

Thundleshick was looking down at a coffee table which was host to a variety of domestic knickknacks. His eyes settled on some sort of ceramic frog. “Madam, I don’t imagine there is any other camp like it in the world.”

“And what was it called again? Your brochure didn’t seem to mention the name.”

Thundleshick scratched his beard and muttered something that sounded like “Camp Pawksa[inaudible]tucket.” Whenever anyone asked the name of the camp, he made up a vaguely Native American-sounding word and changed the subject. He glanced at a photograph behind them. “Is that your boy, there?”

They looked at the picture of Herbert wearing a goofy smile. “Yeah, that’s our guy.” While they were turned, Thundleshick stuffed the ceramic frog into his cloak.

“He’s a good looking boy. Good looking boy,” Thundleshick grunted with some effort.

“And about this camp...” Donna tried to piece together the coarsely muttered syllables in her mind, but didn’t want to risk repeating them incorrectly. “You say it really is a magical camp?”

Thundleshick seemed to light up. “Magical? Gadzooks! We’re up to our blasted necks in magic there, really. We’ve got magic coming out of our—”

“So you and the kids,” William interrupted. “You do magic together, then? You teach them magic?”

“Oh my, yes. And so much more. The kids earn their magical merit badges through great feats of wonder. They learn songs, and discipline, and about getting along with others and making friends. It promises to be an adventure young Herbert will never forget!” Thundleshick’s sudden enthusiasm might have been an act to get himself closer to a fine crystal swan he’d noticed on the windowsill.

“You don’t say?” replied William. “It sounds like a blast. But you should be aware, Herbert doesn’t know any magic, of course. And... well, the thing is, He’s a tough customer. He may not take to it very readily.”

“My friend, there’s nary a child I receive who knows a lick of magic. By the end of the summer, I promise your boy will be spitting out invocations like a veteran tobacco chewer. And his strength of wit and character will fill like a spittoon.”

The couple paused a moment to solve the peculiar analogy. Thundleshick, with wild eyes, gestured behind them again. “And those boys... who are they?”

The crystal swan disappeared into the mortifying abyss beneath his garment. The parents pretended not to notice. “Those... were his brothers.” There suddenly seemed to be a little less air in the room. Thundleshick wasn’t sure whether to feel the guilt of a thief, or the guilt of a social buffoon. He compromised by feeling neither.

“Thundleshick,” William broke the silence. “This all sounds wonderful. But I’m just wondering. Is there any way you can show us that this thing is... legit?”

“Hmm. You mean you would like to see a permit or a license or such?”

“No, no. I’m sorry, I don’t want to sound too skeptical, but before I go ahead and write this check, I was wondering if you could show us some... you know, magic.”

The mention of money was enough to put an additional spring in Thundleshick’s step. He clutched his scepter and scurried to the middle of the room.

“So it’s magic you want to see. Very well! If magic it is wish you to see...” He stirred the air with his scepter like an invisible batter. Wisps of glowing blue mist tailed its tip. “Then magic...” He raised the scepter above his head. “What you will see...” And pointed it at a cuckoo clock. “Will be it!”

An arc of blue caused the clock to vanish. A sudden, mysteriously cuckoo clock-shaped bulge manifested in his the back of his cloak.

William clapped his hands. “That was great! Well done, Thundleshick. To be honest, I’ve never actually seen that before. Magic, that is. It’s quite a treat.”

Donna glanced at her husband. “Yes, it really was. Honey, I think I will put some coffee on after all. Maybe you can help me for a second?”

“Sure, hon. What do say buddy, want a cup?”

“Ah, now that you mention it... I suppose I am feeling a bit... thirsty,” Thundleshick said while delivering a series a lip-licks and conspicuous blinks which was a kind of code a fellow drinker recognized as “I would like some booze, please.”

“Great,” Willam smiled. “I’ll open a bottle.”

In the kitchen, Donna was not bothering with the charade of threatened coffee-brewing. She stood with her arms folded.

“I know it sounds like a great time for a kid, William. But that man...”

“Thundleshick? Come on, dear. He’s just an eccentric.”

“The man’s a horse’s asshole!” snapped Donna, momentarily forgetting she was in a children’s book.

“A kindly old man. Reminds me of my grandfather. Wasn’t much to look at, but that codger knew how to boost a kid’s character.” He fondly recalled summers filled with lively games such as “Cane Fever!” and “Where’s Grandpa’s Colostomy Bag Now?”

Donna frowned. She knew she was avoiding the real issue. “Herbert will never go for it. He’ll shrug it off like all our other ideas to get him excited about something. Even if he finally agrees, he’ll begrudge it the whole time.”

“Ah-ha,” said William, “That’s what you think. I have a plan.” He fished through his jacket, producing a folded flyer. He opened it, handed it to his wife.

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Donna scrutinized the document with charitable attention. The same you’d give a hobo if he rushed you into an alley for a furtive demonstration of his secret government espionage equipment, and with a finger to hushed lips, unveiled a dead raccoon. “I’m not following this. Accounting? What about the magic camp?”

“Herbert doesn’t even have to know!”

Donna’s face slightly relaxed with incipient comprehension.

“Ah-hurhur-AH-HEM.” William cleared his throat in a theatrical transition to a phony ‘serious’ voice. “Now Herbert, I think it’s time we had a heart-to-heart. You’re getting older, and with age comes responsibility. Responsibility is about paying the bills, and as such, it’s high time you acquired some real world, grown-up skills.”

Donna giggled. It spoke to their parental style that the mere insinuation of a heavy-handed approach was a major wellspring of comedy.

“The way I see it,” William said while pouring a glass of scotch, “he’ll go along with it and fully expect to be in for a long, boring summer of accounting. When he sees that it’s all really about magic and adventure and bonding with other kids, he’ll be so surprised, who knows, he might just let his guard down and have a good time.”

Thundleshick surveyed the DVD collection, leaving mysterious vacancies on the shelf. The “2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney: Women’s Gymnastics Competition” DVD was nowhere to be seen. Whether this was the case a moment ago will be left to the speculation of the reader.

“Mr. Thundleshick?” said William. Thundleshick sprang upright, causing the contents of his bulkier-looking cloak to jangle.

“No I wasn’t. I mean... yes?” His eyes, independently of the head, spotted the brown liquid in William’s possession.

“I guess we have a few more things we’d like to know. You know, this place, Camp Whatsit, it sounds really remarkable. I’m envious of Herbert. I never had the opportunity as a boy.”

“Anything, sir. What curiosity would you have me satisfy?”

“There’s so much to wonder, really. I would guess part of the fun would be reading about everything in Herbert’s letters, so I don’t want to spoil too much. Three meals a day, I presume?”

“Oh, goodness, yes. Feasts prepared in the blink of an eye with vapors of the ethereal. A bounty stretching to the horizon and back, thrice per day, plus once on the 4th of July. Your dear lad will be gorged with gorgeous plump turkey legs, surfeited with stuffing, and chockablock with chocolate tartles!” He had this bit down pat.

“Tartles! You don’t say!” William was easy to win over once descriptions of food became involved, and was rarely deterred when the dishes in question didn’t actually exist.

“My mother’s embroideries are gone,” Donna hissed quietly to her right.

“Shh. It’s an unfortunate compulsive disorder and it’s not polite to bring it up. My grandfather had it too.”

Thundleshick was alert to Donna’s dissatisfied posture. This was where he really prided himself in working his magic, so to speak. With the ladies.

“Madam, I see your concern for your son runs deep. It is touching, and only solidifies my resolve to afford young Herbert memories he will cherish long thereafter. It is a promise this old man stakes upon his humble life.” From behind his back he produced an embroidered fabric featuring a violet. His dirty fingers fluttered with plump dexterity. He pulled the flower from the fabric, giving it the full essence of a real violet.

“Elwin, it’s beautiful.”

“Thundleshick, you magnificent bastard. I’ll tell you what. I can’t possibly think of anything better to spend this three grand on this summer.”

He pulled the check from his pocket, and seemingly by the most impressive magic trick yet, the check vanished from his hand and blurred into Thundleshick’s garb. No magic, however, was involved (except for possibly the fabled “Avarice Kedavrice”).

“This is wonderful. Herbert’s going to have a blast,” said William, with his oblivious hand still making the motion to offer the check it was no longer holding.

“You shall not regret it. Herbert is a lucky boy with tremendous parents. I owe much to strong guardians myself. Why, if I didn’t have parents like you as a boy, I wouldn’t have turned out to be the man I am today.”

“Worth drinking to! Your drink, sir. Have it before it evaporates,” William said, offering the glass. Thundleshick took the bottle from his other hand, and held it up with nod of gratitude.

“Then I’m off. I’ll keenly await meeting your son. Good eve!”

Thundleshick bounded out the front door and down the walkway with surprising agility for a fat old man. His loaded cloak jangled as curious-gotten trinkets spilled out and littered the yard. Each bound caught the underside of his cloak with a slight parachuting effect, revealing his corpulent alabaster legs, and for just a split-second, the porch light glinted off his bare bottom. Donna winced.

William beamed and threw back the glass of scotch. “It’s going to be one hell of a summer.”

A boy covered in mud swung a plastic bristled-broom pitifully at the air in front of him. He was flanked on all sides by 10 foot-tall skeletons, whose wet, black bones shined in the rain like polished onyx. Inside their ribcages were vibrant neon-green organs, which pulsated in mock-functionality. The bony assailants screamed through invisible vocal chords, sounding like a noisy vacuum cleaner might if it were part-cat.

One skeleton swung its jaw open to the limit, and let forth a prolific gush of phlegm-like ooze onto the boy. The ample colon of another skeleton came to life like a hungry tapeworm, darting swiftly through a rhythm of complex muscle movements. Its ‘mouth’ flexed and swallowed a child whole. The stomach bulged beneath the ribcage, and two small hands could be seen pressed against the tissue from the interior.

Legions of other skeletons stalked in the distance, performing similar acts upon panicking youngsters. Their dark forms were obscured by the night and heavy rain, lightning occasionally flashbulbing their silhouettes.

“Skeletons... why... did it have... to be skeletons...” puffed Herbert through aching lungs. He’d had no prior beef with skeletons. But even on an unconscious level, it’s hard to pass up sounding like Indiana Jones.

He and Beatrix ran through the forest, stomping in puddles and being whipped by stems and branches. Herbert took the brunt of the wet snapback of plants, while Beatrix had an easier time wending through the foliage, not being depth perception-hobbled by an eye patch.

“I’d like to ask you something which on any other occasion might seem strange. Well, maybe it’s still strange. In fact, I don’t think there will ever be a time I won’t feel ridiculous for asking it,” Herbert stammered, while Beatrix half-expected his query to be regarding what she is doing this Friday, and if she likes pizza. “Do you know any magic?”

“Of course not,” she puffed, hopping over a rock. “I actually had strong doubts about whether it existed at all.”

“That’s a shame. Some kind of invisibility spell, or skeleton-murdering spell might come in handy right now. Even though it’s all a bunch of silly crap.”

“Silly?”

“I hate magic.”

The two children were sliding down a muddy path at an alarming velocity. Herbert noted how unlikely it was for someone to make a terrified getaway through a forest without sliding down a muddy hill by complete surprise. It was always like a ride, with twists, turns, scares, false stops, and sometimes full-blown rollercoaster loops. It was as if a band of bored Ewoks had spent weeks preparing this primitive mud-luge path for their own amusement. This is what Herbert mulled over, as we ponder the sagacity of a second reference to a George Lucas film in about as many paragraphs.

“I know a lot of a people think it’s cool,” Herbert elaborated while vaulting off a mud ramp. “I mean, no offense if you’re into it or anything. It’s just so dumb.”

“Dumb or not, it appears to be a legitimate aspect of the universe. You might as well curse other laws of nature and call them stupid. They are what they are.”

Herbert skimmed through his mental list of natural laws he had cursed before. The law that the buttered side of a piece of bread, when in freefall, will demonstrate overwhelming magnetism towards the carpet. The law about good deeds and the rock-solid assurance that they will never escape retribution. The law about witty Irishmen writing down cynical laws, and without fail, having each one proven to be correct through trial and error (mostly the latter). But maybe she had a point.

“That’s true. It may be real and part of God’s big plan, or whatever. But it’s still stupid. Laws of nature are really basic and discrete. There are just a few forces, only so many elements... it’s simple at a fundamental level, and complex stuff arises naturally from it all, you know? Nothing just appears. That’s what I think is stupid about magic. There’s something about it that always struck me as just lazy. At least lazy for a writer to put in a book. Yeah, sure, it’s so convenient if you can make anything at all happen, by just waving a wand or doing a dance or stroking a toad in a really special way. It’s lazy. Finding out it happens to be real doesn’t change that much.”

“I guess God is just a lazy bastard too, then,” she said with a defiant smirk, while zipping around a wicked bend on the luge path. “Lucky for both of us He doesn’t really exist.”

Hebert exhaled nervously. He was no church aficionado, and he contemplated the reality of God as little as he did with magic. The statement was the unmistakable kind of gauntlet thrown down by one raring for a debate on theology. Herbert was inclined to leave such heavy metal objects resting harmlessly on the floor. He opted to refrain from saying, “Well, until recently you didn’t think magic existed either...”

The speeding kids tumbled to a halt on a welcome stretch of flat land. That welcome, however, wore out about ten yards in front of them, where the land ended with a cliff. The drop-off into blackness was made all the less welcome by the fact that it served as the only escape route from the skeletons now gathering to surround them.

Herbert looked to Beatrix, who appeared frightened and vulnerable. He became aware of a foreign feeling, something male in him. A feeling that he ought to be charged with her protection, and if situation presented itself, dazzle her with deeds of mind-blowing bravery. He wasn’t sure why this was incumbent on him, though it might have had to do with the blunt reality that when viewed from certain angles (i.e. from behind the eyes of a teen boy), she was actually pretty cute.

The skeletons encroached, and Beatrix clutched his shirt. Now was the time to do something brave. He was going to die. It might as well be a gallant death. He grabbed a small but sturdy-looking tree nearby.

“Hey... skeletons!” His mind raced for an adroit quip to throw down. We should not underestimate the willpower it took to avoid the phrase “bone head”.

“Eat branch!”

He tugged at the tree, which held fast. He might as well have been trying to uproot a sequoia. Above his grimacing face, a skull issued an unpleasant gurgling. It puked an obscene volume of luminescent goo onto Herbert and the unfortunate sapling.

He lay cocooned in the wobbling pile of bodily fluid. His nose blew a bubble from the surface of the mass.

Elsewhere in the forest, a pair of shiny shoes made a lively, rhythmic procession. Above the shoes was a dark form, blurred with sprightly maneuvers, vaulting over shrubs and ricocheting from tree trunks. It was trailed by a cape, tracing a liquid path in its wake. A glint of silver emerged from the form, like a silver needle, catching the moonlight.

A green colon whipped about Herbert’s phlegm-cocoon, his nausea-stricken face poking out and gasping like a fish. A mighty black claw held Beatrix, drawing her close to its permanently grinning face. Its eyes and nose sockets were sickening voids of misery, and stink spilled from the holes. She shut her eyes and waited for something awful to happen.

There was a pop. From beneath her eyelids, she could tell it was momentarily brighter. She opened her eyes. The skull was gone. The skeletal hand went limp and dropped her. She landed next to the disembodied skull.

The headless skeleton staggered backwards. There was another pop. A stream of incandescent colors attacked the torso. It exploded, scattering splintered bones like morbid shrapnel.

At the source of the weaponized color display was a boy. He struck a posture that conveyed a smug self-assurance in the same pitch-perfect way that a hunchback’s posture conveys a pressing need to go ring a huge bell. He held with elegant poise a long silver wand. It hummed noiselessly with magic, ready to strike, like an antique TV antenna might be ready to give you a static shock.

“Craven zealots, hear this. Savor these evil deeds.” He made a steady, fearless stride towards the towering mob. “They will be your last. You are done for. That is, if shall be any deciding factor the merit of my...” The dramatic pause was practically an assault in itself.

“Majyyks!!”

The skeletons shrieked in unison, as their new dinner entrée taunted them. The boy flicked his wand as if cuing up an orchestra. “Mistral nymphs, heed this summoning! Arraign my foes with fingers of wind!”

His wand stabbed the air, denting it with a pulse of distortion. A bony torso hoisted into the air as if weightless. His wand leisurely directed the skeleton into another with great force. Bones clattered, sounding like someone dropped a bunch of wood paddles on the floor. The combined jumble sailed over the edge of the cliff.

A new aggressor lurched forward sending a heavy fist into a soggy crater, where the boy stood a moment ago. He was gone. The monster labored to pull its fist out of the mud.

“Control your humors, sir! Lest you should find someone willing to do it for you...” The boy sat on a high branch. He held out both arms like a scarecrow, moving his hands and fingers in a way one would manipulate an invisible marionette.

The skeleton promptly clutched its own plump organs. It ripped out a liberal wad of green viscera, and shoved it into its gnashing mouth, chewing, swallowing, and sending the masticated lump down its nonexistent throat passage and onto the ground. It then gripped its own skull and yanked it off. It dropped it on the ground and stamped it violently, crushing it like a Christmas tree ornament. The headless frame toppled over lifelessly.

One of its brothers opened its jaw, and fired a jet of slime like a fire hose towards the boy. He sprung to his feet and pointed his wand at the mucous geyser. “Please! Stay your foul offerings.”

The bilious stream dissolved into a hodgepodge of colors, fluttering, and wriggling. He hopped upon the cloud of butterflies, candy, and kittens, and rode the adorable current about the night sky.

The galloping kittens, et al, brought him in front of Beatrix. She sat on the ground, afflicted by some type of mesmerization at the spectacle.

“A token of consolation for a lady in distress.” He waved a hand. Lively pieces of candy danced through the air, accumulating in her cupped hands. One of the kittens absent-mindedly sidled up to her and purred.

A better look at the young man told her he was likely her age. He wore a smart burgundy suit with a vest and a white shirt. Rippling behind him was a velvet purple cape. Potent magics (or, excuse me, majjyks) emanated from him, surrounding his body as a subtle wind, teasing his clothes. His hair was a shining chestnut brown, looking as if the beneficiary of some truly unprecedented marathons in the salon. It danced in waves to the silent tune of his magic, like he was underwater. His smile was playful, yet profoundly confident and reassuring. His eyes sparkled with energy and kindness. He was probably the most attractive boy she’d ever seen.

He turned and strode into the bony melee. His mood for trifling games, his expression indicated, was threatening to expire.

“Armies of Odin, make your might my will!” he blustered, aiming his wand at the heavens. “Banish these accursed devils to toil the netherworld, forever!” Bolts of electrical current carved white-hot striations in the air. The heat and noise intensified, culminating in a jarring blast wave. Beatrix tumbled backwards, finding purchase an inch from the cliff’s edge. When the pyrotechnics subsided, there were no traces of any fully intact skeleton. All that remained were scattered, smoking bones. Some of them were actually melting.

Beatrix found herself being pulled to her feet.

“It’s alright now, miss...”

She was too dazed to realize his pleasantry doubled as a request for her name. She just stood with her mouth open. The boy broke the silence. “The name is Clove. Russet Clove. I’d naturally prefer to get acquainted under a more hospitable circumstance. But there you have it.” He cleaned the silver wand with a handkerchief.

The distant shrieks of other skeletons beckoned Russet. He tapped with his wand a loose skull smoldering on the ground. It sprung into the air. He waved an arm to clear the smoke

billowing from its eye sockets, then perched himself on it. He tapped it once more from behind, and rode it into the night sky.

Herbert grasped the small tree he'd attempted to uproot a moment ago. It was now horizontal, jutting over the edge of the cliff. Dangling from it was a slime-soaked Herbert.

This was something else he could have predicted. If you happen upon a cliff, particularly in the context of a chase, it is a matter of preordained magnetism. You might as well just put on your best pair of dangling gloves then and there.

An equally certain outcome in Herbert's mind was his imminent rescue. He just wasn't sure how his rescue would go down (a potentially literal phrasing), and he was hoping whatever natural forces were at play would get on with it.

He felt a hand grab his wrist. He looked up to find it belonged to Beatrix. This was the worst case scenario. He was going to be saved by the damned girl.

"Hold on, Herbert. Are you ok?"

"Pthhh..." He vacated slime from his vocal passage. "I'm doing just fine." Again, we must celebrate the magnificent restraint involved in avoiding the phrase, "Hangin' in there."

"Who was that guy?" she posed conversationally to a dangling Herbert.

"Dunno. Someone who knew some really killer skeleton-murdering spells, I guess." Herbert instantly felt remorse for talking up the guy who stole his hero's thunder. Well, not so much that he stole it, but that he was so obviously prepared to back up the gesture with astounding results. The best that could be said for Herbert was that he backed it up with a profound demonstration of his ability to experience the sensation of sogginess.

"Yeah. He was pretty impressive, wasn't he?"

"Can you please let me up???"

“Oh... right.” She pulled Herbert, but noticed his eye took on a different demeanor, and pointed in a different direction. She saw the tiny full moon reflected in his pupil. The white reflection was briefly covered by a darting, black form. Something was behind her.

She quickly removed the locket from her neck. “Here, take this,” she whispered.

A black, slippery entity wrapped around her midsection, and pulled her into the air. Her grip was pried from Herbert’s hand. She was carried away into the night by a zipping, serpentine shape. Herbert watched, mortified, but instinctually snatched the falling locket with the hand he’d been using to clutch the sapling. He and the locket fell into the abyss.

The shovel’s pressure against the sole of Herbert’s foot caused a sharp pain as he stomped it into the frigid winter earth. He’d barely made half a foot worth of headway beneath the surface.

“Seymour, you really smell. Can’t you stand over there?”

“Herb, I think that smell is the corpse,” offered a pale Seymour.

“You might be right.” Herbert deposited a puny shovel-full of dirt over his shoulder. Sprawled on the ground was an older boy, possibly in his later teens. He was stone cold dead. His face was a grim ivory mask of bloodless skin. His eyes were sunken, like two marks left on an overripe peach by a couple of firmly pressed thumbs.

Sweat came to a dripping bead on Herbert’s nose. He toiled furiously, but the hole did not get deeper. In fact, it somehow seemed to have more dirt in it than before. This type of thing was a mechanic of the universe that was created whenever Herbert dreamt. There was good reason for such an occurrence now.

This was a dream.

“Seymour, I don’t know, man. You’ve had some serious body odor issues lately. And this corpse funk... I’m just saying, when stench compete, everybody loses.”

“Who is he, anyway?”

“Doesn’t matter. He’s worm food. Let’s just get him in the ground.”

After another stab at the dirt, Herbert found his shovel stuck, rooted in the earth. It was no longer a shovel. It was the small tree he'd previously tried to uproot. The world darkened around him, and grinning skeletons closed in.

He tugged the tree, ripping it clean out of the ground. But to his surprise, it was not a tree. It was a Pikmin. Herbert found surrounding him a devoted band of googly-eyed plant soldiers. He blew his multicolored whistle, and the horde snapped to attention. Thousands swarmed around the skeletons, pounding the living (or undead) hell out of them. The skeletons were upended, brutally beaten to death (or unlife). The army carried their prizes to their base while humming a rhythmic marching tune.

His thumbs swiveled on both analogue levers of the controller. He was in his room again, playing the game. That smell. The knob turned. In walked Thundleshick.

“My boy...”

“Oh, hi, Thundleshick.”

“Having an enjoyable computer-box, are we?” Thundleshick eased his awful girth onto Herbert's bed. “Boy, look here. I know you've been looking for this.”

He removed a spiral-bound book from his cloak. The cover was blank, apart from a strip of solid black, covering up where the title might have been. Herbert turned. He had been looking for that. In fact, he'd been completely infatuated with it.

“Where did you get that??”

“Now, now. We've all the time in the world for those questions. Come now. Join me for a look.”

Herbert, forgetting himself, sprung up and plopped on the bed next to the fragrant old man. The book was opened. Herbert peered in. His view was met with a full two-page spread of Thundleshick making a sly face. He was draped across a couch, completely nude.

Herbert woke up screaming. Birds fled from nearby trees, flapping into the sunrise.

Beatrix could barely move a muscle. A cold, oily sensation wrapped around her, binding her arms to her body.

“You forget how good my sense of smell is, little girl.”

A large eel floated, as if swimming, over the thick brush of the forest. The daytime in this wonderful, magical place was at least more forgiving than the night. Pleasant even, if a little warm. Above them sparkled sunlight through an emerald canopy. Beatrix, however, found it hard to enjoy while she was coiled in the center of the eel’s long body. It spoke through a perfectly, upsettingly human face. It had a big nose and a well-groomed moustache.

“I think you must have me confused for someone else.”

“Nonsense. Your odor is unique. I picked it up the moment you arrived. In any case, I distinctly recall introducing myself before. My name is Hastings.”

Hastings’ sense of smell was unrivalled. So canny were his olfactory capabilities, he could sniff out minor fluctuations in the stock market by odor alone. He could even close his eyes and “see” the world with a sort of nasal sonar. In fact, this was mostly how he did navigate the world, since he was legally blind.

“Maybe it’s my perfume you smelled. A lot of girls wear it,” Beatrix posited.

“Yes, yes. Auspicious Breeze. I have smelled thousands of girls with this accessory. There is no confusion here. You’d have better luck getting a monkey to mistake a banana for a ballerina by dressing it in a tutu.”

“I guess it depends on the monkey...”

“In this case it is a very hungry, banana-savvy monkey!”

“And what do you want with this girl you think I am?”

Hastings rolled his eyes. “Why don’t we get on with this? Where is it? The artifact?”

“Artifact?”

“The one supposedly hung from a human neck.”

“You mean like a tie? Or a scarf?” she asked, remaining coy.

“Very well. We will see what my employer has to say about it.”

“You mean Campmaster Thundleshick?”

“Heh-heh... Ah-hahahaha!” The turbulence in his torso caused Beatrix’s head to bob up and down. “Yes, wouldn’t that be something! That preposterous coot! You should be so fortunate. My employer isn’t quite as nice to children as Mr. Thundleshick.”

Hastings grimaced. The thought brought his attention to the magnificent horror of Thundleshick’s odor. It was the perfect storm of olfactory abuse, and Hastings could smell it every moment as clearly as if it were in front of his nose. He grew accustomed to its omnipresence, the same way you became used to the smell of dog feces on someone’s shoe if you were stuck in a car with that person for a long trip. It became ignorable out of sheer necessity. But the moment the conversation turned to feces or dogs or shoes, the mind couldn’t help but wander back to the aroma. In this case, the entire universe was the car Hastings was stuck in, and Thundleshick was the crap on the shoe somewhere in the car.

Beatrix sulked. A familiar feeling was setting in. It was a feeling of futility and oppression. She sighed, almost forming a smile. For the first time since she arrived at this summer camp, she began to feel somewhat at home.

“Simon, what are you doing? You’re not thinking about eating those, are you?” Samantha said, referring to her brother’s small pile of stale bread. Every street urchin worth his salt kept a spare crust in reserve at all times, to be used only in emergencies.

“Nooo,” her orphan brother replied through a puff of chilly, visible breath. “I was just thinking that maybe I could use it to start a fire to make us warmer or if maybe I shouldn’t do that and just save it and eat it later. You know, in case of an emergency!”

Samantha shivered in her vintage Strawberry Shortcake T-shirt as she glanced around the frosty, anonymous warehouse. It certainly would have been nice to have a fire, but she maintained the air of big-sisterly disapproval towards her brother, who wore a vintage Teenage Mutant Ninja

Turtle shirt. Their cage held a third orphan. She was older than the two young siblings, had very long black hair and wore a pink-stoned ring. She was trying to pick the lock, an activity which had kept her busy for the last several days.

“I don’t think you can start a fire with bread, Simon,” Samantha informed. “And anyway, it sounds like a waste of good crusts to me.”

“How do you know? I bet a good crust would make a really big fire like this. PCHOOO—FSSSHHHHOOOO.” Simon’s fingers illustrated the concept dramatically.

“And how would you start it?”

“I could rub my bootblackening brushes together, like this!”

Beatrix interrupted Simon’s spirited demonstration. “It probably wouldn’t be a good idea to start a fire in here, guys. It would set off the sprinkler system, and then we’d just be colder.”

“I told you! Now put those crusts back in your pocket for a rainy day, silly!”

Beatrix concentrated on the bit of bent wire she’d salvaged earlier from the sweatshop. She fished around the inside of the keyhole hoping to catch a tumbler, or some other mysterious lock component her admittedly limited knowledge of the subject might cough up. She heard distant footsteps. “Darn! This stupid thing.” She hastened her efforts, redoubling her wire prodding and jimmying. “We’ve got to get out of here before he comes back. I swear, if I have to solder one more of those cheap iPod knockoffs...”

Unlike her two cellmates, and the hundreds of other children locked in adjacent rows of cages, Beatrix had landed herself in this pickle by choice. It wasn’t however to volunteer her time to help a large, unscrupulous thug manufacture “iPlods”, and help furnish bargain-savvy consumers with an MP3 player whose delicate interior circuits snapped like baby bird bones upon pressing the power button. She had her own agenda which was presumably important enough to warrant the trouble. But she was getting nowhere fast sitting in captivity all night, and it was becoming frustrating.

The wire snagged inside the hole and became stuck. The heavy footsteps were closer. “Argh! Why won’t you just open?” She slammed both fists against the bars. There was a click, and

the cage whined open. Beatrix looked at the door with surprise, then at her ring, which she thought for a very brief moment flickered with pink light in the corner of her eye.

“You did it, Beatrix! That was so cool!” Simon marveled.

“Let’s go, guys,” she said. “I’ll need your help.” The hundreds of other caged orphans became excited, like monkeys at a zoo beholding one upstart monkey’s fecal-throwing defiance towards the zoological authority. Beatrix made gestures to settle them down.

“Shh! Please be quiet! You don’t want us to get cau...” She was interrupted, predictably, by being caught. Wrapping around her neck was hairy hand the size of a steak you’d win a plaque on the wall of a restaurant for consuming.

“There’s something I’m wondering...” Beatrix searched for the right tone to her question, a blend of innocent curiosity and rhetorical bite. “You say your sense of smell is so good, you were able to find me. So why don’t you use that amazing sense of smell to find the artifact you’re looking for?”

Hastings bristled. He didn’t like even a vague insinuation that his nose might be anything other than an embodiment of olfactory perfection. “I assure you I would have picked up its scent ages ago. I would have claimed the prize and would be engaged in much more fulfilling pursuits, you can be sure. I do have hobbies, you know. I like to watch sports on occasion. I paint model race cars, too. Wild goose chases with stubborn and dishonest little girls is very hardly what I would classify as a good time!”

She tried to picture Hastings with a paintbrush in his mouth, poring over a toy car with hours of loving attention. Even monstrous eel-men had to pass the time somehow, she guessed. “You would have found it... if?”

“If I had ever actually seen it before. Or smelled it, that is. It is more or less the same concept for me.”

“So you don’t know what it looks like. Or, um... smells like.”

“Ah, but I know what you smell like. You are my lead. And you will eventually lead me to it.” Hastings’ face spread itself into a smug grin.

Beatrix salvaged some comfort from this exchange. She was far from being as nasally gifted as her captor, but she had an active imagination. When she handed the locket off to Herbert, she tried to be discreet about it. But it was nevertheless hard to imagine the act could escape detection from Hastings' masterful nostrils. Why he disregarded the exchange was unclear, but the front running explanation to Beatrix was that he wasn't all that bright. The opportunity to mess with his head was hard to resist.

"I'm sure you'll sniff it out eventually," she said, sounding uncompelled.

"Oh, you doubt it?"

"I suppose I could hide an ice cube in a hot landfill and you could find it before it melts?"

"I could tell you if it was a cube or if it was one of those round ones with a hole in it!" Hastings was irked. Beatrix didn't quite know where she was taking this "please don't throw me in the brier patch" routine, but it never hurt to get the ball rolling on prodding his insecurities. "It doesn't matter if you don't believe me. It will be very clear to you soon."

"How so?"

"I told you. I smell everything. I smell the confusion of the one-eyed boy you helped last night. And I smell the boy who is about to try to rescue you in a moment."

This threw her for a loop. Boy? Not again...

Herbert—sore from his prior collision with a treetop and subsequent night's sleep in it—struggled up a steep, ferny hill. He inspected the irregular piece of jewelry, mysteriously foisted on him last night by that strange girl. It was metal, maybe steel, tarnished with age or use (use for exactly what was anyone's guess). Engraved around the outer ring was a pattern of interlocking loops, looking somewhat like infinity symbols. He flipped it open. Whatever fit inside the ring was likely secured in place when it was snapped shut.

He thought about Beatrix, and the hazy final moments before his plunge into the chasm. What was that thing that grabbed her? And why did she give him her locket? He found himself hoping she was alright.

She was probably fine, off having really incredible magical adventures by now. Herbert on the other hand, thought he'd be lucky not to starve to death at the bottom of a gulch before sundown. Maybe a good walking stick would make him feel better about his outlook. It might imbue him with a rugged, vaguely outdoorsy patina. He suddenly wished he carried a knife. He didn't really know what outdoorsmen actually did with their fancy knives. Probably good just to have on hand in the likely event you had to amputate something.

He stooped over, haphazardly swooshing bits of organic ruffraff about the forest's carpet, looking for a walking stick. Maybe one that was gnarled fashionably, which might make him look like a cool wizard. With that thought, Herbert suddenly felt he would do just fine without a walking stick.

That's when he noticed something poking out of a nearby thicket. It looked like a hand. A rather limp, dirty hand.

"A boy?"

"Yes. Quite a handsome one, too! I regret that you will have to witness me relieve him of that attribute."

Beatrix's thoughts shifted to last night. Was it really the same one? She detected her heart rate elevate at the prospect by some inscrutable force she found herself unfamiliar with. Why should this idea produce excitement? There was at least, by her measure, the strong likelihood that if it was the boy she was thinking of, this dapper, self-important eel-strosity would probably stand little chance against his magic (majyyks!). But that didn't seem to be the source of her biorhythmic fluctuation...

Hastings' nose throbbed like a small creature trying to attract a mate. "His magic... it reeks almost as much as his hair gel! And his cologne. And moisturizing balms. Ho-ho, this is a vain one! Let's see... I also smell... silver..."

Beatrix was growing more certain by the second. What was his name again? Something to do with a potato? Or garlic? And the curious heart-hastening... it persisted.

“Yes...” Hastings said, probing the air for additional textures. “This boy is attempting to get the drop on me. Setting a trap. Let’s do the lad a favor and try to act surprised when he shows up, ok?”

“Alright.” Beatrix said, even though she knew he was being facetious. She was beginning to take some joy in needling him when possible. Hastings slithered through the air trying to act casual, unaware that most people have no ability to read an eel’s body language as casual or otherwise. His lips circled around a whistled tune.

As expected, a cloud of red smoke swelled out of the air, sharply, like a kernel of corn popping. The wind carried it away, revealing a boy.

“Oh my God, I’m really surprised!” Beatrix mocked. But she found to her surprise that she actually was surprised.

Standing there was a tall young man. Handsome, yes, but not the one she expected. He was a little older, with dark, short hair and a preppy-looking outfit. There was similarity in demeanor, though. It was an effortless broadcasting of confidence with every action, and it didn’t seem to matter if it was justified or not. He was too handsome for it to matter. The boy held a silver sword at his side.

“That was a really... cool trick, young man. Radical, even. As you can see, I speak in your youthful vernacular. I trust this gains me enough credibility with you to put away your sharp thing and let us pass?”

“It doesn’t look like she has much say in where you’re going. That’s not very cool. Dude.”

“An impasse it is, then!” Hastings’ moustache puffed up like the quills of a threatened hedgehog. His smile revealed awful rows of razor-sharp teeth. The boy aimed his sword at the eel. A fierce howl of wind flowed from the silver blade. If you looked closely—and you didn’t have the time to—you would notice the jet stream was composed of many tiny swords, like a rushing school of glittering fish.

Hastings evaded the attack, uncoiling, dropping Beatrix in the process. He charged the boy, who raised his sword for an urgent rebound, but it was too late. Hastings’ face was already bearing down on him at impossible speed, making a hissing noise from his mouth, or maybe worse, his

nose. Hastings' teeth sank deep into the boy's knee, his grip locked by surprisingly strong jaw muscles.

The boy dropped his sword. "Augh! Let go of me, you slimy son of a bitch!"

He swatted at Hastings' head, messing up his neatly-groomed gray hair. Hastings' shook his head back and forth like a coyote trying to snap the neck of a rabbit. It looked disturbingly instinctual. The boy's nice khaki pants were soaking into a dark brownish color in the knee region.

Suddenly, Hastings' eyes shot open, bulging out like Ping-Pong balls jumping to the surface of water. His face froze. A dot of blood under his nose became a trail down his moustache. The eel-body flipped wildly like a fish in the background. It was no longer attached to its head.

Beatrix stood over Hastings' severed head, which was still locked onto the boy's knee. She held the silver blade, now covered in a dark, thick fluid.

Eel sauce.

Smoke filled the warehouse, triggering the building's sprinkler system. The water doused the bonfire of cheap furniture and even cheaper MP3 players. The children became soaked and would probably catch pneumonia, but they didn't care. They were free.

In a secluded area of the building, away from the icy downpour and smoke inhalation hazards, Beatrix was sifting through the contents of a filing cabinet. The criminal mastermind who ran this facility kept extensive records on children of a certain ilk for the needs of his rather specialized business model. This mastermind at the moment was lying unconscious several yards from Beatrix and the two orphans.

"How did you do that, Beatrix?" Samantha asked with unbridled awe.

"She was... she was like..." Simon stammered as he executed a variety of spastic movements. His dramatization of the incident was foggy at best.

Beatrix pulled a folder from the drawer, and slid a sheet of paper from it. As she read the document, her face of concentration dissolved into one of satisfaction.

“So what now?” Samantha said, struggling to contain her excitement. “I’m looking forward to leaving here so we can all do fun things together. Doesn’t that sound great?”

Simon chipped in, “Yeah, it’ll be awesome! I can’t wait to show you the places Sam and me used to hang out! The train yards, the old bootblackening corner...” Most anecdotes originating from a homeless orphan usually had something to do with train yards or bootblackening.

“Sounds great, guys.”

“What is that anyway, Beatrix?” Samantha said regarding the document.

Beatrix browsed the text again, which was blotchy from bad photocopying. Next to the text was a photo. A photo of a boy wearing a goofy smile. And an eyepatch.

She smiled, and tussled the orphan’s hair. “Nothing you need to worry about.”

Beatrix jimmied the sword between the teeth and the raw leg wound. There was an unfortunate popping sound, likely a break in the jaw bone. Hasting’s pale head tumbled away. The boy shouted, unable to remain stoic anymore.

“Don’t you know any healing spells or anything?” Beatrix asked.

“No. Never could get the hang of those,” the boy replied through a grimace of pain. He ripped the sleeve off his finely cut, snow-white shirt, and tied it around his wound. She detected a brief moment of silence as he mourned the fashion downgrade. “Name’s Grant. What’s yours?”

She introduced herself. As Grant listened, it seemed to Beatrix that he was studying her, scrutinizing her face as if he thought he knew her, but couldn’t place it. It was only a passing impression, as he returned to a standard social posture.

“Pleasure. I was just traveling the woods looking for my mate when I saw you getting manhandled by that foul thing. I felt it was only right to intervene, but...” He looked at Hastings’ lifeless eyes, forever frozen in his last moment of surprise. “In retrospect, maybe you had it all in hand!”

“Oh, not really. If you owe thanks, then so do I,” she said. Grant sliced the excess sleeve from his bandage, and used the spare material to clean his sword to a sparkle. She continued, “You said you were looking for someone?”

“My friend. He went wandering off somewhere and I lost track of him. He’s sick, you see. I need to give him his pills. I suspect he’s out of them... not that he’s very mindful of taking them in the first place. Frustrating. That’s why I think he could be in bad shape. Have you seen anyone?”

“I’ve seen lots of guys around. None since yesterday, though. Does he wear an eye patch?”

“No, that’s not him. Never mind, I’m sure you didn’t cross paths.”

“I could watch out for him, if you described him.”

“Tell you what. I think we should stick together. So if you come across him, I will too.”

“Oh. Um...” She didn’t know how she felt about accruing another male party member, particularly one she knew nothing about.

“Yes, absolutely. We’ve got to stay together. It’s dangerous out here, and I have this troubling sense that you don’t know anything about magic. Am I right?”

“Sorry to say, yeah,” she confessed.

“And if we’re ever separated, and you do run into my friend, here...” He took something out of a pouch tied to his belt. It looked like a Russian doll. It was bright red, and very shiny. It seemed to glow, like a polished, precious stone.

He opened it. Inside was a smaller doll, which he removed. The smaller one looked just like its larger parent, but was half-red, half-blue, the colors divided down the center of the face and body. He held it with a hand on each color. A thin line of light separated the two colored halves, and the doll became two dolls. They were identical, except one was red, the other was blue. Grant handed her the blue one.

“Take this. You’ll be able to find me with it. Instantly!”

“Herbert, cut it out! God, what’s your problem?” Herbert’s fingers pulled at the edge of his older brother’s bowl of Captain Crunch. Seymour gingerly restrained the bowl in a delicate game of tug of war.

“Man, there’s no milk. It’s buried like an inch beneath the cereal. I can’t eat this dry crap,” Herbert griped.

“But I just split the last of the milk evenly. It was a fair split!”

“Yeah, but come on. You know you like your cereal on the dry side. I like mine to swim a little.”

“Ok, yeah, but I poured myself a bigger bowl. Proportionately speaking, there is already less milk in mine!”

“Nobody told you to have so much. You could stand to cut back a little, anyway. Maybe you’ll shed a few.” Herbert, in spite of his other passive qualities, was blessed with the mind of a bully. Unfortunately for Seymour, this virtue appeared to be making a critical spike at Herbert’s ripe age of ten (placing this moment, the keen among you may have already calculated, about four years ago). A true bully knows it’s not the size or age of your target that matters. It’s his mind’s demonstration of willingness to be bullied. It is the combined displays of weakness, desire to accommodate, and scarcity of self assurance which any real bully will smell like blood in the water. The boys’ parents couldn’t bring themselves to police the behavior after the recent disappearance of their older brother, Louis. They figured children have their own ways of coping with loss, and these natural mechanisms shouldn’t be tampered with. It would work itself out in time.

“Alright, fine.” Herbert let go, sending the bowl’s contents onto Seymour’s lap.

“Jesus!”

“Oops. Sorry.” It was a sincere statement. Being a bully didn’t necessarily mean you wanted to make a big mess in the kitchen. It was more a creed of psychological harassment.

“Damn it, Herbert. Damn it! Now I’ve got to go change. Look, if the bus comes, can you just hold it up until I’m back?” Herbert gummed a mouthful of dry, razor-sharp Cap’n Crunch. It was like an endurance sport for the soft interior of the mouth. As he poured the remainder of

Seymour's milk into his own bowl, he idly gazed at the empty milk carton. It exhibited on one side something he'd grown accustomed to looking at. Text reading "Missing:" and things like "Last seen:" and "Eye color" and "Hair color". Beneath this was a picture of their older brother, Louis. This image was going to change soon.

For the next four-plus years, Herbert would be looking at a picture of Seymour on milk cartons.

"I hope you choke on your stupid eye patch," Seymour muttered as he hustled up the stairs to his room.

"Thaf doefn't mafe any sense!" Herbert yelled with a mouth full of jagged grain rectangles. "Why would my eye fatch efen be in my mouf?"

That was the last time he ever saw Seymour.

Herbert looked down at the unconscious boy as if examining a heap of manure someone had dumped on to his front doorstep.

There was something familiar about him. He looked simply ghastly—almost stone cold dead. His face was a grim ivory mask of bloodless skin. His eyes were sunken, like two marks left on an overripe peach by a couple of firmly pressed thumbs. He was...

No, he wasn't that person. This boy was alive. He was breathing.

The boy's clothes were caked in mud. Maybe they were nice at one point, but not now. A brown suit with a vest and a possibly-white but now-brown shirt. Languishing underneath him was a velvet purple cape, also re-pigmented—amazingly enough—to mud brown. There was something tucked into his garment, something metallic, long. A wand?

No way, Herbert thought. That seemed even less likely than finding his dreamed corpse sprawled in the mud. There was something in his hand. Herbert carefully plucked it from the boy's sleepy grip. It was an empty prescription bottle. It read:

Russet Clove

Divalproex 500 mg

Take one capsule by mouth

Two times daily for 30 days

It didn't seem possible, but it was true. It was the same boy. He thought to himself, when some people crash, they really crash.

“You would like to eat him? He looks to be a very tasty young man, that is what you are thinking is what?” Someone was talking to Herbert. Herbert looked around, but could not find the owner of the melodious and strange question. It went on. “It's his soft portions! That's on which you have your eye on? Yes?”

Herbert saw it. It was a metal cylinder a couple feet tall. Halfway down the object was a pair of eyes, large and quite biological-looking, as if they once belonged to a horse. Beneath the eyes was a jagged mouth carved out of the metal and likely razor-sharp. It was twisted upward into a ludicrous smile. Beneath the mouth was printed in plain, black lettering, “LENTIL”. As in LENTIL SOUP.

“What? Uh... no?” Herbert said, vexed, as the phrase “soft portions” ran naked laps in front of his brain's stunned audience. “I am hungry, yeah. But there's no way I'm going to eat this guy, no. If that's what you're getting at.”

“A tiny nibble!” the can said, undaunted. “That's all I will allow is all, should you accept my offer. The price I ask is the solution to my riddle is my asking price!”

Herbert's face was blank. “No, I'm really not interested.”

“It's smoothed and ceramic

Like a whitened dish-cradle,

It soothes like a hammock

When invitened by ladle...”

“Seriously, that’s alright. You’ve misunderstood...” Herbert feebly protested.

“Be it a bouillabaisse bed

Or a consommé cot,

Be so tempted your head,

Recall a hat it is not.”

It looked at him expectantly, quite pleased with itself. Herbert hesitated, as the silence expanded into something of an idiotic face-off.

“Just ignore the damn soup. Tell it to go away,” Russet said, stirring in his mud crevasse. He made a face like he was nursing a migraine.

The soup can bounced towards Herbert. “Well?? What will you hazard?”

“It’s a bowl. A freaking bowl.” Russet now sat upright, barking at the can. “The thing you put soup into.”

“Yes!!” The can sprung into the air as if clicking its nonexistent heels.

Herbert was surprised to hear Russet talking, but not more surprised than hearing the same from a can of soup moments earlier, just to put things into perspective.

“He’s been pestering me all morning. Seems to be under the impression he needs to protect me,” Russet said, as he reclined again into the muck and leaves. He seemed content to catch a few more hours of sleep without so much as another word.

“Russet, huh? So that was you? The one who killed all those skeletons?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“What happened to you, man?”

“Pfffffft.” Russet pulled his grimy cape over himself as a blanket.

Herbert laughed in recollection. “Arraign my foes with fingers of wind?”

“Look, cut me a little slack,” Russet sneered. “I’m not proud of myself, alright? Are you happy to hear that? I feel really damn silly about it all, and I’d like to forget about it and just lie here. And I would like you to go away.”

Herbert was still chuckling. “Wait, wait... what was that one about Odin? Odin’s might?”

“Oh, shut up. Just get out of here, will you? And see if you can lure away that dumbass soup can with you. Go!” Russet hurled a stone at Herbert. He sidestepped, watching the stone sail through a gap in the trees where the sky was visible. That’s when Herbert saw it, floating in the sky in the distance.

“What the hell is that?” Herbert gawked. It was hard to identify beyond its three obvious characteristics. That it was floating, it was twirling, and it was... him.

It wasn’t him, exactly. It was a picture of him, on both sides of a sort of digital token, slowly spinning like a coin on a desk. Underneath it was a blinking arrow pointing straight down, making it seem like a computer icon. It was also quite far away, as it started to dawn on Herbert, who would never find himself ahead of the curve in matters of depth perception.

“What’s what?” Russet asked. Just a drop of earnest confusion polluted his sour demeanor. “Is that... me??”

Herbert perplexed. “Don’t you mean me?”

“No. It’s me, you dolt. Can’t you see?”

“Huh.” Herbert had a thought. “Hey, you. Soup. Lentil. Can you come here?” Lentil perked up, delighted to be getting attention again. “What do you see there? A picture of me? Or Russet? Or is it you?”

Lentil focused with all his might on the task. “I seee... a steaming bowl of clam chowder!”

Herbert frowned. “What?”

“No! No! It’s changing... It is a bowl of minestrone is what it is! And now... and now a hungry gourmand is drifting over slowly... and here comes the spoon! Drifting... drifting... there!”

“No, no,” Russet said. “You’re looking at the clouds, stupid soup. I don’t give a flying crap about what kinds of soup you think you see in the clouds. Do you see anything else. Anything floating, that is not a cloud?”

“I... am sorry.” His metal smile creaked into a frown. “I am ashamed to say I cannot answer your riddle is the thing I am ashamed of.”

“So he can’t see it, and we only see ourselves in it?” Herbert deduced.

“I guess. Yeah. Who cares.”

“Well, you know what this means. We have to go there and see what it is.”

“Oh screw you!”

“Come on. I’d go alone, but I’m sure I could really use your magic.”

“I’m not doing no damned magic, that’s for damn sure.”

“Come on, man.” Herbert pulled the boy to his feet in spite of a limp resistance.

“God, hey, let go, alright! Alright!” Russet struggled away from Herbert. “Jesus.”

“Look, what were you going to do? Lie in the mud all day long? That’s retarded.”

“Would’ve suited me fine.”

“Well, not me. Someone’s got to find a way out of this... summer camp.” The phrase was weighed down with enough irony to keep a fleet of hot air balloons grounded. “Even if it kills one of us.”

Russet looked back longingly at his groove in the mud.

“There’s not as much to it as one might think.”

“I guess you have to do a lot of reading? Memorizing spells and magic words and such?” Beatrix speculated.

“Nah, it’s simpler than that. And more subtle. Magic words in my experience are optional. They sound cool, I suppose, if you really want to be a showboat,” Grant explained. “And as far as books go, yeah, I guess it couldn’t hurt to bone up. But that’s not really how I learned the magic I know. It’s kind of an intuitive thing.”

Beatrix squinted, trying to absorb this. According to all the fictional material she’d been exposed to, magic was a complex affair rife with arcane babble and simmering cauldron sludge. There was intrigue in cryptic protocol, and such protocol invited a kind of comfort, the way a prisoner becomes acclimated to, and then dependent on, the stiff the prison regulations. But then, maybe this was a device fiction authors were apt to lean on for those very reasons.

“All you need is a decent imagination, and some concentration. Once you get the hang of it at a low level, the complexity of your spells builds from there. Oh... You need one other thing, of course,” he continued. “A magic item.”

Rats, she thought. She was starting to think she might be just minutes away from casting her first spell. “You do? Why?”

“I suppose it’s a conduit for magic energies. Actually, I don’t know. All I know is trying magic without a decent magic item is like starting a fire with a couple sticks as opposed to a lighter. Possible for the proficient, but still awkward. And impossible for someone who doesn’t know what they’re doing.”

“Are these items usually something like a sword? Or a wand?”

“Actually, they can be anything at all. A staff. A cloak. Even an ice cream scoop, if it was enchanted properly.” Grant paused, looking down at her hand. “Or... a ring. Like the one on your finger.”

She held up her hand to look at her ring. “You mean one like this one?”

“No, I mean that one. I’m quite sure it’s magic. You get a sense for these things.” He tapped the pink stone gently with the blade of his sword. The air rang with a sweet harmonic note as

ephemeral sparks leapt from the collision. Beatrix was wrong. She was less than minutes away from casting her first spell.

“What do I do?”

“Start slow. Just concentrate on the ring. Then just think of... well, just magic, I guess. In the abstract.”

Beatrix closed her eyes, even though she wasn't instructed to. She thought about her ring, then thought, in the most general way possible, about magic. Almost instantly, she felt warmth around her hand. She opened her eyes to see a mild glow surrounding the ring. “Wow. That was easy!” she said, laughing a bit at the favorable absurdity of it.

It was easy. But a mild glow was one thing. It might be useful when trying to illuminate a dark keyhole at night, or when faced with the need to impress a primitive culture of ape-people and make them fly into a fit of wild pant-hooting and bone-throwing. But what about something with a little more bite?

“So what else can I do?”

“Depends. Nothing too fancy for a while, I'd expect. But keep working at it. The forces at work tend to feed off what you're most driven towards. Magic that helps you accomplish what you most want comes the easiest, and is usually the most powerful. It also depends on the makeup of your character, who you are, and all that.”

Beatrix nodded, holding out her ring-hand. She focused, as Grant went on. “There's a variety of magic types, of course. Healing spells, curses, illusions... Hell, pick up a copy of the D&D manual. I'm sure you don't need me to tell you.”

“Illusions?” She didn't know why this one jumped out at her.

“Yeah, they're often easier than other kinds. Making the appearance of something, it stands to reason, is easier than causing the actual thing itself to come into existence, as with manifestation. Something about thought-energy-matter transfer, no doubt.”

Bands of light coalesced around the pink stone. First formless, but then became dancing wisps wrestling with each other like snakes. The snakes wove a material that morphed and rippled and folded in on itself, becoming convincingly like silky cloth.

“Wow, nice! Told you, not much to it. You’ve got a knack for it, I’d say.”

“Thanks,” she said, still concentrating on her thoughts. What you’re most driven towards... so that was the key. Beatrix’s purposes may have been hazy to her, but the images associated with them were sharp, and came and went from her mind’s slideshow as they pleased. The snakes of light tangled, composing as an impressionist painter would an image of Herbert’s face. They jolted suddenly, like a swarm of tadpoles reacting to a pebble thrown in the pond, and composed for an instant a portrait of an older girl with short black hair. Then she was gone.

Beatrix, startled, threw her hand behind her back, bringing to a halt her amateur magic act. She looked at Grant, who she was relieved to find did not appear to notice the last couple of illusions. He was looking at the landscape in front of them, at a hill. Behind the hill, there was the silhouette of a metal tower. Originating from somewhere near the tower was a rising trail of smoke.

“So what do people call you? Wizardy?” asked Russet, as the two boys traversed the rocky hills outside the forest.

“No. Just Herbert.”

“What does that make ‘Wizardy’ then?”

“Let’s just drop it.”

“Sounds like a pretty moronic name to me,” muttered Russet. Herbert thought this place really was a magical land of miraculous wonders if it could produce a boy even more wretched and awkward than he was. It didn’t seem possible, but here he was in the flesh.

Russet nearly tripped over a stationary can of soup. Lentil sat in silent fixation on the path ahead, contained on either side by sheer rock faces. There was a brook of gurgling water along the path, and drinking from the brook was an elephant. Or to be more precise, an elephant’s skeleton.

Russet was paralyzed with mortification. It wasn't exactly the sight of the ghastly skeletal elephant (which some may be tempted to refer to as a "skelephant", a temptation which shall henceforth be resisted very little). What troubled him more was the fact that as a party their aptitude for discretion rested on the whims of a small metal creature with the rational temperament of a five year-old.

Not that their hiking impediment wasn't all that ghastly. Twice the size of an African elephant, its black-boned frame carried an impressive girth of green organs. A great network of intestines bundled in its abdominal region, ending with a magnificent colon. The colon stretched from its rear towards its front, strung through its ribcage into the skull, and out the front of the skull where its trunk would be. It used its long mock-trunk to slurp water from the brook, and deposit it directly into its stomach by reaching into its ribcage. Whenever it did this, the two frightened children who were trapped in its ribs had to cower evasively from the appendage. If Herbert had binoculars (or simply an ocular), he might have seen the young boy and girl were wearing vintage Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and Strawberry Shortcake T-shirts, respectively.

Lentil seemed to come to a conclusion about this obstacle. It was an obstacle he wanted dearly to engage, fraternize with, and perhaps pose a series of challenging riddles. He hopped towards the skelephant, causing Russet to let out a small yelp. "You get back here this instant!" Russet hissed urgently. Lentil bounced undeterred. Russet dove into a mad lunge and tackled the can, pinning it to the ground.

"It looks to be a fine new friend is what it looks..." Lentil's voice was muffled by a large wad of Russet's dirty cape.

"I'll 'fine new friend' you. Shut your fat ugly mouth before I show you the business end of a can opener."

"Russet, calm down, man." Herbert sidled up to the caviling pair. "Hey, why can't you just kill it?"

"Why don't you kill it?" He was elevating his voice in spite of himself.

"I mean, weren't you basically offing skeletons all night? This should be a piece of cake for you. Let's see some of those magics, or majjcs, or whatever. Come on, light him up."

Russet fumed, turning red. Herbert tried to grab his cape, but was swatted away in a spastic flurry of panic. “Don’t touch me! Just keep your grubby paws to yourself, you busybodied cycloptic prick!”

“It’s just that this path looks like the only way through here. And those kids, they look like they need help. You like saving kids, don’t you? You are, like, really heroic or something, right?”

Russet was about to snort another angry volley at Herbert when he noticed he’d lost track of the soup can. Lentil was, as he feared, “engaging” the skelephant, possibly flummoxing the beast with esoteric verse about bouillon cubes. The skelephant however was not looking at Lentil. It was looking at Russet and Herbert while scraping the dirt with one massive foot, as if about to charge. And the “about to” part of that activity was looking to be very short lived. In fact, it had downright flat-lined.

“It’s running at us!” Herbert observed hysterically. “Stop dicking around, ok? Just kill it!” Herbert shoved Russet toward the raging locomotive of bones and organs. Russet was shaking, frozen in place. He held his wand tentatively, then closed his eyes and took a breath. The wand began to smoke. It became engulfed in a thin, yellow mist which rose like the aftermath of blown out birthday candles. A plaintive sound of flatulence crept out of the tip as the spell came to an ineffectual demise. Russet frowned, dropped his arms to his sides, resigned to what would come next.

Beatrix surveyed the acres of tarmac spread across the flat valley. There was hardly a square foot of it that wasn’t cracked and sprouting weeds from beneath. Hangars of corrugated steel had corroded to the point of being porous. Large planes, though otherwise not appearing to be historic or antique, showed the unmistakable disrepair of age. The rusting hulks had missing parts, broken windows, and only a flecked insinuation of the original paint job. Atop the control tower was a satellite dish which looked like it was supposed to be spinning, but no longer was. In piles initially viewed as scrap were caches of ancient artillery and ammunition. In fact, the more she surveyed, the more it didn’t look like a normal airport at all. Not like one a civilian would use. It was more like a military airport.

Conspicuous among the disintegrating metal was a small shack of corrugated rust with a flat roof. Not because it was a remarkable structure, but because there was smoke coming from a pipe in the roof.

“An airport? Why?” she asked.

Grant shrugged. “Could be any number of reasons. To facilitate air travel I’d say was the safest guess.” She smirked at his possibly non-deliberately satirical reply.

“Well, don’t you know things about this place?”

“Not everything. It’s a big place, and I’m afraid the affairs of those who inhabit it can be somewhat... complicated.” Grant motioned her to follow as he marched down the hill towards the shack. His sword was slung around his back. The handle caught the sun, and the shape of the reflection lingered in Beatrix’s eye.

The skelephant had Russet coiled in its intestinal trunk, and flailed him about vigorously as if using him to battle a cloud of flies. Its trumpeting was exultant and victorious.

Herbert looked on with a mix of shock and disappointment. He was sure when faced with death Russet might snap out of his mood and put the beast in its place. Herbert began to suspect that maybe Russet had some sort of problem.

“ThiiiiIiis iiIiis aaAAaall yoOOour faAAUUult!” shouted the flailed boy.

“Perhaps it is a helping hand for which you would care for a hand with which to help you with?” Lentil was at the foot of the frisky skelephant.

“WhaaaAAaaaaAAAAat?”

“Ah! But no free lunch goes unpunished!”

“ShuuUUuuUUut uuUUuuUU...”

“Ahem...” Lentil modified his posture, as if preparing for a histrionic soliloquy.

“Most trust has that broth

In which steer places stock.

Like a flame to a moth

We race to its crock!”

“UuuUUuurgh... BeeEEee quiiIii...”

“Whether bubbled in cauldron

Or it’s simmered in kettle,

Our taste buds are called on

To put test to their mettle!”

The skelephant pressed Russet’s head against the rocky dirt, and twisted him around as if putting out a large, boy-shaped cigarette. “Mmmph! I don’t... pthff... PTHFFFT! I don’t know!”

“Is it some kind of chili?” one of the trapped children suggested.

“Oh! Oh! What about boot soup! It’s one of my favorites!” said the other.

“I don’t kn... ptffff... know! I don’t care! Whatever! Soup! Something to do with soup! Just ki... thbbffthhh... kill this thing!” Lentil looked sad, as if his young son had just told him a lie when he’d given him one last chance to tell the truth.

“If that answer is that which you provide my riddle with the answer to, then I am afraid I have little choice...” Lentil did a short jig. A sparkly aura filled the air, and two more identical skelephants appeared.

“Oh bloody... thhhhhhhbbpt... hell.”

“Each fort is a kind of residence,” Grant explained. “Sort of a community for kids attending the camp. Kids who come here, the luckier ones, I guess, will eventually find their way to one of them. Thundleshick established the forts at the onset of this thing, some time ago.”

Beatrix was almost startled at hearing something nearly regarding the existence of organization, however shoddy, for the summer camp. “Where are they?”

“Well... I’m not completely sure where we are now, but each one is roughly east, south, west, and north. Let’s see... to the east, you’ve got Fort Crossnest. South, that’s where Funnelbunk used to be. You don’t want to know what happened to that one. Uh, then west, you have Slurpenook. Stay away from that one at all costs. Just a warning. And up north is Pizzahut.”

“... Pizzahut?”

“Uh... yeah. It’s really just a name. Don’t get your hopes too high. But anyway, if you want to head that way, north, or to the east, those places are fine.” He pointed in both directions as he mentioned them. Beatrix caught something out of the corner of her eye as he said “east”. Something strange, floating in the sky. It was a picture of her, somehow, spinning on a disc. She turned to look at Grant. He was still prattling on about something, seemingly oblivious to the floating object. Surely he wasn’t simply failing to notice it. It was as if he couldn’t see it at all. This had her gears turning.

“Don’t you see that? In the sky?” she said, looking directly at him, careful not to be actually looking at the floating object itself.

“Huh? See what?” He looked all around, scanning the horizon. She thought for sure he would have seen it now. If he actually could see it. Beatrix took her eyes off Grant, putting into play a minor deception. She looked at the sky, but not facing east. She faced north, gazing at a vacant portion of the sky.

Grant watched her, then came around to her vantage point and scrutinized the patch of sky she was fixed on. “What do you see there?”

Beatrix appeared to snap out of it as a cloud passed in front of the thing she wasn’t looking at. “Oh. Nothing, I guess. I must be seeing things.”

“Well, what was it?”

“For a second there, I thought I saw myself! Must be exhaustion.”

Grant scratched his chin, looking a bit concerned. “Do you think,” he said after some time, “someone could be expecting you here?”

“I don’t know. I can’t imagine why.” She shrugged. More silence followed.

He looked pained, then addressed to his bloody leg. It appeared to be in worse shape from the hiking. “I’m no good out here like this. Maybe someone in here can help,” he speculated, as he again limped towards the smoking airport shack.

“What are you hoping for? A magic potion or such?” she asked earnestly.

“Maybe. Something like that.” They stepped onto the cracked, uneven tarmac. Heat radiated off the dark surface and started to bake them instantly. Beatrix wiped her forehead, and snuck a brief glance to the east. It was still there, floating and spinning. She allowed herself a mischievous, if hardly perceptible smile.

The two new antagonists took turns beating Russet with uprooted, prickly shrubs while the third beast held him aloft like a piñata. “Mmmph! Fthh! Gthh damph ith louthy mphthr fthckrth!”

Herbert watched Russet’s tragic embarrassment unfold. Whatever luster there was to Russet previously, the spring in his step, and indeed any positive attribute, had simply vanished. This was no longer a hero. He was a charity case.

Herbert rolled up his sleeves (mentally-speaking). Magic was not the solution to everything. In fact, he proposed in his own hazy, non-intellectual way, something to the contrapositive, which held that if magic was not the solution to everything, then anything but magic was the solution to, if not everything, then some things. He felt this situation might fall under the category of “some things”. He felt even more strongly that “anything but magic” was one of his strengths.

The conspicuously not-magical thing Herbert did was pick up Lentil, and in a gloriously un-magical fashion, chucked him at the skelephant’s skull. The impact made a sound like a hammer hitting a

coconut. “Elephant! Yeah, you, Dumbo! Aren’t you bored with that one yet? Why don’t you have a go at this!”

Herbert flashed a lewd gesture, then ran towards a wall of foliage. The ground shook with the stampede equivalent of six African elephants in pursuit. Herbert dove into the shrubbery, tucked and rolled. What Herbert knew which the skelephants didn’t, though, was that this was not a forest. The trees and bushes terminated abruptly only ten feet into it, opening to a steep, rocky hill descending into a gulch.

The monster stampede exploded through the trees like a huge, voraciously trumpeting cannonball, splintering the sturdy tree wood like it was cheap particleboard furniture. As the creatures made an inexorable rotation through the air, Herbert reached up and grabbed Russet by the foot, prying him away from the trunk’s grasp. The skelephants tumbled down the hill in one great tangle, while the sound of screaming orphans could be heard vaguely.

A limp, bramble-scratched Russet collided with Herbert, who took the brunt of Russet’s weight as awkwardly as possible. Herbert heard a ‘snap’. And then he heard pain. But in this case, “felt” would be more appropriate than “heard”.

“Augh... I think you broke my arm.” Herbert looked up, as if cursing whichever God was responsible. Perhaps Loki, the Lord of Mischief was the one who warranted his scorn. Not so much for the broken arm, but that Herbert’s one deed of breathtaking heroism would be wasted on this miserable loser.

Grant knocked on the door which responded like hollow metal drum. It opened, revealing a woman’s elderly face. But elderliness was only the beginning and most superficial of the misfortunes which had befallen her face. Her eyes were scarred closed. Her lipless mouth was a thin line amidst creases of age. It was seemingly fused shut, possibly from a burn or a surgical procedure. She wore earmuffs, which straddled a badly unkempt head of silvery hair. She was otherwise not an unattractive woman, possibly even glamorous if caught in the right period in her life (such as a fondly looked upon pre-disfigurement period, for instance).

“Yes, who’s there? What do you want?” Her mouth did not move. A voice could be heard from within the shack through a filter of radio static.

“Hello, madam, my name...”

“Dott! For heaven’s sake, get over to that door and let me see who it is!” crackled the static voice from the interior. The old woman felt around impatiently with waving arms, while Grant’s introduction was left in suspended animation. Beatrix, to no avail, tried to peer into the shack and get a glimpse of the voice’s owner.

Something caught their attention from below. It looked like a small child, not more than two feet tall. But it wasn’t a child. It was mechanical, with its clockwork and moving bits exposed, everywhere except for its face, which was a painted, polished metal face of a female doll. It had two sophisticated, perpetually focusing lenses for eyes. It looked up at Grant and Beatrix, and as it did so, the old woman looked up simultaneously, at about the same angle.

“There you are!” snapped the cheerful voice from inside the shack.

Grant, recovering from a bewildered expression, opted for another stab at formality with the blind woman. “Um, hello, ma’am. Grant Anonama, here. Pleased to meet you. This is Beatrix.” He offered his hand towards the woman. The small robot stared at his hand, lenses twitching and zooming furiously. The woman waved at the air until her hand found Grant’s, and completed a limp, inattentive handshake.

“Where is my radio? Blast, just one moment, children. Where the devil...” the radio voice spoke in a discombobulated tone. She stooped down, swatting the air in the vicinity of the robotic doll. The doll, or ‘Dott’, as Grant presumed might be its name, turned and tottered into the shack. “Please, don’t stand there! Come in! Get out of that heat!”

“So... how’s the arm?” Russet said, finally interrupting what was likely a long and chilly drought of conversation.

“Never been better,” Herbert said, cradling his blue arm. “I’m about to give it a real workout, in fact. Maybe some one-arm pull-ups, or a few handstands. I’m about to pump some major iron with it in a second, if you want to see a real show.”

“Well, um, Wizardy... for what it’s worth, I feel just awful about it.”

“So do I. Don’t call me Wizardy. I should have let you roll down that hill with those elephants.”

“Don’t think for a second that would not have suited me just fine!” spat Russet with sudden volatility. Herbert rolled his eye while trudging ahead. He briefly reaffirmed the position of the spinning icon. He thought he heard a weak sob from behind him. Herbert re-rolled his eye.

“Not even a ‘thank you’, huh?” Herbert muttered under his breath.

“Wh...” Russet said between poorly disguised sniffles. “What?”

“Nothing. It’s just that you’d think you might show some appreciation. For getting you out of that jam. That’s all.”

“I’m sorry. Yeah. I mean, no. I mean... big deal. Who cares!”

Herbert ignored him. He began to hear rushing water ahead.

“That is...” Russet continued, again withdrawing his combative tone. “I’m not much worth saving, am I?” He drew a heavy breath and kicked a small stone.

“Wow, you really are a miserable shit, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Yes, I am a shit, aren’t I?” Russet’s face appeared to don a semi-earnest, semi-delirious sense of revelation with this statement, as if a burdensome shroud of ignorance was lifted from his eyes. Herbert had no interest in getting suckered into a pinch psychotherapy role on this hike, or ever.

“If you want to make it up to me, how about giving me your cape?”

“M... my... cape?” He began stuttering at the thought of shedding an important fashion accessory, even if it was a very muddy, wrinkly one. Somewhere deep in the ravaged recesses of his psyche there was still a very vain boy. “What on earth do you want with my cape?”

“Well, there’s a bridge coming up. See?” Herbert pointed to an upcoming ravine. Strung across it was a rickety-looking rope bridge with intermittent wood slats as footholds. “It doesn’t look all that stable, so I’m going to need a free hand to hang on to the rope.”

“Um... and this has what to do with my cape?” Russet was unconsciously caressing it like Linus did with his blanket in *Peanuts*.

“I can use it to tie my arm in a sling. The arm you broke, if you recall.”

“Oh. Right. Ahh...” He looked as if he was searching for the precise wording for the reason that excused him from surrendering his cape. Herbert advanced menacingly. “Whoa!” Russet jumped, suddenly terrified. “No, no, no! Of course not! Here, take it. Take it!” He handed over the cape with shaking arms.

“Mm-hmm, mm-hmm!” Dott squawked robotically. She was intently focused on the radio sitting on the table. She pointed, then looked deliberately at the old woman, then back at the radio, then back at her...

“Ok, ok! Goodness! Don’t get so overexcited,” spoke the static radio voice. “Now hold your head still, silly, so I won’t trip and hurt myself.”

“Ma’am, can I... assist you somehow?” Grant asked.

“Zoe, dear. Call me Zoe, and no. I’ll be just fine,” said the radio. “Please hold your horses for one moment. I’m having a little trouble hearing you from all the way over there on the table.” Grant watched the old woman, which he cautiously presumed might be named Zoe. She made her way to the table while fixed in the eerie, sterile glare of her little toy helper, navigating the through hovel of gadgetry that was her abode. The obstacle course consisted of wires, glass tubes, bubbling crucibles, hefty jars and barrels, hundreds of other unnamable knickknacks. She lifted the radio from the table and fidgeted with the knobs. “There, that’s better,” came out of the walkie-talkie-like device. “If you need to say something, please say it into this. I’m afraid my ears are currently operating its corresponding device!”

“Your ears?” Beatrix jumped in, sensing the same question on Grant’s mind. “Sorry if this is a dumb question, but who is on the other walkie-talkie? Who are we talking to now, I mean?”

“Oh! I suppose I should have introduced them. It’s just that, well, they aren’t even here to be introduced, so you can see how it would slip the mind. To answer your question, you are talking to me, Zoe. Or to put a face to it, that poor old soul over there scuffling by the heap of batteries, if you pardon me for a moment... (oof)... while I get to my blasted... stool. There!”

“Uh-Unn, Uh-unn!”

“Oh, right,” Zoe’s radio-voice said, “Of course I should have introduced you too, Dott. But you know perfectly well I can’t actually see you most of the time, so, without the slightest bit of offense, dearest, I tend to forget you are there. But...” Zoe lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “That is how I know you are doing a wonderful job!”

Russet’s pace progressed asymptotically to a dead halt before he was anywhere near the ravine. He made a grim inspection of the bridge, which seemed to him a generous appraisal of what the structure really was. “Crumble-tether” might have been better. “Plummet-rope” seemed more to the point still.

“No. I’m not crossing it. I just won’t do it.”

“It’ll be fine. We’ll cross one at a time, carefully.”

“Forget it. You’ve wasted enough energy on me. I’ll save you some right now. Don’t bother trying to get me on that absurd wobbly suicide-harness.”

Herbert sighed. “Ok, whatever you say. But I’m going first. I’ll show you it’s perfectly safe. If you still don’t want to, fine with me.”

Russet narrowed his eyes suspiciously, not wanting to commit to any devious bargains, even though the terms appeared to demand nothing from him. He couldn’t be too careful though.

Herbert held the rope with a white-knuckled grip. He focused on his footwork with heightened concentration to make up for the lack of his right arm. Under his foot, and the wood slat it stood on, roared the white rapids at the bottom of the ravine.

“See? Easy!” he yelled upon reaching the other side. “Now you cross!”

Russet hesitated. It was clear the bridge passed the test, but that only proved it was sturdier than his backbone. He reached for a rope cautiously. “I... don’t know!”

“Look, Lentil is there to help on that side, and I’m on this side! Nothing will go wrong!”

Russet turned to Lentil warily. “Listen, tin can,” Russet hissed with incriminating urgency. “You better not play any of your stupid games. No games, you hear? I’m watching you.” He did something with his fingers that made it clear that he was, indeed, watching him.

“What I am here to do is help you on this side is what I...”

“Alright, alright! God. Look, just stand far away from the bridge and I’ll go. Go over there. Further. Further. Keep going. Now stay there.”

Russet inched to the center of the bridge like an elderly man in physical therapy. He wouldn’t dare behave more gracefully, even if it genuinely improved his stability, for fear of jinxing the procession. “That’s it. You’re doing it! Nice going, man!”

Russet almost hazarded a little smile. The cool air rushing up from the river was certainly a relief from the sweltering oppression of the day. He made the mistake of glancing down and almost threw up, but then rebounded nicely.

Russet thought about increasing his pace, when he heard a gnawing sound. He craned backwards to see Lentil chewing on the ropes with air-headed abandon. “Oh, now what the hell do you think you are doing?!” Russet blithered incredulously. “No, get away from that! I am not goddamned kidding!”

There was a snap, then a jolt under Russet’s feet. “I thought you were supposed to be protecting me! Does this seem very much like protection to you?? Does it, you tin of unfathomable excrement?! Does it?!” Mention of Lentil’s alleged purpose seemed to get his attention. He hopped onto the bridge to join Russet. There was not a shred of restraint in his bouncing advance.

“No! No! Off the bridge! Off the bridge!” Russet scrambled for security, striking a pose like he was playing an invisible game of Twister in midair.

“So be it your desire to have yourself saved is what you wish me to do? Ah-ha!”

“No! No save! Leave! No bounce! Leave bridge!” Russet stammered.

“Ahem...”

“Oh, I swear to God, if you start on with another friggin’ riddle...”

“Its steam billows up, like prandial phantom...”

“Aaaargh!”

“Haunting its stew with character-noodles...”

Russet put the can of soup into a choke hold and pounded its lid with his fist, making metal clonking sounds. “Shut up! Shut up you ugly son of a canned whore! Shut your miserable trap!” Clonk, clonk.

“To the surface they rise, ordered any but random...”

“I’ll kill you! I’ll wipe that hideous grin off your moronic face, you... you pea-brained, inconsiderate... turd merchant!”

“Spelling— it’s true!—‘You’ll love it, but oodles!’”

There was a ‘snap’. The hopeless tangle of rope, soup and boy fell towards the rushing water below. Herbert merely watched in quiet disbelief. A “clonk-clonk-clonk” could be heard all the way down, until they both disappeared into a small, white splash and were carried away by the river.

Beatrix watched the powerful lenses poking out of the otherwise innocent-looking doll’s face. They whizzed and chirped with a kind of depth, a human soulfulness now that Beatrix began to understand that the images captured by them seemed to be channeled directly into this old woman’s

awareness, as if they were her own eyes. Her own, albeit separately perambulating outside of her own head.

“And... the others? You mean, there are more of these little fellas to help you?” Grant said, as he began to catch on in his own way.

“Yes, the boys! Graham and Ferris. Troublemakers sometimes, but what boys won’t be? You are very kind, Ms. Zoe.” The voice from the walkie-talkie suddenly changed in tone.

“Who was that?” Grant inquired.

“That was Ferris.” The voice resumed to what they’d come to know as Zoe’s. “How goes the work, dear? Oh, fine, I suppose. My brother is completing a crosscheck and then we may retire for the evening and play some games.”

It was becoming a tad confusing listening to a conversation between two people out of the same walkie-talkie, while one of the voices supposedly belonged to this perfectly silent elderly woman sitting in a stool. It might seem more confusing yet if it was known the two voices on the walkie-talkie were coming from the same source, the mouth of a small robotic doll.

“I have them both out in the hangar taking care of some busywork for me. No use dragging my old bones out there for this,” spoke Zoe’s voice again. “That one was vociFerris. He is my voice. And what a lovely voice he is. Aww shucks, Ms. Z.”

“And his brother? What does he do?” Beatrix asked.

“sonoGraham plays the part of my ears. He’s listened to everything through the radio on the other end to help me keep up with you kids, and he’s done a heck of a job too. He’s a shy one, though. Quiet as the wind. Heeheehee! Heeheeheeheehee!” Robotic giggling erupted from the walkie-talkie. “Ferris, for heaven—Heeheehee!—sake what are—Heeheehee!—about?”

Beatrix and Grant looked at each other. It was hard not to observe the exchange as a full-blown schizophrenic having a conversation with him/herself through a radio.

“Heeheeheehee—me mad—heehee! Just sto—heeheeheehee! Oh, I am so sorry (heeheehee!) Ms. Z. It’s Graham, isn’t it. Won’t you tell me what he is signing to you? You know I can’t see what he is saying unless Dott is there. Heehee... oh, I really shouldn’t translate. (snicker...)

stop it, will you!) I really shouldn't!— I hope it is nothing vulgar. Really, that Graham is just too clever for his own good sometimes. Completely fresh. Heehee! Oh, it's nothing. Don't worry. I will make him shut up."

"Mm-hmm, mm-hmm!"

"fociDott! Please, don't encourage them." Dott became expressively contrite. "And please don't sulk! It's all well and good for you to have your moods, but whenever you sulk I wind up with a lovely view of the floor! Thank you!"

"Madam Zoe, refreshments sound lovely," Grant kindly replied. "But really, what I should take care of first is this little cut on my leg. I don't mean to be a bother, but..."

The woman on the stool suddenly had a posture of alarm. "Dott! For goodness sake, go over there and have a look! My goodness, my goodness, if I'd known you were hurt... Dott, why couldn't you have had a better look at the young man's leg earlier? Oh, don't show me the floor again! Go! Go!"

The little robot sprang off her pile of junk and skipped over to Grant's leg. Through its powerful digital capture equipment, a rich, detailed view of Grant's blood-soaked knee filled the space of Zoe's optical awareness. It zoomed in closer as the software auto-adjusted the image for lighting. The makeshift bandage had obviously run its course.

"It's just a flesh wound, naturally," Grant disclaimed. "I was just thinking, perhaps if you had a special remedy or such? Potions or curatives?"

Zoe held her hand to her chin, becoming absorbed in mentally locating such a thing. "Yes, I think I've got just the thing. Dott, will you trot yourself on over to the bins behind me. Yes, that's it. Take a right at my stool... no, no, the other right. There you go. It's a gray metal box in there some where."

Grant smiled uneasily at Beatrix, as if the gesture performed the function of a wink. She returned the smile with her own vintage of uneasiness. "Anyway," she began in a way she hoped

the old woman would interpret as a private conversation. “You were telling me about this camp. I’m curious, what else do you know?”

“What did you want to know?”

“Well... I mean, this obviously isn’t a real summer camp. It’s some kind of big trap. Kids are lured here and captured. So what does Thundleshick want with them?”

“I see what you mean. You’re sort of right, but not quite. It very much is a real summer camp, in many ways. Well, except for being able to leave if you want to.”

Beatrix didn’t seem satisfied with this. “What? Are you sure about that? So Thundleshick is... he is the one in charge, right?”

Grant was visibly hemming for something to say. The subject appeared to make him uncomfortable. “I... yeah. No, he’s the guy in charge. Technically, he did set the whole thing up, all the forts and whatnot. And he runs it all, in his own way.”

“And he was the one who came up with all those silly fort names? Pizzahut and such?” Her tone was sarcastic, but it was a legitimate question.

“Oh. I guess so. I’m not sure, actually.”

“So, why does he do it?”

“That is... a really good question.” Grant’s sudden ease of response, and look of relief, you might call it, made Beatrix think this was a question he finally felt he was “allowed” to answer freely. She decided to believe him.

“And why are you here?” she asked, masking her suspicion.

“Me?” Grant replied innocently. “Already told you. I’m looking for my friend, Russet. But now at least I have someone to help me look.” He produced the most disarming face he could muster.

The name stuck in her mind like a knife-thrower’s blade. Russet. That Russet? She opened her mouth as if to say something, but then closed it.

“Ah-ha! Got it!” Zoe shouted through her walkie-talkie. Dott held aloft a gray box triumphantly. “Good, Dott. Now please take it to the poor boy... or, I’m sorry. Mr. Anonama. There you are, boy.”

“Mm-hmm, mm-hmm!”

Grant took the box from the doll-faced robot with a smile. “Thank you very much, Dott.”

He sneered at the sudden awareness of his stinging leg. He’d been able to ignore the pain while distracted by amusing antics of robots/sensory aids and various kinds of chitchat. But now that he was about to treat the wound, the sharp throb placed itself front and center at the head of the line, like the fattest bum in the soup kitchen. He was looking forward to a splendidly instantaneous magical remedy, nice and tidy. Maybe a kind of thick salve coaxed out of the udder of a rare mystical breed, like a half-giant falcon, half-wildebeest. Or maybe the curative simply came in the form of a topical toad. A kind of tree-climbing variety, which would hug his knee with suction feet, while its enchanted belly absorbed any maladies and repaired his wound.

He flipped open the lid to see only wads of gauze, a syringe, a couple of bottles of alcohol, and some Band-Aids. “Oh. It’s a first aid kit. Wow.”

“Yes, you should get that old bandage off and clean the wound right away.”

Grant was already untying the knot on his bloody, severed sleeve with a look of distaste. “Yes. Um, I was just thinking, maybe you had some kind of remedy that was... a little more... magic?”

“Magic? Oh, no, I never was much for that sort of thing,” she confessed. Grant looked around again, rethinking his initial presumption about this shack and the one who inhabited it. It was full of oily rags, machine parts, and scattered doodads. This was the den of a kindly old grease monkey more than that of a sorceress. He felt foolish.

Beatrix looked out the small window, which she noted faced east. She noted this because from this window, she could see the mysterious floating icon she’d spotted earlier. It spun, distantly and silently, beckoning her.

Grant flinched as he pulled the bandage unstuck from his clotting wound. Without removing his eyes from the deep gouge, he held out the sleeve towards Beatrix. “Beatrix, would you mind, please find somewhere to throw this out so I don’t mess up the place?” She took it between two fingers, looking about, wondering how a single bloody sleeve could possibly elevate the disarray in this cluttered shack even one iota. With her other hand, she felt the cool metal on the underside of her ring with her thumb.

There was a sudden roar from the walkie-talkie, sounding like a rocket blasting near the receiver. It made the old woman jump. “Sweet Jesus Christmas almighty, if you boys are going to fire up the engine like that, Graham, at least have the decency to step outside for a second, or at least cover up your little ear-holes! I’m sor(static) Zoe, it wo(static) Graham’s almo(static)...” She strained to decipher the words from her own mouth. “What? Oh for Pete’s (static). I (static) hardly hear a word... (static)ut the eng(static)or the love of(static, static, static) cut off the damned engine! Are you trying to make your mother... Oh! There we go. He’s all done.”

Beatrix, amidst the commotion, flicked the bloody cloth in a way that looked rather convincingly absent-minded. It landed on Dott’s head, covering her eyes. Zoe shook her head, swatting at the nothing in front of her eyes by pure reflex, but was undeterred in her tirade. “Really, you’re going to overheat the thing if you’re not careful. Don’t make me second-guess myself about leaving you alone out there. I feel compromised enough here with only Dott to look after me, the silly girl.”

Dott finally tugged the bandage off her head, removing the bloodstained darkness from her, as well as Zoe’s, field of vision. Grant was applying alcohol with swabs to his leg with a great deal of focus. Beatrix stood looking out the window motionlessly, with her back to the room.

“Anyway, Beatrix, sorry if I wasn’t all that clear in answering your questions. There’s a still lot I don’t quite understand myself. And I was just a little distracted, what with this dang leg, and all... Really, what do you want to know? I’ll try to do better.”

She made no reply. He paused, assuming she wanted him to continue his train of thought. “Well, like I said, it is a kind of camp. But yeah, that is a loose term for it. For one thing, like I said, it is very... well, difficult for a kid to leave here. Just about impossible. The thing is, summer here is very... it’s a very long summer. You might say it lasts forever...” He looked up from his

sentence, almost hopefully. He was trying to break certain things in a way that first of all made sense, but also in a way he hoped wouldn't be too upsetting. He didn't know why he felt he had to sugarcoat things like this, especially to someone like Beatrix, who he presumed might appreciate a straight answer more than the average girl. It was, he reflected in a grave half-second, part of his personality he detested. But then the alternative, the other side of things he noted with the other half of the second, was even worse...

She remained silent and still. Grant was growing concerned. "Beatrix? What is it?" He crept to her side. She didn't budge an inch. He then hunched a bit, bringing his face closer to the window. He wanted to get a look at her face.

But she had no face.

It was blank, totally featureless. Grant took a step back, startled. He might have been worried for her, except the explanation was almost immediately apparent to him. He noticed a shimmering quality to her perimeter. The hair lacked detail, not discernable strand-for-strand, but somewhat blurry with gently dancing artifacts you'd see on compressed satellite TV. He waived his hand, which passed right through her body, leaving a misty trail of momentarily-dissolved clothing.

It was an illusion.

Grant hurried to the door. He swung it open and manically threw his head this way and that, but there was no sign of her at all. She'd managed to elude him without putting the slightest dent in his obliviousness.

Another thing which failed to put so much as a ripple in his tranquil pond of ignorance was the other occupant of that shack. The occupant who was neither a technologically adept blind/deaf/mute old lady, nor a diminutive neurologically-linked seeing-eye robotic doll. This occupant was in fact smaller than either of them, and remained perfectly unseen in the clutter.

The lid to a medium-sized jar slowly lifted. Under the lid, now wearing it like a hat, was the head of a very small horse. The tiny horse head scowled surreptitiously at Grant. It was a scowl far more menacing, far more expressive than you'd think a horse head was capable of. It disappeared, and the jar clinked shut.

With the accompanying sound of a great volume of mucous being forced through a large flailing colon, a half-dozen slippery children splattered on to the steel grate flooring. It was a kind of second birth, really, and if their fathers had known about it, they might be proudly pointing camcorders towards the dilating sphincters of the towering skeletons, with a cache of cheap cigars at the ready to be passed around. The parallel is not fully without merit, since these children were beginning a very new life indeed.

In a closed loft above the floor, a young man occupied his computer station. His large, thin-rimmed glasses reflected the light from his web browser, while the sneer on his gaunt, sallow face similarly reflected some vague technical frustration. He wore black shorts with black shirt neatly tucked into them. Crossing his chest was a wide black sash, littered with rows of colorful badges sewn on to it. They were merit badges, signs that he was one of the very few in the organization, if not the only one, who took this realm's institutional role of "Summer Camphood" seriously. There were a couple reasons for this. One very plain reason was that he carried the title of Camp Counselor. The other reason was that Counselor Slinus Marlevort was quite probably out of his mind.

He let out a noise of mild exasperation. "This internet connection is absolutely ridiculous." In the browser, the lower edge of the image crept slowly. A downward-pointing snail stuck to the screen might have beaten it in a footrace.

"No, I wasn't talking to you," Slinus said into his cell phone. "What were you saying?" He wheeled away from the desk, rolling noisily on the fashionable, yet very sinister-looking brushed steel floor. He looked out the window without any purpose to his expression, surveying the gooey huddle of children.

"She killed him," said the small voice on the phone.

"Killed him?"

"She cut off his head."

There was a pause. "... That's hysterical. I guess I shouldn't be surprised. I wish I could have seen that."

A brusque silence came from the other end of the phone.

“Come on, Terence. I’m not worried same thing will come of you. I know you are in a different league from that eel man and his ridiculous moustache.”

“That’s very reassuring,” Terence snorted, “Anyway, I’ve lost track of the girl. But I’m on the trail of a boy. The one who calls himself Grant.”

Slinus removed the phone from his ear for a moment to register some amusement upon hearing this. “Oh, right. Him.”

“Anyway, he seems to know where the girl went. I’ll follow him, see if he leads me to her and get back to you.”

Terence hung up curtly. Slinus snapped his phone shut, and turned in his chair to see a portly boy standing in the room waiting for his attention. His clothes were too small for him, as if he had grown out of them long ago. His face was dumpy and sad, and no trace of exuberance seemed to remain underneath his wispy preteen moustache and goatee. He wore a black sash with just a few merit badges sewn to it, and tucked into his belt was a comedically small wand with a star on the tip.

“There’s no sign of any of them in this group,” he muttered.

“I didn’t think so.” Slinus rested his head on his fist in resignation. “Just hose them down and prep them for orientation.” He swiveled, giving his new prizes on the floor below another nonchalant inspection. He suddenly looked as if he left his keys in another pair of pants, and the pair of pants in question was locked in his car.

“Where the hell is my skelephant?”

Grant limped across the rough terrain, muttering to himself about being outmaneuvered by his female companion. He was so preoccupied, he didn’t notice the faint scuttling noise behind him. The thing doing the scuttling though, to be fair, had little trouble evading detection since it was the size of a lobster. You might even say it was a lobster, if you disregarded the fact that it had the head of a tiny horse. He scowled as he clambered among the rocks covertly. It was, again, a surprising scowl, since you didn’t tend to see horses offering much expression with their faces. On closer

examination, it was mostly in the eyebrows. He had marvelously well-defined and quite agile eyebrows.

Grant removed a small compass from his pocket and confirmed his bearings. He was practically certain Beatrix had gone north, the direction of Fort Pizzahut. He'd reassured her before that it was only a name, but when he thought about it again, the allure the name presents may overpower even the most stodgy intellect with conjured visuals of pepperoni and cheese-stuffed crust. But that wasn't really why he thought she went this way. When she was watching the sky, he'd concluded she may have seen an invisible beacon designated for her, and simply didn't tell him about it. If this was the case, there was no telling who had set up that beacon for her. Time was of the essence, now.

North. That had to be it.

Heading east, Beatrix felt a renewed surge of wind in her sails. She looked at her ring with a sense of amusement, as well as certain gratification in her newfound abilities.

The illusion... it was so effortless. She barely even thought about it, and in an instant, a complex spell that might take a junior sorcerer years to master became manifest. And it all arose from a single, potent will of hers—the will to deceive.

She bit her lip unconsciously, then became cross with herself for the flicker of guilt. Was it guilt? Surely she didn't feel guilty for leaving behind Grant. Maybe it had more to do with what the spell said about herself. Was that really who she was at the root of her being? Someone so keen on deceiving others, the impulse was actually a form of raw, ethereal energy commanding the universe to change around it?

She decided resolutely to dismiss the thought, and any disquieting effects on her conscience about ditching Grant. She operated better alone, and in any case, there was something about him. For one thing, she was inclined not to trust Grant Anonama because she seldom trusted anyone with such an obviously fake name. Really, he could have done much better.

The icon in the sky was getting close now. Exhilaration at what she might find was creeping up on her, like a prankster with an inflated brown bag and a poised popping-hand, or like heart disease on

the elderly (an effective prankster indeed). She'd be there in no time, certainly before nightfall assuming she wasn't a total nincompoop.

Well after nightfall, Herbert walked on shaky legs through blackness, guided only by the pittance of light from the stars.

Cradling his aching arm, the fine velvet cape was muddy and clammy, and served to perpetually refresh his rancor towards that idiot Russet Clove. He thought, if only he'd get his hands around the neck of that miserable basket case... or rather, get one hand around it while using his other bloated arm to sort of limply flog him, like wielding a rubber chicken.

The floating icon was now directly overhead. It was by far the brightest object in his field of vision, fully self-luminous, though unfortunately for Herbert and his inglorious nighttime hiking follies, it cast no light on anything else. Whatever it was pointing to ought to have been right in front of him, but he couldn't see a thing.

Then he saw something, just barely. As his eye adjusted, he could make out faint shapes that very much spoke a certain geometrical language. A tongue loosely in the ballpark of Buildingese. He couldn't tell what kind of building it was, though. A castle, a bungalow, an architectural marvel like Frank Lloyd Wright's Falling Water? He had the sudden dreadful thought that he might be stumbling into a magical abode, perhaps a palace, rife with whimsical enchantments, wizardly oddities, and infectiously excited children practicing spells and preening their familiars. Though if it came to that, he would give it a pass if it featured one of those really long banquet tables full of magically appearing foods, the kind that tended to have an absurd overabundance of colorful wobbly puddings.

He was almost there, though each step felt like lifting an obese howler monkey clinging to his shin. Now that he thought about it, he didn't feel tired so much as legitimately ill. He searched his memory for the last time he felt this sick, but to no avail. We, however, would not have similar luck.

Jill Valentine emptied the remainder of her ammo clip into a zombie. Unfortunately, the salvo did not halt the monster's sluggish advance, and she was forced to flee. As she foolishly jogged in place near an obstacle, her undead assailant helped itself to a greedy bite from her soft portions.

Herbert's thumbs danced about the Playstation controller as he looked nervously to his side. His brother was less than two feet from his face, glaring at him with worried interest. Herbert squirmed under the scrutiny. "I don't know how you talked mom and dad into letting you stay home from school. It's not like you're the one who's sick." He coughed, causing Seymour to flinch.

"Are you sure you're alright, Herbert? I could call a doctor, you know. Maybe I should..."

"Well, no, I'm not alright. Do I look alright? But I don't need a doctor, for Christ's sake. Can't you go find something else to do?"

"I'm calling a doctor."

"Are you out of your mind? It's nothing. What are you so worried about? Hey, put down the phone!"

"I'm sorry, Herb, but I just can't take the risk." Seymour began dialing, undeterred by not actually knowing the doctor's phone number. Herbert sprung to his feet and struggled over the phone with Seymour's plump fists.

"Seymour, put it down. Why can't you just be an uncaring asshole like a normal older brother?"

"Let go, Herb! Maybe he can write you a prescription or something..."

"If you don't put the phone down, I'm going to tell mom and dad. About you know what."

"Oh, come on, Herbert, just 'cause you found that girl's gymnastics DVD in my room doesn't mean..."

"Not that. The really bad thing. You know."

"You wouldn't!" Herbert's expression spoke to the contrary. Seymour was a literal person with little instinct for bluffing. "Come on, please don't, Herbert! But seriously. This is serious. It reminds me of... it, you know? The same thing you're talking about? That day?" He tried to stare as knowingly at Herbert as he could, hoping something, anything, would suffice in place of words.

Herbert knew it was serious. He looked serious. A kind of robot-sent-from-the-future-to-kill-someone-serious. “I’m just a little sick. It’s got nothing to do with that.”

“How do you know? That’s how it started, with really sick-looking people! And then with the coughing and the moaning and the dying—” As Seymour became more hysterical, his inner Jerry Lewis tended to surface.

“You mean... our brother?”

“Well... I mean...” Seymour anguished over a response.

“Was Louis sick? Is that how it happened?”

“Well... not... really...” Herbert watched his brother expectantly as he hemmed around the issue.

“... but it’s all... related, you know?”

“No, I really don’t know.”

“Herbert, why can’t you just remember?” Seymour blubbered.

“Why the hell can’t you just tell me?!” Herbert grabbed him by the collar and pushed him backwards onto the coffee table, as if making an urgent motion for an amateur wrestling match. A ceramic frog fell to the carpet. Seymour’s abject face quivered like a rubber mask.

“Careful, Herbert, some of this stuff is valuable.”

“Tell me how our brother died!”

“I...”

“Yeah...?”

“I...” He pushed Herbert off of him easily with his much greater but seldom used strength. He scurried to the Playstation controller and held it unconvincingly. “Look, why don’t we forget about all this doctor fuss and play our game! I’ll be the monsters and you can be the commando. Hey, look, I just obtained some sort of plant. How many points do I get for that?”

Herbert ignored the question, and stooped over the ceramic frog on the carpet, suddenly examining it with what appeared to be profound interest. Seymour hesitated, worried there might be a small crack in the supposedly valuable amphibian. Herbert twitched, then convulsed. He puked a warm geyser on to the frog.

On the screen, numerous zombies were huddled into a similar position over Jill Valentine's rapidly deteriorating torso as the screen faded to red.

Part II

If Herbert had only known what was contained by these walls, he might have sported a gait more sprightly than a pallbearer's shuffle. For these walls, these magnificent, nay, pantheonic boundaries were custodial to...

Exceptionally whimsical enchantments!

Towering gates of lucent crystalline splendor swung open. Out pranced two rows of rouge-cheeked youths in full magi-scout regalia. They fluttered on tippy-toed skips in their polished mithril hiking shoes as their phalanx bent gracefully into a spiral around Herbert. A chorus of sweet melody, presumably a patriotic hymn in praise of their beloved Fort Crossnest, filled the air and seemed to tickle it, a kind of lively persuasion which talked it, wooed it, into a dance. It, in return, swirled about the children, teasing their uniforms of titanium white. The golden kerchiefs around their necks billowed like liquid metal, and dapper, polished safari hats capped off their cheerful heads. Four lads rushed towards Herbert with the Palanquin of Valorous Merit, hoisted him upon it during a decisive pause in the musical composition, and hurried him into the gates as if he was a basin of water, and inside was their burning village.

Alas, no blaze was to be found inside, but for the warmth of good cheer and youthful camaraderie! Every whimsy the brave mind could dare to entertain found representation in these shimmering halls. Mirthful satyrs blew exultations into the mouths of their trumpets with no less gusto than what they'd use to resuscitate a drowned lover. Imps juggled opalescent orbs which, to even the most brusque imagination, looked as if they surely harbored entire universes, and which occasionally shattered on the floor in a likely well-rehearsed brand of contrived folly. Scribbling upon decaying scrolls were wrinkly creatures which looked sort of like deformed, little old men. They probably weren't really men, but you wouldn't dare ask what species they were just in case they actually were. Witches toiling over bubbling cauldrons recovered from their ghastly green swills glazed hams the size of award-winning pumpkins, and other such glittering comestibles.

The food. The aroma caressed Herbert's nose, and through the same magic spell which affects hobos when in the vicinity of a pie cooling on a windowsill, Herbert found himself levitating towards its source. A stout race of servile mushroom creatures spared little haste in bringing food to the tables, using their spatulate mushroom caps as a kind of waiter's tray.

They were long tables. There would be no disappointment in at least the one of their three dimensions. But as impressive as the tables' proportional shenanigans indisputably were, the real showstopper was what rested on their surfaces. Herbert squeezed in-between two vigorously dining campers and began filling his huge plate. He wielded a butcher knife like it was a battleaxe towards a Volkswagen Beetle-sized ham nearby, dealing critical hits to it and knocking off several whole pineapples which had been lanced into the mammoth meat-hock with hatpins.

As much as Herbert took from the table, it was perpetually refreshed by servants with things that looked even better. Colorful teacakes stacked to a height beyond perception. More chocolate tartles than any sensible gourmand's gullet could possibly account for in a lifetime. Meat pies so big they could be reclassified as mass graves for livestock, and piles of bloodsausage you'd need a bulldozer to realistically transport anywhere. And the wobbly puddings. Oh, how there were wobbly puddings. Wobbly puddings so copious you'd swear they'd started breeding, and so diverse in color and composition, any naturalist would stand agape at the depth of their gene pool. And wobbling, ever wobbling. A wobbling so soothing, so hypnotic, they might have used it to hypnotize an inquisitive rat long enough to engorge it, slowly dissolving its carcass with digestive enzymes, and who knows, probably did.

The crowd was riotous, bantering about magic and food and good times remembered. Herbert latched onto one bit of dialogue from the din. "Bertie, good bloke! Be a clam and pass me some of those spanking tartles, won't you?" Bertie shifted in his spotless scout's whites, assuming a smug position of advantage. "Oi then, Finny, wot's innit for me, then? I wouldn't right mind to seein' towards somma them wob'ly puddin's. Might force me to loosen the ol' grip on these tartles, here!" Finny looked as if for the first time in his life a worthy adversary had found him. He beamed, "Well, why didn't you say so, fine bean! The puddings are as good as yours, friend!" The two exchanged a couple of jocular winks and some magical gesticulations, and the desired menu items took flight and traveled to their respective recipients.

On another day Herbert might have lampooned their personable affectations. But today, surrounded by warmth and friendly spirit, he ventured a smile. A genuine one, a throwback to something pure and boyhoodsmanlike, entirely in spite of himself. And as long as he permitted himself to bask in the succour of great times being had, and the fervour of strong male bonds, he submitted to another

questionable train of thought. He would have thought a wizardly dining hall such as this would be complemented, or in fact crowned, by an overseeing wizard. But alas, there was not a wizard.

There were twelve wizards.

They surrounded the hall, spaced regularly, per the hours of a clock. They maintained a solemn, profoundly wise-looking vigil, though not stone-like, as their presence was invested with an all-assuring benefaction. There was Girgund the Stately, a plump little wizard with a red bushy beard, and a twinkle in his eye which possibly served as the only light in some distant, darkened realm. There was Frigglish the Jocund, a broad-shouldered wizard whose beard curled at its tip to nearly come back to his mouth, and whose mirrored spectacles were said to reflect ignorance back at its original projector in the form of frightening serpents. There was QuianZu the Auspicious, a frail man with a wispy moustache and a serene face, one undoubtedly kissed by the divinities of Buddha himself.

And then there was Cloudspindle the Maven, a lanky figure sitting hunched, relaxed, almost stewing in his own wisdom. Herbert felt this wizard was looking at him and became locked in the crosshairs of his abstruse gaze. His eyes shined like diamonds, and the lines in his face deepened, blooming like a flower, as the wizard drew a wizened smile. His beard flowed like a gentle river of pure, silken white, as soft as the coat of an aggressively shampooed show dog. Herbert against all odds felt secure in his gaze, and felt he could swaddle himself in the man's beard and sleep soundly in his lap. Maybe Herbert had it all wrong. Maybe he'd been harbouring unfair prejudice, and done little honour to the reality of wizards. Maybe, Herbert thought, wizards were ok after all.

Or maybe, he thought, wizards were not ok.

Herbert hated wizards.

Another embarrassing impasse has crept upon us, as it must again be admitted with the due fleet of dump trucks weighed down with industrial-grade chagrin. The author of this book has unfortunately established a track record of dishonesty. Any guarantee that no lies will stain the pages beyond this point would be a flimsy pact indeed. Comfort perhaps is taken in the almost sure prospect that not one of you for a moment bought the ludicrous hogwash appearing above this paragraph. If one did not pick up on the subtle shades of satire, or the uncharacteristic bit of good fortune befalling our hero, then surely those remaining stragglers of you were tipped off by the sudden turn to badly

caricaturized Brit-speak, and the irrational placement of the letter “u” in words they simply don’t belong. And for those of you who until even this moment suspected nothing amiss, and were keen on finding out the names of the rest of the twelve wizards, being quite sure they’d play a huge role in the rest of the book, you’ll be allowed a moment to compose yourselves and pretend you knew it all along just like everyone else. (FYI, they were: Smarny the Quiescent, Dillfly the Sober, Executus the Spry, Bund the Laconic, Gastrell the Munificent, Zazzzerpan the Learned, Ockite the Bonafide, and Cuttletard the Deft)

It might further mollify the reader-author relations to suggest that the preceding horseshit-laden hoax, or fantasy we’ll now call it, may very well have been an exhaustion and hunger-induced fabrication in Herbert’s mind. This is a plausible enough explanation, and one we’ll stick to as we press onward.

Herbert’s awareness returned to unforgiving reality. Visions of tables festooned with piping meats had caused him to entertain sympathetic thoughts, fond thoughts even, about kindly old wizards. Normally an unforgivable lapse in judgment, this was something he’d just have to chalk up to overexertion, and not beat himself up about too much.

The building was not a glittering palace or anything of the sort. From what he could decipher in the darkness, it was a stumpy building, featureless, like a concrete bunker. He got the impression by the way it was rooted that the bulk of inhabitable space existed underground.

The rusted metal door had a tiny, muck-coated window, and exhibited only traces of an ancient paintjob. He held little hope that it would be unlocked, but as he reached to touch the handle, he heard a “BUZZZZZZ”, and then a click. The handle gave way to his inquiring grip, and the door opened.

Inside, the smell of age was dominating. It was dark, but not lightless. What there existed of illumination told him, as he’d suspected, that the primary direction to go in this building was down. The clanging metal staircase took him to a corridor, where the sickly flicker of fluorescent lights revealed peeling painted walls. Also painted on the walls were words, possibly a kind of utilitarian signage directing those who would navigate the building. They were written in an alphabet only somewhat similar to that used in English, and in a language barely similar to English at all.

Herbert gingerly placed his feet to avoid debris. The hall was strewn with litter, like broken glass, crumpled, moldy pieces of paper, and things Herbert hoped were just clumps of dirt, and not rat droppings. Was that a broken wand on the floor? It might have just been a bent TV antenna.

As he made his way down the corridor, he passed a number of doors, some ajar. A noise from behind him caused him to jump and spin around. It was a faint scuffling coming through one of the doors, and suddenly Herbert suspected the stuff on the ground might not be dirt after all.

He obviously nicked a shard of glass with his shoe, sending it tinkling across the hall with an inescapable audibility. He tensed, and froze. "I'll be right out! One second!" shouted a frazzled female voice from behind the door. "Gosh darn it! Just had it. Where is it?? Stupid!" hissed the self-scolding whisper. Herbert's head floated into the doorway, allowing his unpatched eye a clear line of sight into the room.

The voice belonged to a girl who was picking up clothes and shaking them without really looking at them, then tossing them into haphazard. Her hair was wild and unkempt, mercifully drawn back into a ponytail, and resting on it tentatively was a witch's hat. She wore quite casual clothes which might have passed for her pajamas, and her legs were stuffed into a pair of black boots, one kind of crooked, like she'd just put them on hastily a moment ago.

Herbert, having fully digested the innocuous laundry room scene, pushed the door open a little wider. "Hey. I'm Herbert. Who are you?"

"Shh, shh, shhhhhh-zshhh-zshh-zshh..." The sounds became phonetically similar to the first sound in Zsa Zsa Gabor's name. "Zshh, zshh, zshhhzshhzshhhhhhhzzshhh—Herbert, I'll be right with you, 'kay?'" She slammed the door.

Herbert located a piece of the floor free of rat turds and plunked down there, leaning against the wall, welcoming the chance to rest his battered, exhausted body. "Take your time."

As if in defiance of his remark, the door that instant swung open again with violent metal yawn. Smoke poured out of the room as if a fire extinguisher had exploded in there. The girl pranced out with her arms raised and a bright smile on her face. It was the smile, it would prove, of a showman.

“Welcome! Welcome all, adventuring sprits! Welcome to the great Fort Crossnest, refuge for the Champions of Charms and the Sorcerious... —shh! No! Ok...— Sorcerially Serious! Those serious about sorcery! You know what I mean!”

She was wearing something new, perhaps the target of her mad garment scramble. It was a sash slung around her chest, covered in badges. Herbert wasn't any kind of summer camp aficionado, but to him, a lot of those badges looked really homemade. Some of them were small squares of paper with pen scrawlings on them, while another, quite clearly, was the wrapper to a piece of Starburst candy sewn onto the cloth.

“You're all just in time for orientation. I'll be your guide. I'm Camp Counselor Carmen Pearlskipper, but just call me Carmen 'cause we're on a first name basis around here. We're all friends around here, ok? If one thing is paramount here, it is friendship. I must warn all of you that nothing outside the boundaries of excellent cheer and brotherhood will be tolerated. Stiff penalties of time-outs will be issued at the failure to comply! Is this understood?”

Herbert looked around, paying weary lip service to the implication that anyone besides him was being spoken to.

“Alright! Can I get a high-five?” Carmen held up her hand, and Herbert reciprocated with one of the weakest high-fives he'd ever given. And he was not exactly legendary for his gusto in that department to begin with.

“Then let's go! Let's get on with the tour! If you'll just follow...”

“OWWW!” Herbert recoiled, but Carmen's grip on his wounded arm was steadfast. “That arm is broken. Can you please let go? I'm being very friendly about it, see?”

She gasped, pulling her hand away like his arm was a hot stove. “I'm so sorry! —shh! Idiot! Stupid!— Sorry. It doesn't really look like a sling.”

“Never mind. Can we just do this thing? The orientation, or whatever?”

“Is that a... is that a muddy cape?”

Somewhere in a desert, it was dark but for the light offered by a great display of stars, whose constellations would be foreign to any astronomer with a degree in the subject. With the dunes reflecting the cool luminance of the stars, Grant could see reasonably well.

Though seemingly there was no one around for miles, at times he thought he could hear a kind of scuttling from behind him, and occasionally, a very small whinny. He was strongly beginning to suspect Beatrix had not actually headed north, as he found it hard to imagine she could have outpaced him for so long.

He held the Russian doll in his palm, turning it over and over with his fingers. Should he just break down and use it? He had to find her soon. But if he did use it, he'd risk losing half of the doll in the swap. He began to wish he'd thought this whole thing out a little better.

As he put the doll away, something caught his eye up ahead. It was an indistinct shadow, trudging in one direction, slowing to a stop. Then it reversed directions, and slowed to a stop before reversing yet again Grant concluded this was because it was moving in circles. It was a clumsy form, kind of like a stumbling baby bird. But unlike a baby bird, as Grant could tell as he got closer, it was huge. The size of an elephant. Even bigger, in fact.

"Behold, enchantments galore!" Carmen blustered, as she brought Herbert through another anonymous metal door somewhere in the bowels of the bunker.

"So what is this? A kind of rec. room?" Herbert puffed, still winded from their madcap procession through the twisting corridors.

"You'll find all sorts of scintillating recreations here, yes. And each one a point of spellbinding wonder. This over here, for instance! A humble black box, yes? But no! Pictures, illusions, of living, moving, breathing things, talking, dancing, entertaining..."

"You mean the TV?"

"Yes! You're familiar with Television? Alright! High-five!"

"Yeah, I've had a few encounters with it," Herbert downplayed, while high-fiving. "Really, really magical stuff. Is that a computer over there?"

“Yes! You are all really sharp ones today, aren’t you? High-five!”

To Herbert, everything in this room looked so old, so coated in decades worth of congealed film, it was astonishing that any of it worked. But there was the computer, obediently playing its Windows screensaver on a faded monitor.

Carmen explained, “The way I understand it—mind you, I’m no ace magicker myself—is tiny druids of silicon use little pails to draw from wells of ether, and make their great pilgrimage at the speeds of light across...”

“And that’s a phone? Does it work?”

“Yes! It is a phone!” Herbert carefully observed she only answered his rhetorical question, and not the other one. “It takes the essence of your breath into small saddlebags and is carried off by ponies of wind through...”

“What’s that weird thing it’s hooked up to?”

“And this over here,” Carmen carried on, ignoring his question, “This is incredible. Great warriors at your command, fighting for your cause. Each shrunken and made one with great iron staves of agility. They spar and vie for one and only one orb of conquest and take no pleasure in anything but sweet victo—”

Herbert cut short her depiction of a dilapidated foosball table. “Carmen, sorry, that’s really great. Actually, all this is really nice. Maybe we could come back to this later. I’m just wondering if you have anything to eat around here?”

Carmen was silent, though her mouth was still moving, perhaps from momentum. Her silence segued into looking suddenly aghast. “Idiot! Dumb! Dumb, dumb, fool. Foolishhh!— Of course, how rude of me. You all must be half-starved, no doubt from your heroic and spellbinding journeys. What’s say we cut to the chase and hit up the mess hall, huh?”

“High-five?”

“High-five!” she agreed.

With that, another mad dash was on through a convoluted sequence of corridors. Herbert could swear she was sometimes doubling back in directions they'd already gone. "You won't even believe your eyes when you see it! The whimsies of our magic kitchen, they will challenge your imagination!"

"Right." Herbert felt that if the whimsies were anywhere nearly as challenging as the ones he'd just seen, he probably wasn't exactly in grave danger of having a wonder-induced stroke.

They were welcomed into the kitchen by a thunder of pans, tins and other garbage being kicked across the floor by their motoring legs. Carmen threw Herbert's arm out of her clutches and looked as if she hardly knew where to begin embellishing shamelessly upon this scummy, perfunctory-looking hovel of a kitchen.

"Oh! Oh! Now this... You see, this chamber, this... vault, it contains very agitated demons."

"Uh-huh."

"And you see, these, these cryptodigits, you press and listen to their song."

"Yeah?"

"The song rattles the demons' cage and they become very upset and produce heat..."

"You're talking about the microwave, here?"

"Yes! High..."

"High-five, high-five, I know. That's really cool. So what is there to put in the devil-box then?"

"In here, in the cavern of..."

"The refrigerator."

"... winter, you'll find anything your heart desires, and as much as you could ever want. So long as portion yourself judiciously. It is all strictly rationed, you see."

“I do see,” Herbert capitulated, as he examined the uninspired mound of plain-looking frozen goods. “Are those frozen burritos?”

“Yes!”

“So what you meant was, anything my heart desires, so long as my heart desires a frozen burrito heated in a microwave?”

“Yes!! High-five!”

“Sure. How ‘bout you high-five me one of those frozen burritos over here?” Herbert grasped the sad, icy log. He smacked it on the counter, knocking off half its volume in frost, and tossed it into the microwave like a brick. The ancient machine lurched to life with a plaintive hum.

“Anyway, in the next leg of the orientation, you will all be pleased to know...”

“Whoa, whoa...” Herbert called off Carmen’s voracious dogs. He didn’t lose eye-contact with his burrito through the barely transparent glass. “Carmen, why don’t we take a breather from the orientation? Anyway, what’s with this ‘you all’ stuff? You know it’s just me here, right?”

Her eyes darted back and forth, which might have meant she feared the jig was up on some sort of prank she was perpetrating. Or maybe it was just one more symptom of a lurking mental disorder. “Dummy! You dunce! We’ve done it now!...”

“And that. Why are you doing that? Who are you talking to?”

Now that Herbert thought about it, maybe there were others here. Some unknown entities, hidden through some insidious affiliation with magic (which would be the first such affiliation of anything, appliance or otherwise, found so far in this dilapidated compound). Maybe they haunted this poor girl, and told her to do things. Then again, maybe she was just mildly schizophrenic.

“Oh, come on, Herbert. I know I’m only talking to you. You’re so crazy! High-five!”

“Do you?” he said with reservation.

“Yeah! All that ‘you all’ stuff, that’s just standard to the orientation. You know, usually more kids show up than just one.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yes! Naturally. But the truth is, you are not the only one here. Oh, no.”

Herbert tapped the glass of the microwave, rousing it from a momentary nap. “Is that so?” It seemed likely to him that her brand of eccentricity was the result of years of solitude. He couldn’t imagine anyone else living in this deteriorating, lonely bunker. “Where are they, then?”

She looked nonplussed, further evidence to Herbert that she was probably full of it. He continued, “I will bet you anything that there is not a single living thing in this bunker, Fort Crossdress or whatever it was, aside from you, me, and the legion of very intestinally-active rats.” The microwave beeped and ground to a halt. The subsiding hum gave way to the fiercely sizzling noise from the payload inside. Herbert knew enough about cooking with microwaves not to touch it unless he was an avid collector of third degree burns. “And this thing isn’t magic, you know. It’s just a crappy microwave. You know that, right? None of this stuff is.”

“What am I, stupid, Herbert? —Yes!— I know that. I’d have to be really silly —Yes! Shh!— to think all that. The orientation has always had to be, um, spiced up a little, since this place is a bit depressing, and truth be told, isn’t all that magical. We don’t want to disappoint people.”

“I’m afraid talking about a foosball table like it was the damned Lost Ark of the Covenant could only serve to do exactly that.”

“Maybe you’re right. I don’t know. But some kids really seem to like it!”

“You mean the ‘others’ who are here? Still kind of wondering where they are.”

“No, not ‘they’. She! A girl. She came in today. First one in a while! High-five!” Herbert was sure he knew exactly which girl she was talking about, even before he saw the girl in question suddenly peering in through the doorway. Beatrix gave a polite knock on the doorframe, then waved.

“Junior Camper Beatrix, this is our newest camper, Junior Camper Herbert.”

“Yeah, we’ve met. I think he’ll make for a fine Junior Camper in this outfit.” She said with a satirical smile.

“Ok, how about we not go crazy with all the Junior Camper stuff,” Herbert muttered.

“Idiot!”

“Beatrix, I don’t know if you’ve had the chance, but Counselor Carmen gives one hell of a spiel about this place. If you have a spare moment, I’d highly recommend it,” he said while blowing on his burrito, which he somehow managed to get onto a paper plate, a feat managed through a delicate procedure involving a number of odd utensils, including a wire whisk.

“Oh, I’ve had the spiel. It was something, alright. Quite illuminating.”

“Really??” Carmen was delighted to hear the rave reviews.

“Well, this is all fun and everything, standing around in this dirty kitchen, but I think I’m going to go eat this burrito before it gets cold. Or less than thermonuclear-hot, I guess. Carmen, bang-up job with the orientation, but you can get back to bed. You look exhausted.”

“Whew.” Carmen took off her hat and appeared to relax. She clomped away, ostensibly to go back to bed. “Shh! Dumbass!”

The injured skelephant issued a weak, pleading trumpet. A child’s voice came from its ribcage.

“Hey, Mister! Can you please help us?”

“I have a marble in my pocket. You can have it if you just please help us!”

Grant came to a stop in front of the limping beast-slash-child prison. One of its legs was shattered, while another on the same side was wounded. This caused it to drag itself in circles, and from the look of the circular ditch in the sand, it had been doing so for some time.

“You can keep your marble, kid. I’ll get you out of there. How’d you get in that thing anyway?”

“He swallowed us through his trunk! Like this! Sluuurrrrp!” Simon mimicked cheerfully. For what these children had likely been through, they maintained positive demeanors, Grant thought. Maybe they were just accustomed to perpetual misfortune of one kind or another.

Grant crawled into the ditch and up onto the other side, standing on the central circular plateau. He walked along with the beast, eyeing it critically. He drew back his sword, and plunged it between its huge ribs. There was a final wail of trumpeted misery, then the massive green heart—which Grant found his sword piecing—stopped beating. He pulled the sword out, and in a continuous sweeping motion sliced several ribs from the cage, sending the orphans tumbling onto the sand.

“Thanks so much, mister! Here, you can have my marble anyway.” Samantha held up the humble sphere with a grubby hand. Grant shrugged, and took it.

“Alright. I’d be honored.”

“So what are we gonna do now, mister?” Simon asked.

“Well,” Grant said, suddenly gathering up the persona of the “fun babysitter”. “What do you kids think about becoming my sidekicks?” The two orphans looked at each other agape. It was as if they’d caught Santa Claus in their living room, and in pursuing him, a rip in the bottom of his sack deposited a trail of presents. “What are your names?”

“I’m Simon and this is my sister, Samantha! We’re orphans!”

“Simon,” Samantha scolded, “Ixnay on the orphanyay already, ok?”

“Sorry, sis.”

“Ok, Deputy Simon. If you and your sister don’t mind walking a little bit, I’m traveling north to a place called Pizzahut.” There was another exchange of agape looks. “It’s just a name. Don’t get too excited. Though I’m sure there will be things to eat there.”

“Will there be dandelion stew?”

“Ooh, ooh, will there be gruel cubes??”

“Let’s keep our fingers crossed.” The orphans put their finger joints to the test. “Also, listen carefully, sidekicks. We’re on a secret mission, and we’re being followed. But the guy following us doesn’t think we know he’s following us, and we should keep it that way, ok? So if you hear any

scuttling behind you, like the noise a crab or lobster might make when it walks, or if you hear any small whinnies, just pretend you didn't notice anything, ok?"

The two stood at attention and gave their most official-looking salutes. "Yes, sir! I don't really know what a small whinny sounds like, so I'm sure it wouldn't occur to me to notice it!"

In a sort of dormitory room, Herbert sat on a grungy bed, chewing. It was a surgical kind of chew, one adapted to the process of negotiating a food product that was scalding hot in some places, but ice cold in others.

"The burrito's actually pretty good. You should go make yourself one."

Beatrix made a face like a grumpy infant in the vicinity of a mall Santa. "Oh, I already tried one. It was... words fail me."

Herbert took a swig of lukewarm orange soda, the only beverage available in the dysfunctional kitchen.

Beatrix sat across from him, on another grimy bed. The beds were made, but probably a long time ago, and had gathered little speckles of black fungus on the blankets. She cleared her throat expectantly, in as subtle a way as she could pull off.

"Oh! Right," Herbert remembered. "I've got something that's yours." He reached into his pocket. He passed the locket to her. She looked happy to have it again, and wore it around her neck. "It slipped my mind, listening to your harrowing tale and all."

"Oh," Beatrix began, after a pause. "You might like to know, I did find out my ring was magic!"

Herbert choked on a particularly disagreeable clump of burrito. "Really."

"And speaking of magic, since I know you're so interested in the subject," she said, camouflaging her sarcasm with a normal tone, "check this out."

"What's that?"

“Kind of like a Russian doll. There are smaller versions inside, and this one itself came out of a larger one.” She popped the doll open, and removed the smaller half-red, half-blue doll. “These separate vertically, and magically, I suppose. Like this.” The two-toned doll became two separate dolls, one of each color.

“Huh.”

“Then you take this one.” She handed him the red one. Herbert put the plate containing the grisly half-eaten burrito down on the bed, and took the doll. “Then I turn it. Like this. Hang on.” She twisted her blue doll, so that the top half was turned around facing the other direction.

Herbert felt the doll move in his hands, as if coming alive. It turned quickly to look at him, but its fit of animation was very brief. His ears felt pressurized, and popped. He looked up at Beatrix, who was still sitting there, but things were different. Slightly different, and he couldn’t immediately put his finger on how. He looked down, and sitting next to him were the two halves of the doll which once contained the smaller dolls. They had been sitting next to Beatrix a moment ago. Beside Beatrix was his mangled burrito. It dawned on him that the objects hadn’t moved. He and Beatrix had.

“See? The dolls swap positions, and so does anyone who’s holding them.”

Herbert was silent, feeling his torso to make sure all of it was still there. He’d never been teleported before, and he always thought he would be one of those people—assuming teleportation existed, which it apparently did—who had a phobia about it. He opened the little red doll. Another smaller half-red, half-blue doll was inside, which he felt leery about removing.

“Another thing,” she went on, “I determined it doesn’t work when one of them is open. See?” She demonstrated by again twisting her blue doll, but no magical event followed this time. “I suspect those two smaller dolls could be taken out and used in exactly the same way, if you wanted. But it would render the bigger pair inoperable, since the smaller ones have to be inside, and both pairs have to be closed for them to work. See what I mean?”

Herbert slowly nodded his head. The moment had the stink of learning something difficult, or something he didn’t particularly care to know. Not because it was necessarily uninteresting, but because, as Herbert feared on some level, all kinds of knowledge carried a type of burden.

“I don’t know how many dolls are inside the dolls. Or for that matter, how many bigger dolls there are out there. ‘Parent dolls’, I guess. But I do know,” she said, with a look of contained self-assurance, “that if you don’t want someone using the corresponding doll to teleport to you, all you have to do is keep your doll open.”

“Hmm.” Herbert eyed her, wondering if there might be some purpose in this observation. Was she hinting that she didn’t want him popping in on her unannounced via doll at the drop of a hat? “Do you think we can use it to get out of here? Like, teleport away?”

“I hadn’t thought of it, actually. If that is the case, we would at least need to find the doll’s parent.”

Herbert shrugged. “Why bother. I’m going to get us out of here soon anyway. I saw a phone in the rec. room. I’ll call my parents. Or maybe the police, I dunno...”

“It might not work. Everything around here seems in such disrepair. There isn’t even any running water. I was really hoping for a hot shower, too.”

“Can’t you fix it? With your magic ring or something?” Herbert proposed.

She looked as if it never occurred to her, in an honest, sort of sheepish way which Herbert found somewhat endearing. He was surprised to admit it, but since they’d been separated earlier that day, he found he missed her. In retrospect, she made for a quite reasonable companion for discovery within this rare circle of hell seemingly engineered for Herbert’s personal displeasure. She was good company, particularly when compared with other unpalatable travel mates he could think of. If he could just get his dad on the phone, and convince him to somehow haul his SUV through whatever planes of reality divided this realm from his own, he would consider inviting her back to his place to hit up the Gamecube.

But then Herbert recalled she had said earlier that she didn’t want to leave. He scratched his head, visibly perplexing at her.

She looked a little to his right, her eyes widening with surprise. There was a male voice from behind him. Herbert didn’t even need to turn around.

“I should have guessed it’d be the two of you. Methinks destiny’s put its vexing designs on us all, wouldn’t you say?” Russet leaned on the doorframe with crossed arms and a cocky smile.

Herbert sagged. “Oh, hell.”

It was, as it had been before, hard to believe it was the same person.

Russet stood in the room, radiant as ever. His clothes, miraculously, or maybe magically, were spotless and fresh again, wrinkle-free and quite fragrant. His black shoes shined like a freshly waxed sports car. His skin again was soft and vital, not sickly and grimy, and his features again were fair, yet commanding, not marred by haunting inner tortures.

The only way he differed from his former self one night ago, to Herbert’s displeasure, was the lack of a cape. “And it was threatening to be such a nice evening...”

Russet vaulted himself onto a small table against a wall, crossing his legs into a sitting position. He placed his chin on top of his folded hands, and proceeded to besiege them with his effluent charisma. “Wizardy Herbert. Friend. It eases my soul to know you’ve found your way safely. Followed your guiding star, have you?” Russet snorted, continuing on a train of rapid prattle. “Ha! Imagine, navigating by one’s own face in the heavens! To think my visage belonged with the constellations, as if my ego needed it! Good grief!”

Herbert rolled his eye, and had a feeling he’d be resorting to that activity again soon.

“And the same sentiments of relief are in effect regarding your safety as well, miss. Though I do regret I was unable to obtain your name in my haste the other night. Perhaps, in this most leisurely setting we find ourselves enjoying this eve, you might favor me with it?”

“You’ve got to be joking.” Herbert said under his breath, but audibly enough. Between the mania of Carmen’s orientations and the turbulence of Russet’s weird moods, he wasn’t sure he could take any more helpings from the burgeoning buffet tray of psychological disorders.

“Excuse me, Herbert, but don’t you think it’s a little rude to interrupt a lady as she’s about to speak?”

“Oh. Sorry. Where have my manners gone? I should have introduced you. Russet, this is Beatrix. Beatrix, this is Russet, a complete nut-job.”

“Beatrix, then. Charmed and deligh...”

“Wait, wait, alright...” Herbert stood up in an agitated tizzy. “What am I supposed to do, here? Pretend this is all normal? Is that the etiquette for dealing with people as crazy as you? One minute you look like something fished out of the sewer. And now, you’re all ‘finding ourselves leisurely enjoying this eve blah-blah-blah’. You really expect me not to say anything?”

“Jeez, Herbert. What’s the matter?” Beatrix asked.

“No, no, it’s ok.” Russet spoke diplomatically. “Now Herbert... and Beatrix, I suppose it’s only fair that you know too. Earlier, Herbert and I encountered each other. And in a moment of weakness, I’m afraid to say... well, I became a little cross. Completely unjustified behavior, and I apologize.”

“A little cross?” Herbert echoed.

“A bit of a spoilsport, yes.”

“A spoilsport?”

“Yes, and I feel just rotten over it. What’s say we make amends right here and put it behind us? Put the old hatchet six feet under, so to speak?”

“Well, I saved your ass, and then you broke my arm. I’ll tell you where you can put the old hatchet.”

“The arm, of course! What a clumsy muttonhead I was! It wasn’t the first time I’ve found myself culpable of the offense. Dare I say, it won’t be the last.”

“Yes, it all sounds really innocent, doesn’t it. Almost charming. Like something out of an Oscar Wilde play, really. My God, I should be on my hands and knees thanking you for gracing me with your presence. Oops, I mean hand and knees.”

“Come now, buddy, lift yourself out of those dumpy doldrums! Why dwell, when you can...” Russet, in mid sentence, hopped to his feet on the table, then sprung off it like a diving

board, doing a double somersault over Herbert's head. In midair, he plucked the cape-sling free from Herbert's limp arm. The cape was back around Russet's neck before he landed from the somersault. "Dance!"

Russet's pose complemented the word, as if he was about to begin a soft jazz tap routine. The cape was billowing in soft velvety waves, suddenly in perfect condition. And so was Herbert's arm. It actually felt stronger than ever. He felt like he could halt a charging rhinoceros with that arm, or at least use it to punch out a smug son of a bitch in a cape. "What did you do?" Herbert asked, warily.

"Consider it a humble, and merely preliminary token of reconciliation for my boorish deeds, fine Wizardy."

"Nice spell, Russet." Beatrix commended.

"But I've only yet begun my repairs!" Russet slid his silver wand from its sheath, and with eyes closed, raised it like a conductor. He drew a breath, then shot the wand's tip towards one of the moldy beds.

"We're together! At last!" Russet swelled melodically.

"Ohhh, no," Herbert protested. The bedding bloomed into a froth of pink blankets and satin.

"Albeit a bit tardy!"

"No, you are not starting a musical number right now. Not in here, not now. No way." Another flick of the wand had the room in warm décor with a burgundy paintjob and dark trim, fully furnished. It looked a bit like a lounge, and now merely lacked an aging gentleman in a robe with a snifter to complete the effect.

"Friends forever! And fast!" Russet grabbed Beatrix's hands, swooping her up to her feet. Surprised, she had a look of nervous amusement, but played along. Russet spun her around in a mock-waltz.

"Get that singing bullshit out of here!"

"Me, Beatrix and WiiiZARDYYY!"

SLAM.

Herbert shut the door after their waltz swept them out of the room. He locked it, then crawled between the pink satin sheets and went to sleep.

Beatrix stood with her mouth slightly open. “That was quite a performance, Russet.”

Russet, mid-bow, lifted his head and winked. “All in the due course of gladdening a lady.”

Beatrix made a bemused inspection of the now well-lit corridors of the bunker. “And you certainly did wonders for the atmosphere in here.” She was referring to what transpired during his vigorous musical number, the full, dogged narrative for which we’ve been mercifully spared. Set to his tune though, rest assured, was an ensemble of lively cavorting, graceful Terpsichore, and, yes, majyyks, not the least of which was a handy spell allowing one to make up clever rhyming lyrics on the fly.

The majyyks also called upon the environment to come to life. The frightfully peeling paint on the walls crawled like a kind of supple flesh, and smoothed itself into a seamless plane of pale green. The garbage tumbled through the halls in a horizontal avalanche, dissolving into nothing, leaving a polished, metal surface. Light fixtures above their heads sprung to life with new, steadfast bulbs, supplanting the impotent flicker of the decades-old ones.

“I never did get to thank you for saving us. From those skeletons.”

“And there’s simply no need. Our mutual acquaintance, Wizardy, has already returned the deed in kind, helping me out of my own pickle. You must forgive me if I stay discreet with the embarrassing details of the event, but in any case, he and I are square. Square as can be, as if we’ve taken our mothers to the prom! But from you, Beatrix, all I need to see is your smile to have the exchange turn in my favor. We are more than square. What is that slanty type of square called?”

“A rhombus?” Beatrix felt herself blushing, the first time she could recall it ever happening over a conversation about geometry.

“Yes, a rhombus it is, then. We are fully rhombussed in the transaction.”

“I have to say, your magic is really impressive. You have a lot of talent.” Beatrix tensed her face with critical self-reprimand. “Sorry, I probably sound like a gushing fool.”

“Nonsense! I’m humbled by your remark. Majjyks really are the spice of life, I find,” he said. “Second only to fine tailoring,” he added, after a sly pause.

Beatrix nervously fidgeted with the belt loops on her pants. Despite her most noble efforts, it was proving hard to feel terribly self-chastising in the glow of Russet’s friendliness. “So, is that Cyrillic?” she asked conversationally.

Russet looked to the wall she was referring to, and examined the painted letters with an air of one about to give really complicated directions to a lost motorist. “Umm... you know, I think it’s Russian.” He nodded, becoming more comfortable with this appraisal. “Yes, must be. That’s the one with all the backwards R’s and such.”

“Yeah. Must be.” She stifled a yawn. Now that she thought of it, she couldn’t remember feeling so exhausted. Or dirty. “Say, Russet... When you tidied the place up... you know, with your magical song... did you by any chance fix the running water? I could really use a hot shower.”

“I can assure you this facility, dear Beatrix, is now a veritable shrine to exemplary plumbing standards! The ablutions you crave may occur on your whim. And I imagine,” Russet’s voice escalated to a tenor of excitement, “you may be interested in doing a bit of laundry, no? Say no more, I can see it in your eyes. (Not to mention your clothes!)” He tapped his wand like he was ashing a cigarette. A medium-sized white satchel appeared in his hand. “Just put everything you want to have cleaned in there—darks and whites together even, it doesn’t matter—and give it a little shake, and it’ll all come out clean as the day you bought it!”

“Oh, wow. Thanks!”

“And if you care to have anything pressed, let me show you...” Russet went on with tittering glee at their indulgence in what was likely one of his favorite subjects. As extensive as Russet’s arsenal of magic (majjyks, dammit) was, you could wager dollars to detergent that half the spells related to the maintenance of a proper wardrobe.

The next morning, Herbert shuffled groggily down a corridor while rubbing his eye. In his slumber-addled state, it took him a moment to notice the place was tidier, less rat crap-infested. It didn't take much more time to guess it had something to do with Russet and his Broadway shenanigans. It took even less time for him not to give a rat's crap about it. Today, he had bigger fish to fry.

Though the rest of the fort was up to hospital sterilization standards, the rec. room was as dilapidated as ever. He wondered briefly why Russet's magic hadn't permeated this room, guessing rather linearly that there might be some anti-magic barrier surrounding it. The musty computer persisted in its loyal display of its banal Windows screensaver. The great shrunken warriors idled, pitched at angles on the foosball table, fused to their iron staves of agility. The bookshelf was jammed with moisture-crinkled, yellow-paged books. They looked like they were recovered from someone's dead grandmother's attic, but Herbert recognized many of them as contemporary titles. Most had been printed in the last five years, and in keeping with contemporary literary trends, most invoked a particular theme.

There was an aggressive representation among the shelves of the most popular book series, arguably of all time, the "Rutherford Trick" collection. Rutherford and his friends sought out the Treasures of the Thousand Kingdoms, often dipping into their cache of devastating magic spells. In each book, it was not uncommon for the gumptious youths to bring entire kingdoms to their knees if it meant inching them closer to treasure. Despite heavy-handed overtones of sovereignty violation and militant conquest, the tales always sported a lighthearted, fancifully zephyrous breeze throughout their pages.

Also smattered about the shelves were volumes of the hip, outrageous, and oft in-your-face series, "ALASHA-ZAMMM!" It chronicled the adventures of several rival gangs of youngsters who sparred for turf, riches, and something that rhymed with "riches" which would best be left understood as "women", all fought out through the arcane, and often "dope" vagaries of street magic. The author, though given a slack leash in having tapped into a vein of "cred" with youth culture, was notorious for putting editors through the ringer with textual deluges of questionable material and profanity, all broadcasted through capital letters ("caps lock", for the author, was not merely a keyboard key, but something to punch like a timecard, signaling the beginning and end of a day's work).

Herbert recognized those titles, but hadn't read any of them. But one he had read was—to his sudden palpitations—sprinkled on the shelves liberally. “Vera Valera and the Secret Sorceress Sorority”, a series of tales involving magically-inclined coeds, led by Vera, a vivacious and caper-savvy university socialite. Together they'd solve mysteries and become entwined with the affairs of the many eclectic secret societies on campus. Herbert, though he'd never cop to it, found all the characters and scenarios very charming. Fans of the series, however, would invariably have to endure the curiously salacious flavor to everything, from lengthy descriptions of the coed's sorceress outfits, and the ways the scant material tended to hug the contours of milky, vitamin-enriched skin, to a narrative style which was absolutely fixated on details of a certain ilk, such as the way Vera's slender hand would hover, almost trembling with excitement, over a heaving bosom as she revealed her theory on how old Dean Brimstale had fled the enclave with the Palladium Mortarboard.

And then there was another book which Herbert didn't recognize at all, called “Harry Potter”. Though treated to favorable reviews by a few publications, and indisputably housing some endearing tales about children and witchcraft, the series remained relatively obscure, and few kids had ever heard of it. But for those who had, the existence of the book itself would serve as a story of inspiration, reminding everyone that in this country, even a young black man from Harlem plagued by poverty and violence could shake off the shackles of the ghetto, and by dint of perseverance alone write one hell of a children's book. As inspirational as that notion may be, and it is, the real world will always require its pound of flesh. Publishers, leery of frightening off potentially squeamish readers by peddling a book written by a black man from the 'hood, or anyone with an unpalatably “ethnic-sounding” name, persuaded the author to truncate his credit to initials only, and when the issue was ever pressed, claim to be a young white woman from the U.K., as was a fashionable trend among such literature at the time.

Herbert removed one of the Valera novels and, making sure the coast was clear, slipped it in his back pocket.

He applied his attention towards the telephone, which was the reason for this visit. Though first, in a sort of double take, Herbert found himself looking at the bizarre gizmo the phone was hooked into. It was about the size and shape of a sidewalk mailbox, though it wasn't metal. The case was composed of clear plastic, exposing convoluted clockwork inside. Two dominant interior features

were a couple of thick discs, one big, one smaller, like gears on a bicycle. They spooled a kind of tape between them, perhaps magnetic. Between the discs was a label, which said “ 3π ”.

Concluding nothing about the device and surprising no one in doing so, Herbert picked up the phone. There was a dial tone, a sound he was relieved to hear. He punched in the number to his house, and waited with the phone to his ear.

And waited. And waited some more. Just as he was about to remove the phone from his ear, he heard something. It was faint and low-pitched, but was gradually becoming louder, higher in pitch. The noise seemed to reach its peak, a sound like holding down the lowest key on an organ. It then began its sliding descent down the octave on the other side. It was as if Herbert had just rolled over a lazy hill of sound. He waited. And waited. And then exactly as before, it began again.

Herbert hung up in disgust. He debated over whether to try again, which of course he would. Naturally, he thought, it couldn't be that simple. It never was, certainly not in a place like—

“I love those books.”

Herbert jumped. “What?”

“The book in your pocket! Vera's so great.” Carmen was standing behind him. For someone responsible for such a clomping pandemonium in her boots the night before, she now seemed like the model of stealth. She could have garroted him if she wanted to, and Herbert invested no certainty whatsoever in the assumption that she didn't. “Is that volume 18? Or no —Silly!— 19? ‘Soiree of the Pillowfight Valkyries’, I think it was?”

“What? Oh, this. I just needed something to kill a spider with.”

Beatrix held the worn, folded piece of paper, still debating whether it should play a role in this encounter or not. She was nervous about bringing the subject up, but she had to start somewhere. And for some intangible reasons, as well as some quite tangible ones, she'd begun to trust Russet. And now that she thought about it, she wasn't so much preoccupied by the matter of business at hand as she was with the idea of seeing him again.

Standing outside Russet's door, she unfolded the Xeroxed sheet. Creases in the paper carved straight, toothy lines of white through the photograph of the boy's face, intersecting through his black eye patch like crosshairs.

She folded it up and made a motion to knock on the door, but found it ajar. "Hello? Russet?" A sleepy, grumbling noise wafted from within the room. "Oh, sorry... I didn't know you were still slee..." She was interrupted by more guttural shapes of sound. She thought they were, very much non-lingually, conveying that the intrusion was fine. She opened the door cautiously.

She was startled by what she saw. The room was in horrible shape, worse than before his fit of tidying. Dust coated everything, the bed coverings were stained and moldy, and the one working bulb flickered pitifully. There was a rasping cough from under a soiled mound of bunched-up blankets.

"Russet?" She stepped closer, trying again. "Russ..." Russet bolted upright with a prize sow-caliber snort. She nearly leapt out of her shoes.

His eyes were clenched shut like shy clams, and his hair was like a nest prepared by mentally handicapped birds. He looked partly like someone with a world class hangover, and partly like something you'd find in a cemetery assuming you were equipped with digging apparatus.

"Let me watch a little more. This Epiphany Collection is just incredible," he slurred deliriously.

Beatrix looked around, generously giving him the benefit of the doubt that he might be saying something coherent, but only briefly. She gently tapped him on the arm. "Hey, I think you're still dreaming there."

He took in a short breath and opened his lids wide, revealing bloodshot, darting eyes. They settled on Beatrix.

"Are you feeling alright?" she asked.

"Fine. Better than ever," he said in a tone that would suit someone poised atop a dunking booth, filled not with water, but dead puppies. Beatrix hesitated, putting a finger to her lip. She thought about Grant, and his pursuit of his friend. Didn't he say something about medicine?

“Well you don’t really look fine. Are you sure you’re not sick?”

“Pff. Yeah. Sick, that’s what I am,” he said with a sarcastic edge.

She struggled to fathom the disconnect between last night’s Russet and today’s. Maybe some people just weren’t morning people, she thought. “What happened to this room? You cleaned everything up so well last night, and now...”

“Oh. I suppose the magic wore off. It happens. All kinds of stuff like that happens to me.” He sneered in an unbecoming way. Though Beatrix noted, contrary to last night, just about anything he did with his face this morning was unbecoming. It was proving to be a stubborn medium.

“Why do you think that?” she asked.

“Who the hell knows. God’s got a real bone to pick with me. Yeah, He really likes to gnaw on that bone.”

“Come on. That can’t be it. We all get a little down, sometimes.”

“What, don’t you believe in God?” He asked, with a hint of petulance. Beatrix faltered. On another occasion, this might have led to a whole debate on the subject, the kind of conversation in which she tended to thrive. Though at the moment, she was understandably trigger-shy on matters of theology.

“I... don’t know,” she said, toying with her hair.

“Well, what is it? Yes or no?”

“I guess not. No.”

Russet released a guffaw. “Sorry, don’t mean to condescend, you know,” he said. He flashed her an insecure look through his baggy eyes. “I’ve just never fully understood that point of view. I just don’t get it.”

“Why not?”

“Well, something’s got to have it out for me, I figure. If not God, someone very important then. A terribly vindictive prick.”

“That’s your reason? That’s awfully…” She shrugged instead of saying ‘specious’, usually one of her favorite words in such conversations. The fact was, it wasn’t even specious so much as it was merely pathetic.

“And somebody’s got to be responsible for making me into such a perfectly, elegantly miserable puke.” He reclined with some effort into his musty den of blankets. “I’m like an orchid in midnight bloom. Or the falls of Shangri-friggin’ -La. If you can’t tip your cap to God for that, you simply have no sense of majesty.”

Beatrix breathed a heavy, but carefully soundless sigh. This was not at all how she’d intended the morning to go. She restively toyed with the folded paper.

“Are you hungry?” she asked, suddenly hopeful. “Maybe you could, if you feel up to it I guess, do some kind of breakfast spell?”

“Oh. Yeah. Well…” He pulled blankets over himself in a voice-muffling heap. “I hope you like burritos.”

She frowned, then looked at the paper. She slid it into her pocket.

“Contact with the outside world is a little tricky around here,” Carmen tried to explain to Herbert, summoning every ounce of her limited patience and attention span. “There’s a rift between this world and yours.”

“Is that what that weird contraption is for? Getting through the rift?”

“I honestly don’t know. —Stupid!— But yes, I think so.”

“I think it’s a broken piece of junk. The phone doesn’t work.”

“Well of course not. —Shh!— Everything around here is really old, in case you didn’t notice.”

“I noticed. So what’s this rift, anyway? Some kind of force field maintained by wizards or something?”

“Wizards!” She laughed, almost choking from the sheer absurdity of the remark. “Of course not! —Shh!— Sorry.” Herbert silently awaited clarification. Carmen gathered herself. “Um, right. You see, this world is different from our world. Earth, that is.” Herbert was about to say something sarcastic, but she went on. “Hear me out! It has to do with the summer. It’s always summer here. And as such,” she leaned closer, as if imparting a jewel of wisdom which was guarded by a battalion of coy mountain-top monks for centuries. “As long as it continues to be summer here, camp will never end, and you will never be able to leave.”

“What? Why?”

“Because it is summer here, while it is not summer on Earth. —Er! What?— No, wait. That doesn’t sound right.” Herbert sighed. He was wondering why he ever thought trying to have a coherent conversation with Carmen was a good idea.

Carmen shifted her glance towards the rec. room’s entrance. “Oh, hello, Junior Camper... —Darn!— I mean, Beatrix. Just Beatrix!”

“Herbert, I think there’s something wrong with Russet.”

Herbert made a series of overly animated head bobbing motions, squeezing as much sarcasm out of the body language as he could. “You think??”

“He’s just... so different. I don’t know what...” Herbert interrupted her with a hand in the air, turning back towards Carmen.

“Hang on a sec, Beatrix. We’ll talk about it in a minute. Carmen was just explaining something to me.”

“Right.” Carmen regrouped. “The bottom line, I suppose, is...” Her hands addressed the frizzy disaster of hair above her as she searched for the words. “This rift in time between the two worlds, it makes it really hard to leave. But probably not impossible. I mean, we all got here, didn’t we? It stands to reason we can all leave. And I would guess Campmaster Thundleshick is the one to decide whether you stay or go.”

“Thundleshick.” Herbert hissed to himself through pursed lips as he brandished a fist, the way Seinfeld does when cursing his portly neighbor, Newman.

“So he just decides one day, on a whim, that we can go?” Beatrix asked, trying to connect some dots.

“Oh, probably not. I’m sure he’s long forgotten about each of us, individually. He’s not really like Santa, keeping lists and such.”

“I’d sort of gathered that,” said Herbert.

“I’d guess if you wanted him to let you leave, or do anything at all for you, you’d have to do something for him.”

“Like what...” Herbert said, as if responding to the exact same statement, only made by someone holding a rubber suit, a tub of Vaseline, and a poodle.

“Like Camp Quests! —Shh!— Yes, that would have to be it.” Her revelation was met with silence, prompting her to continue. “If there’s one thing he seems to be interested in, it’s Camp Quests. You see, next to the bulletin board there,” she flailed in the direction of a cluttered board. “The computer. From time to time a quest will be posted online, and any camper who’s inclined can go on the quest. Of course, it’s been some time since anyone’s been around here to try. I’d go myself! —Shh!— But then, nobody would be around to hold down the fort here and provide orienta—”

“What’s the point of these quests? Treasure or something?” Herbert asked.

“Badges! Magical merit badges!”

“Oh, well why didn’t you say so? It sounds like it’s clearly worth the effort.”

“For each quest completed you receive one badge. You put the loot in the Vend-o-Badge over there, and it gives you your badge.” They followed her pointing finger towards the peculiar object which looked like a modified snack vending machine.

“Ok, so, you get a badge,” Herbert reasoned, “and then you give it to Thundleshick? And he gets excited about it, for whatever sick reason, and then lets you go home?”

“Possibly!”

“Possibly?”

“But I don’t think only one would cut it. I’d think he’d have to be sufficiently impressed. I’m guessing a whole book of badges would move him. I’ve never known anyone who’s collected a whole book, though. It’s hard!”

“Alright. It’s a start, I guess. Maybe if we all work together at it, and put in the hours...” Herbert looked pained, as if he was already calculating the time budget. “How many are in a book?”

“Three!”

Herbert started to say something, then stopped. “Three? That’s it?”

“M-hmm!”

“Well, hell, we can do that. Can’t we, Beatrix?”

She shrugged. “I guess so. We can give it a shot.”

Carmen clapped her hands, bubbling up with energy. “This is great! It’s been ages since anyone went on a quest around here!”

The cardboard box slapped against the concrete floor. It’s hodgepodge of contents made it look like something you’d find on a lawn during a yard sale. At home on its face would have been a hand-written sign reading “50¢”.

“You’ll need to be prepared before you go gallivanting on quests, ‘kay?” Carmen rummaged about the box, clinking and rustling through items.

“We could pack some sandwiches...” Herbert suggested.

“I mean magic items, silly. You’ll need to know your way around a nifty spell or two if you want to stand a chance.”

“I’ve already got one. See?” Beatrix held out her ring hand. “But maybe there’s something in there for Herbert?”

“Come on, I don’t need...” Herbert began dismissively.

“Sure! Just have a look.” Carmen gestured towards the interior of the box.

“Herbert, I know you have some weird hang-ups about magic, but it really is useful. Honestly, you should give it a try,” Beatrix said as she fiddled with her ring. The object, in its silent way, had endeared itself to her, and so had by mysterious proxy the art of magic. She now felt like an unlikely spokesperson for the cause.

Herbert made a small noise of reluctance. Beatrix stooped over the box and delicately pulled out one of the objects. “What about this?”

“Is that a flute?”

“It appears to be.”

“Let me make this perfectly clear. You will find me resorting to many desperate measures to leave this camp. Virtually any you can imagine. But what you will not do is catch me frolicking all over the place with a damn flute, I’ll tell you that much right now.”

Beatrix replaced the item. She pulled out what looked like a little plastic toy monkey. She did not present the item’s candidacy to Herbert immediately, though. “Are you sure this one’s magic?” she asked in Carmen’s direction.

“Oh, no. —Shhhh! — You don’t want that one. No, no. —Idiot!— Let me take that.” Carmen cradled the monkey, then put it back in the box. “No, the naughty monkey belongs in his box. There he goes.”

Beatrix looked at Herbert with raised eyebrows. “Alriiight. Moving on then.” Another object surfaced. “What about this?”

Herbert glowered at the ornately decorated Oriental fan, not dignifying it with a response. “Right,” Beatrix said, putting it back. She sat up, putting her hands on her waist. “Well, you tell me, Herbert. I don’t know. There are some spoons in there, there’s some kind of weird statue-thing, there’s a crowbar, there’s... I think... some kind of replica of a ship... there’s...”

“What’s that?” Herbert peered into the box, suddenly fixed on something. He moved some objects aside, including a hand mirror, a whip, a power strip for a computer, and a really tall pepper

grinder like they use in restaurants. There it was in Herbert's view, plain as day. He lifted it out of the heap.

"Is that a gun? Like a real gun?" Beatrix reacted.

"It's an M9 Beretta pistol. Yeah, it looks real." Herbert was one of those guys who, for some inexplicable reason, knew things about guns.

"Is that thing magic?" she asked Carmen.

"If it's in the box, then yes, it should be magic. Everything in there is."

Herbert inspected it with, in Beatrix's judgment, an eerie facility. It was black, with various components plated in silver, the grip in particular. He released the ammo magazine, then slid it back in with an authoritative locking sound. "It's loaded, too. Fifteen rounds."

"Oh. That's... good. I guess." Beatrix was never comfortable around guns. "Well, if that's your pick, Herbert," said Beatrix, who could tell the two were already inseparable, "why don't you try some... magic?" She sounded unsure.

"Oh. Alright," Herbert said begrudgingly. In his mind, guns had nothing to do with magic. Performing incantations with a gun seemed like a form of disrespect to the weapon, a kind of misuse. It was almost as if he was being asked to keep his new Lamborghini under the 20 mph speed limit.

He held the gun out, raised to an elevation slightly higher than his head. He then held out his other hand, as if he had the slightest notion about what he was trying to accomplish. "So... what exactly am I doing, here?"

"Just picture something you want to achieve. Magically. Anything, really. But I guess try to start small."

"Small, huh? Gotcha." Herbert focused. His face increased its strain. And harder still. Nothing at all was happening, not even a spark. He felt like a paraplegic trying to move his legs. In frustration, he started stabbing at the air with the gun. The other two crouched defensively.

"Whoa. Watch it!"

“Relax, guys. I’m not going to shoot anyone. Look, the safety’s on.”

“Wow, that’s so unbelievably reassuring!” Beatrix mocked.

“Well, there’s obviously something wrong with it. I don’t think it’s a magic gun.”

“Are you sure you’re doing it right?”

“Not even remotely.”

Beatrix watched the M9 warily. She made the reluctant offer. “Here, let me see it.” Herbert shrugged. With his finger in the loop, he flipped it over adroitly and handed it to her grip-first. She took it from him, but halfheartedly, not properly holding the grip.

The moment she made contact with it, the gun began glowing red and was hot to the touch. She held it up, and prongs of creeping flame spilled from its aura. The flame tendrils, giving her little time to react, grew larger and collected into a ball of fire in front of the barrel. The ball became bigger and hotter in fractions of a second.

She gasped and dropped the gun. It instantly ceased its self-incanted spectacle. She held her fingers, which had felt as if on the verge of suffering burns. “I’d say it’s definitely magical,” Beatrix not so much remarked, as lamented.

Herbert tried again, putting on some of his most fearsome “I am really using magic now” faces, though they came off more as “I am really feeling constipated now” faces. The weapon remained lifeless. “Yeargh…” Herbert let out as he surrendered. “What’s the deal? What am I doing wrong?”

“I don’t know, Herbert. That thing practically exploded the second I touched it. It’s not for lack of magic potency inside it.”

“I guess I’m just no good at magic.” He looked at her helplessly, as if expecting a theory. She held up her hands, like a hobo had just asked her for spare change.

“You know,” Carmen stepped in. “Some people have trouble using certain kinds of magic. It’s like any talent, ‘kay? There are always areas that need work. But it’s also sort of a combination… you know, between the magic item’s capacity, and yourself. What’s inside you. So,

if there's something inside you that's not quite right, then your magic doesn't work quite right, 'kay?' They nodded slowly. She continued, "Ok... like, say you have some fear. Like a fear of flying. Well logically, it doesn't stand to reason you're going to be doing any flying spells soon, right! But it's more than that. If you're a really good person without any bad stuff in you, it would be really hard for you to hurt someone with magic, or cast any 'bad' spells, kay? Or if there's something dark inside you, something evil, then you won't be able to do any good spells. Like healing magic and stuff like that. Get it?"

"Makes sense, I guess" Herbert said. "So what does that say about me?"

"You?" she said, looking skyward, presumably at the onerous prospect of psychoanalyzing Herbert.

"Yeah. What does it say about a person who can't seem to use any magic at all?"

"In that case," she considered, "I might guess there was some very significant underlying issue. I hate to presume to know anything about you, Herbert. —Shh! Dummy!— But my best guess would be some kind of terrible incident in your past. Like a posttraumatic stress thing. Maybe."

"Hmm. Nope. I really don't remember anything like that happening."

"A lot of times people don't remember those things." Beatrix suggested.

"I dunno. It doesn't really sound like me. I've lived a pretty boring life," Herbert said as he pulled the gun's holster strap out of the box. He looped it around his waist, fastened it, and holstered the M9. "Anyway, I think I'll take the gun. I mean, even if I'm not going to be doing any magic with it, at least it is a gun, after all. One that shoots bullets."

"Hmm. Ok..." Carmen didn't seem completely satisfied with this. It struck her as only proper that one should be, if embarking upon magical quests, armed with magic and not relying on things that fired bullets through such a literal, mechanical process. But it was clear Herbert was going to be a slow study. "You're ready for a quest, then."

Beatrix, however, wasn't ready. She was dwelling on something Carmen had said earlier, about those who had trouble with healing magic. She was starting to feel that some of her earlier

intuitions were becoming justified, but rather than produce a feeling of satisfaction, it just made her worry. It was a worry she couldn't pinpoint. Maybe it was mixed with newly percolating feelings of concern for Russet. Or maybe it was a reminder of the seemingly ever-expanding dominion of malefactors bent on her misfortune, for reasons she still didn't understand.

She held the blue doll in her hand, giving it a pensive shake. Decisively, she opened it, then stuck both halves in her pocket.

Under the merciless morning sun, Grant and his two orphan deputies traversed desert dunes on lumbering mounts. The children each rode a more diminutive incarnation of Grant's more nobly-proportioned mount, an 800-pound bull Frogasus. He'd originally had no intention of expending the magical collateral on any kind of transportation, preferring to marshal his reserves for a more pressing occasion. But listening to two orphans bemoan the discomforts of a lengthy march through a desert was just not something Grant's conscience was going to permit.

Samantha and Simon were sound asleep on their smaller frogasus mounts, a sight which would almost look cute if the creatures weren't drooling strands of white mucus. The frogasus, though durable and loyal to a fault, was hardly a premium summoning. It was better known for its economy. Tiny wings left it flightless, and a tough, bumpy back made it difficult to ride. A minor concession Grant did make, eventually, was giving them the legs of a goat. This was after the instantly apparent non-viability of traversing sandy dunes in great leapfrogging bounds for hours.

Grant halted and dismounted his frogasus, and examined his map with a look of frustration. He held a compass up to the map as if it would be of the slightest benefit to his current navigational quandary. Samantha was rubbing sand out of a sleepy eye. "Why have we stopped, mister?"

"We should have arrived by now."

"You mean we get to have pizza soon?"

"No, no. It's... never mind. There just won't be pizza. Or probably not. I've never been to the fort, myself."

“Well, how can you know, then? Maybe there’s lots of pizza!” Simon was suddenly awake and offering his groggy pizza theories.

“I guess you could be right, but don’t get your hopes up. As it stands, I can’t even find it, or even the village it’s supposed to reside by. It should be right here, but it’s not.”

“Well, I’ll go back to sleep on my frog. Wake me when we’re there, unless I wake up first from the smell of pizza.” Simon rested his head on a collection of shiny warts.

“What village are you looking for?” Samantha asked, and meekly added, “If there’s no pizza, will there be some food there? A crust, maybe?”

“Probably. We’re looking for the village of Jivversport. It’s a nice place, and there’ll be accommodations. Well, there would be. If it was here.”

“Where did it go?” she asked, as Simon initiated a low snore. Grant was silent. His mount inflated its chest, exhaled, and bent down to rest on the knees of its front quarters, exactly as a tired goat might.

“Where did she go?” He rhetorically broke his silence with.

“Who?”

“Ok. I really have no choice now. It’s pretty clear she didn’t really go this way. God, how did she give me the slip?” Samantha was reluctant to repeat her question, but looked sympathetic nonetheless. Grant held his red doll, thinking.

She ventured more curiosity. “What’s that?”

Grant seemed to be composing his words carefully before he spoke them. “Deputies... Samantha, Simon, listen to this closely.” Samantha poked Simon. He was immediately upright, as if he’d never been napping. “I’m going to activate this doll. And when I do, one of a few things is going to happen. It might just... well, first it’s going to turn blue, and then...”

“Turn blue?? Wow, why?!” Simon enthused.

“It just will. That’s not important. Now listen. It’ll turn blue, and then I’ll disappear. Then it’ll just fall to the ground, on the sand there.”

“Cool...”

“Yeah. So if that happens, I want one of you to pick it up, and hang on to it. Keep it safe for me, ok?” They nodded. “Another thing that might happen... actually, this is pretty likely, so listen. What might happen is, it’ll turn blue,” he nodded towards Simon as he said the word. “And then a girl will appear where I’m standing.”

“Is she the girl you’re looking for?” Samantha gathered.

“Yes. Exactly. But I’ll be gone, so what I need you to do is...” Grant felt his head and winced, as if he was getting a headache. “God, I hate logistics like this. Let me think.” The orphans waited with interest. “Ok, if she appears, just give her a message for me. Tell her to stay here, and just put the doll down. In the sand. Like, over here.” Grant marked an ‘X’ in the sand. “Then I’ll come back. Got it?”

They bobbed their heads slowly. “How do we know if it’s the right girl?” Samantha asked.

“Ask her if her name is Beatrix,” Grant responded. Samantha’s eyes widened, and turned to see Simon looking at her with a similar expression.

“Ok, here I go. Remember what I told you, deputies!” He twisted the top half of the doll. A few moments passed. Nothing happened.

“It’s still red, mister.”

“Yeah. I forgot to mention. This is another thing that could happen.” His posture sunk into dejection. He became lost in silent thought about this turn of events.

Samantha took the opportunity to wonder quietly towards Simon, “You don’t think Beatrix is... that Beatrix, do you?” Simon didn’t respond, but had a goofy Christmas morning smile on his face.

“Alright, here’s what we do now. Samantha,” Grant smiled, adopting an encouraging older brother tone. “I need you to be in charge of the doll.”

“Ok. Why?”

“Well, if Beatrix ever puts her doll back together, she may try it to come find me. And I need to be able to see her when she does, so that means I shouldn’t be the one to disappear. If you’re holding it, you’ll disappear and go to wherever she was.”

“Disappear?” she said, looking at the doll with sullen reluctance.

“Um... ok, I phrased that really badly. It’ll just be for a second. We’ll make sure you come back really soon and...”

“I’ll do it!” Simon volunteered.

“Great. Here you go, Simon. Be really careful with it. You have an important mission!”

“Cooool. I can’t wait to disappear!”

“Mister, what is that? Is that the village?” Grant turned around to see something on the horizon, something he hadn’t seen before. It was hard to see through the violent refractions in the hot air rising from the sand. It looked like a small building, maybe a cottage.

“No, too small to be a village.” He looked closer. There were two figures on top of it. Human figures. They were waving.

“Questpro Plus v. 3.1” was a peculiar application, unlike any Herbert or Beatrix had used. The main window was complex jumble of lists and statistics on older quests. Some were completed, others were failed, while many had expired, never being taken up by anyone. Beatrix struggled to make sense of the application, a process made more difficult by the blurry, faded colors on the monitor. Though it didn’t seem possible, it had surely been running for decades.

“This is such a strange program.” Beatrix complained. “I wonder who programmed it?”

“Who the hell knows.” Herbert’s eye was scanning the cluttered bulletin board. The pinned-up documents showed their age even more than the computer. It all struck him as evidence of a once thriving summer camp organization. Lists of names, loosely catalogued notes on magic, tidbits on the lore of the realm—it looked like the trappings of a long dead bureaucracy. There was one

document that was curiously more interesting than others in its simplicity, though he didn't reach for it.

"Actually, everything about this computer is weird. Even the fact that it's here at all seems a little weird to me," she said.

"I know what you mean. How's that thing get updated, anyway? I checked for an internet connection before, to send my dad an email. No luck, though."

"Maybe it's a closed network connection? Or maybe it's magic. I don't know much about computers. Or magic, for that matter."

"Computers and magic are an idiotic combination, if you ask me."

"And the date's out of whack. The computer thinks it's 2055!" she said, as she opened the system clock. "So we got here on the third... that makes it the fifth today?" She muttered to herself. She applied the correct date, June 5, 2004.

"Maybe the computer's from the future," he said dryly.

"Yeah. Or maybe, unlikely as it is, someone just typed in the wrong date. Or maybe," she sported, "someone took a modern computer back in time, to the year 1950 or so, and it's been running here all this time with its clock ticking away."

"Huh." It was a thought-provoking idea, even if it was facetious. It brought Herbert's attention back to document he'd noticed on the bulletin. It was handsomely concise, and neatly written. There was something faintly familiar about it.

The computer made a sound, one of those default noises meant to be perfunctorily informative of some event which was terribly important business from the computer's perspective, but usually trivial to its human pilot. This event, however, was far from it. The Questpro Plus item in the taskbar blinked expectantly. Beatrix clicked it.

"Wow. It looks like a new quest has just been posted."

"Oh yeah? What's it about?"

"Let's see... It looks like it has something to do with wizards."

With this, Herbert redoubled his attention on the document, going as far as to pluck it from the thumbtack securing it to the board. He furrowed his brow as he concentrated on the text.

Things to remember:

- 1) Stay away from wizards. They are unpleasant company, and are to be avoided.
- 2) Dragons don't exist.
- 3) There's no such thing as time travel.

"Yeah? What about wizards?" he said, not mentioning the document. There wasn't much to it, he thought, other than coincidentally addressing a couple of pertinent topics, with little elaboration.

"I think..." she ventured, combing the window for information, scrolling through lines of poorly formatted text. "We're supposed to gather 'wizard's whiskers'."

"Whiskers?"

"I suppose it means hair. Like, his beard and such."

"Oh. How much hair?"

She scrolled further.

"Well?"

"Three pounds."

"Is that a lot?"

"It sort of sounds like a lot to me. Hair doesn't really weigh very much."

“Yeah, and I bet an old wizard’s hair is extra fine and wispy. Like dandelion fluff. The bastards.” Herbert reread item 1) on his sheet. He was beginning to perspire slightly. “I guess it doesn’t sound that hard. So we just find a wizard somewhere and ask him for some of his hair.”

“What if he doesn’t want to give it?”

“Then... I guess maybe we best him in a duel of magic or some ridiculous nonsense like that.”

“Don’t you think that might be a little difficult? Wizards are known for their great skill in magic. We’d probably be done for if we challenged one.”

From behind them there was an unmistakably sardonic “Pfff.” They turned to find Russet standing there. Though ‘standing’ would be putting it in a flattering manner. It was more of a hunched torso floating in midair, which only happened to be supported by a pair of legs underneath. His clothes were wrinkly, and his cape was on crooked. His face had deep scowl-lines, and might remind you of the face of someone’s cranky grandma who’d just been in a fight, and won. “Are you kidding me?” he spat.

“Oh, Russet... hey.” Beatrix swiveled her chair to face him.

“Yeah. Hey.” His face only marginally eased its sourness out of courtesy. “Guys, wizards don’t use magic. Don’t you know anything?”

“Well, no. We don’t, actually. What do you mean?”

“I mean, wizards...” he put his hand on his face, as if to regroup from a misfired attempt to explain something so obvious, he’d never considered putting it into words before. “Wizards are not the jolly old guys who have stars and moons on their hats and fondle big crystal orbs all day. It’s not like popular culture presents. I mean, sure, yeah, there are guys like that, with the hats and magic talking owls and stuff. They’re just not called wizards.”

“What are they called?” Beatrix asked.

“Anything else, really. Are you guys serious with this? I thought only imbeciles didn’t know this stuff,” he said. Herbert nudged Beatrix and raised a furtive eyebrow in her direction, as if to validate his earlier remarks on Russet.

“Go on...” she said.

“Sorcerers, mages, illusionists, magickers, enchantment engineers, charm consultants or whatever B.S. titles they’re spinning out these days. But not wizards.”

“So...” Herbert said, pausing, making a motion with his hand as if about to carefully throw an imaginary object into a waste bin across the room. “What does that make wizards, exactly?”

“Wizards are disgusting, crazy old men! They don’t use magic at all. They probably don’t even have the mental capacity for it. They generally just stand around babbling incoherently, being dirty.”

“Does that mean you qualify?” Herbert quipped.

“Har, har.”

Beatrix rested her head on her hand, looking puzzled, less so at Russet’s diatribe on wizards than at his erratic behavior, which she still couldn’t solve.

“Wait... wait a minute,” Russet suddenly had a sinister look of amusement. “Do you mean to tell me, Wizardy Herbert, that you had no idea what the significance of your name was?” Herbert responded with a blank look. Russet erupted, “Oh my God, that’s so funny! I thought it was just some sort of ironic, self-effacing nickname! But it turns out you never knew all along! Ha!”

It was true. Herbert never took pride in his unusual name, and in fact had spent the better part of his life nurturing an understandable umbrage about the whole situation. But he’d never guessed that in reality, or at least this sub-reality he found himself in, that his name was actually a form of slur. It was tantamount to wandering around with a name like Poopey Hubert, or Shitty Higgins. Or perhaps, within a more risqué quadrant, something like Tarty Walter, or Hussie Andrew.

Furthermore, Russet was dead-right about wizards and what they really were. There are innumerable types of people who we might consider to be wizards, and even refer to as wizards in our naïveté. A character like Elwin Thundleshick who, despite certain ignobilities, might be thought of as a wizard, though he isn’t. He is in actuality a kind of bum who wields an advanced facility with kinds of magic most expedient to his petty designs. Or if you crave something from a pool of

legitimate-sounding vernacular, he could be classified as a mid-to-high level rouge-thaumaturgist, with cross-class shades of the gnostic-swindler's discipline. Other better-known examples such as Merlin or Gandalf would more rightly be referred to simply as sorcerers, though in reality very few individuals could be poured into such an archetypical mold. Instead, individuals are sprinkled diffusely across a wide spectrum of sorcerial classification. Examples can be produced copiously, both from within fiction and reality, citing for instance the esoteric hijinks of urban-legerdemancer, David Blaine, or the flamboyant creature summonings of beastmajyykers, Siegfried and Roy, or the slippery elusions of premier ephemera-shaman, Harry Houdini.

None of these people would ever be called wizards, though. A wizard would more properly be likened to a kind of deranged hermit whose indigenous habitat tended to be deep within unpioneered forests. Herbert's short document held sound advice, for you'd never want to get that close to one, even though in truth most of us have at some point. Maybe due to vanishing habitat, or a primitive and ornery stock of wanderlust, a stray wizard will occasionally find himself in more populated areas, including dense cities where he might occupy a street corner shouting unpleasant and incomprehensible things to himself and passers-by. It's uncertain why the term "wizard" in regular parlance had come to take on a magical connotation. It is possible that the association became logical since so many who wield magic (such as Thundleshick) often exhibit wizardly traits, like terrible hygiene, unkempt facial hair, ratty attire and bizarre sociopathic tendencies. In truth, there is a lot of crossover between wizards and notable practitioners of magic, the way a sterile, dull mule has much intersection, though ingloriously, with the majestic kingdom of the equine.

For those interested in a more strict taxonomy of the subject, it's true no pure wizard uses magic, but not all who are like wizards don't use magic. This logic may seem odd, but once reconciled, there follows quite a sprawling, exotic tree of classification. Many a spare coin's been pried from spontaneously generous coin purses by the Order of the Hobo-Magi. Few have ever been swept away in admiration for the pungent bouquet of the bindlestiff-grimoirians. Legendary individuals have arisen within the strata of these classes. The pungent kleptomaniac Thundleshick, the little grubby, doublespeaking swamp hermit Yoda, and of course no such list of notables would be complete without mention of the greatest vagabond-sorcerer of all time, Jesus Christ.

Herbert smirked. “Go on, laugh it up. I don’t care if it’s true. It doesn’t bother me.” Russet continued his blustering amusement, but it quickly began to look forced. His impish laugh fizzled into a weak cough.

“How are you feeling, Russet? If you don’t mind my asking?” Beatrix asked. “Alright, I guess,” he replied in a way that suggested he was anything but.

“Herbert and I are going to go out for a while. We’re going to look for this wizard. Do you feel up to coming along?”

Russet milled towards the box of magic trinkets and gave it a small kick. “Going out and messing around with a filthy old wizard sounds like about as fun as getting mauled by a tiger. I think I’ll just hang tight here. Maybe watch some TV.” He stooped down, idly plucking something out of the box. It was a plastic toy monkey. Printed across its shirt was the phrase “Singe Vilain”. He looked at it abstractedly, as if he’d picked up nothing more than a dull stone.

“I’ve got no problem with that.” said Herbert.

“Ok, then,” Beatrix sighed. “Guess we’ll see you when we get back.”

“Ahoy there, desert travelers! Avast ye, and rest your dune-weary feet!”

Grant was never sure what the literal meaning of the word “avast” was, aside from being something generally piratey, which pirates said. This made sense though, because the boy who shouted it, along with his female comrade, did look roguishly nautical with their bandanas and their buckles and their swashes (he wasn’t sure what a swash was either).

Settling on the idea that the two teens were something like pirates, albeit in the middle of a blistering desert, Grant moved his attention to the ramshackle structure on which they stood. It was a cube of wooden planks, about the size of a two-storey house. There were no windows in the disorderly façade of planks. On the roof, a crooked wooden pole supported a torn, wind-whipped flag bearing, unsurprisingly, a skull and crossbones. Written on the façade in large letters with smeary black paint were words and phrases conveying a bravado characteristic of pirates. “DEATH TO SLURPENOOK!” swept prominently across the upper portion. “SPIES BE DAMNED” was

another that stood out from the more singular expressions, including “HALT”, “BE WARNED”, and “AVAST” (there is was again). But most noticeable of all was “FORT PIZZAHUT” at the top.

“Hearty salutations!” the boy persisted with his rugged seaman’s affability. He waved a short dagger as he spoke. “The shelter of our great fort can be considered yours, travelers. If ye can be sworn to claim no unfriendly allegiance, of course!” He gave them a dubious look from behind his long, partially braided hair in the process of having itself dashingly windswept across his face.

“None whatsoever,” Grant replied. “So... this is Pizzahut, then? Really?”

“‘Tis, mate!” he rebounded with cheer. The girl remained stoically silent, and glanced at her partner. She wore an odd, vaguely nautical hat, and had a telescope tucked into a waist-sash. “First officer Nemoira and I are its protectors. We’ll let no unsavories press the planks of these decks. Captain Counselor Daniel James at your humble disposal.”

“Thanks, Daniel. I don’t suppose you’ve seen a girl around here recently?”

“Would that I had!” He nudged Nemoira jocularly. “The sight of another fair wanderer’d prove a diversion not unwelcome!” Nemoira rolled her eyes at what was probably not the first bawdy remark she’d ever had to endure. “What use have ye with the lady?”

“Just some business. It doesn’t matter.” Grant again sized up the building, which was no closer to being a spa resort than the shed of a serial killer. But anything offering shade at this moment would seem inviting. “Can we come in?”

“Can ye come in?” Daniel echoed, smiling. “Can ye come in,” he said again, with further rhetorical inflection. He stroked a nonexistent beard. Grant waited for an answer. He glanced back at the apprehending orphans, suddenly becoming more aware of the acidic streams of sweat on his face. “I’ll tell ye what you can do. You can...” He raised the dagger into the air, then stabbed it into the wooden roof beneath him.

“Die!”

The two pirate youths vanished.

“Where’d they go, mister Grant?” Samantha asked.

“No idea. Strange people.” He felt the hilt of his sword presciently.

The fort jolted. A cloud of sand blossomed around the base of the now trembling wooden structure. It grew out of the ground revealing hidden height to it, and then soon, hidden breadth as well. As it rose, it became a great edifice of similar box-like wooden structures cobbled together somehow, creaking deeply and frightfully from the stresses, as a loud but soft shushing could be heard from tons of white sand spilling from its recesses. A column of tangled wood, like an appendage, ripped itself out of the sand with alarming swiftness, and brought a mighty claw of planks down hard in front of the travelers. The thing had a massive arm. Another one made itself known in similar fashion. The peak of the mass, the original, now humble-looking fort, showed a cracking fissure across its middle. It opened wide to resemble a splintery, awful mouth. It roared.

Daniel and Nemoira stood behind the ghastly thing at a distance. Daniel shouted over the shushing sand, “Slurpenook rogues! Regret ye will blackening our doorstep! Now reap ye the spoils of a woken clubhouse-golem!”

The golem pounded the ground in front of the party with its monstrous limb, sending them tumbling skyward through a plume of sand and earth, dark from the depth from which it was dredged. The three frogasus mounts, spurred to courage through loyalty (or maybe through an intellect afforded by cashew-sized brains), operated their puny wings with all their might. They took to a wobbly flight and with a great earnest resolve, flew directly into the golem’s open mouth. The golem closed its mouth, and did not chew.

With the brief distraction, Grant crawled out of a pile of sand, finding himself caked in grit which clung to his sweat. He hustled to a strategic position and waited with his sword at the ready. He stood in the path of another mammoth swinging limb, and at the last moment brought his blade in an arc over his head, severing the huge boxy claw at its wrist. The ponderous thing came crashing into the sand, making a sound like an antique boat hitting the ground after being slung from a large trebuchet.

The monster roared at Grant, spitting splinters at him sloppily, though as the fragments rained around him, they looked less like splinters and more like crooked javelins. Grant dropped to a knee to brace himself for, judging by his expression, a substantial follow-up attack. He aimed his sword, steadied by both hands, at the beast’s heart. A beam of bright, scorching white struck its

center as Grant bore the stiff recoil. A frosty cloud enveloped the flailing clubhouse-golem. Ice crystals sprouted all over it, making it resemble a tub of ice cream that's been in the freezer for too long. Then all at once, it was enveloped by a huge block of ice which looked cut like a jewel, manifesting in a breakneck instant, much like the way an airbag deploys. The immobilized monster tipped, then thundered to the ground, becoming completely obliterated. All that remained were boulders of ice, dirty with soggy chunks of mangled embedded wood. Geysers of steam burst forth from the prolific rubble as the tremendous cold met with the heat of the desert.

Grant kept his composure and approached the two pirates. He'd surely spent most of his magical capital on the impressive trick, but made an effort to convey there was more where that came from in case the aggressors were determined in their rascallionism. Daniel and Nemoira appeared to bicker with each other frantically as he approached. Grant stopped in front of them, putting his sword in front of himself like a cane as a kind of portentous warning. "I'm sorry I had to destroy your fort," he said, somewhat sincerely.

Daniel squirmed in his frilly, loose-fitting attire. "That's..." He stopped short of calling it 'ok'. It was hard to view what had just occurred as 'ok'. "Truth be told, mate, t'wasn't our fort. More of a line of defense. And, I suppose..." A frown took over. "... a pet."

In the thick forests surrounding Fort Crossnest, Herbert and Beatrix had set about tackling the unusual quest. An eastern region of the forest, near the base of the northern mountain range, was an area purported to yield a significant population of indigenous wizards. This was information retrieved from the Questpro Plus terminal, which they had little choice but to accept on good faith.

They'd decided to set up a station at a clearing, a kind of wizard observation station, which would consist of little more than a hiding place in some shrubs with a clear view of their wizard trap. The trap itself would consist of little more than an elevated tree branch with a string dangling from it, and a twenty dollar bill tied to the end, where it would flutter in the breeze. Another indispensable tidbit supplied by Questpro Plus was that wizards, though volatile in manner and capricious in taste, could be counted upon to be swayed by cash. This bit of intel, again, they would have no choice but to invest with a blind, supremely abiding conviction.

Herbert sat on a hefty toadstool which yielded pliantly to his weight. He removed the bill from his wallet and looped the string around it, making it look like a bowtie. He'd figured this location was as good as any, admitting his wizard tracking skills was an area that could stand a little polish. He did notice nearby a deposit on the ground which might have been wizard leavings, but just as well could have belonged to a feral dog, and he somehow managed to suppress his woodsman's remorse in not being able to tell the difference. Beatrix sat on a sturdy low branch of a tree with her legs crossed, hunched so her long hair draped over her knees. To Herbert's eye, she looked bored, but this wasn't exactly it.

"What do you suppose is wrong with him?"

"What?" Herbert said as he firmed up the knot around Andrew Jackson's crumpled face.

"Russet. I thought he might be sick. But I don't think so. Not like a normal illness, like the flu or such. He just seems... sad."

"He is sick. And sad. It's got to be a kind of depression. That, and he's a jackass. Both things can be true, you know."

"I wouldn't put it that way. I think he's a good person."

Herbert gave a sort of wobbly nod, the kind someone makes when politely agreeing to disagree.

"He's probably hopped up on pills. I found an empty prescription bottle by him, you know."

"Oh? What was it?"

"Don't know. Maybe some kind of methamphetamines. He probably downed the whole bottle and started hallucinating or something. And then crashed when it wore off, and started acting like a jerk. That's what drug addicts do, isn't it?"

"I don't think so."

"Well he's on some kind of drugs."

"Don't you think it might be a kind of medication to treat a condition he has? Maybe it was empty because he's run out, and now he's having these problems because he can't take his pills?"

she postulated, secretly armed with a bit of knowledge on the subject Herbert didn't have. But then confessed, glancing off to the side, "Or, that's what his friend seemed to suggest."

Herbert, still focused on his craft, replied, "Friend?" Then looked up after a moment. She said nothing. The only acquaintance of Russet's that Herbert was aware of was a not terribly intelligent soup can, and he would hardly describe their relationship as friendly. Herbert was about to inquire further when he noticed something in the air. A sound. It was a soft whizzing sound, and didn't last very...

THWOP.

The acorn ricocheted and bounced away from him several feet. He rubbed his stinging forehead. "Ow. What the hell was that?"

Beatrix stared blankly, and slightly cross-eyed, at the red mark between his eyebrows.

Whiiiiiiiz. Herbert stood up and looked around. "What th..."

THWOP.

This one hit harder. The small nut caromed off his head, sending him tipping backwards, but not quite enough to fall over. He looked around wildly. The dreadful whizzing began again. "Hit the deck! We're under attack!"

Beatrix stood up, looking confused. Then she spotted something. "What's that? There, through the trees?"

Herbert peered out from behind a rock like a groggy turtle, leaving nothing to chance. He saw what Beatrix was facing. It was a frail, filthy old man with a ratty beard and a loincloth. Before Herbert could register any more detail, the old man's hand disappeared into a small pouch, and in a surprisingly athletic move, wound up like a Major League pitcher and sent it sailing with a blur of wrinkly arm skin.

Herbert ducked behind his rock at the last moment, and the supersonic acorn skipped off his barricade just inches above his head. Herbert smelled a slight burning and ventured an inspection of the rock's surface, which had a skid of scorched acorn residue across it.

“It’s a wizard.” Herbert said, with a look of grave alarm. “It’s a damned wizard!”

“I hope you don’t mind if I cut the pleasantries short,” Grant said with a sheathed sword and relaxed demeanor. “Wasn’t there a village nearby, or am I mistaken?”

Daniel looked quickly at Nemoira, who shook her head slightly. “That...” Daniel paused. “It’s a funny subject, you know. Villages, that is. I don’t...”

“And what about the fort? You say that wooden creature was not Fort Pizzahut. Then where is it?”

There was more silent communication between the two. To Nemoira’s woe, Daniel conceded. “To hell with it, then. Our golem, as I made claim of earlier, was a trap. A ruse to catch Slurpenook flies. Turn ‘em back whatsuch they came, or not, if ye know what I mean. The real fort’s up in the village. Jivversport, I reckon ye know?”

Grant nodded. Daniel turned to Nemoira and bowed his head in an unsolicited affirmative. She reluctantly drew her silver telescope from her sash and elongated it. She brought it to her eye and twisted the heavier end, while pointing it towards a vast region of empty desert. The moment she did this, blurry colored forms appeared across the landscape. As she brought the lens to a focus, so focused the forms into crisp shapes. Specifically, hundreds of house-like shapes with roofs, streets, walls, and most conspicuously, an ocean of cobalt blue. The ocean met with the town at a port, and docked at the port was an eclectic variety of ships, some quite old, others modern. It all looked like a striking optical illusion, but once complete, it was a convincing, colorful portrait of civilization brought into the desert. It was suddenly hard to imagine it hadn’t always been there.

Samantha hoisted herself out of a pile of sand, becoming transfixed by the sudden colors of the town, jewel-like compared with the fierce desert bleakness. “Ooh... Simon, look!” Some distance away, too far to hear or be heard by his sister, Simon poked his head out of a sand dune.

“Psst.”

Simon tapped his head to knock sand out of an ear, and used his other hand to brush some off of his tongue.

“Pssst.”

It was coming from behind him. He turned to see the one attempting to conspire with him. He had to look down. Way down. The thing spoke. “Boy, listen to me. I would like a frank answer. Why do you trust that person you are following?”

“Huh? Who’re you, mister?” It was only out of politeness, possibly as well as youthful orphan innocence, that he did not ask “what are you?”

“Your new best friend.”

Simon’s face took on delight at this, even though he knew deep down that friendship was something earned over a period of time greater than three seconds. He’d never seen a horse before, and the sight was welcome, even if it was a kind of perverse variation on the experience. He’d also never seen a lobster before, either.

“Listen, boy. Leave your party and come with me.”

“You? Why? Mister Grant seems awfully nice.”

Terence grew impatient and his oddly elastic horse features scowled. “He’ll lead you to a swift ruin. Now quickly, this way.”

“Gosh, I don’t know...” Simon’s worried hand felt in his pocket the doll he was charged with protecting. Terence’s eyebrows narrowed together and lowered, like two dragonflies making abrupt landings. His lower lip jutted forward and his nostrils flared, pointing upward. With an indignant snort, the air became faintly colored in a cloud around Simon’s head. Simon’s eyes unfocused, and rolled above his eyelids. He collapsed into the sand, sound asleep.

There would soon be a boy-sized trail dragged in the sand, leading into Jivversport. The others wouldn’t notice it.

Beatrix hid behind her tree with her back flush to it. She snuck a peak through some leaves, keeping herself camouflaged. The wizard crouched low to the ground, as if examining it, but then perked up and made his way closer to them with a half-walk, half-insane-looking dance. His face twitched

through a permanently worn look of menacing delirium. His eyes were wild, and seemed to glow extra-white in comparison with the soot-black filth smeared on his skin. He muttered to himself incomprehensibly, sometimes spiking in volume.

“Ok...” she spoke nervously. “What do we do now?”

“Why don’t you see if you can distract it, and I’ll try to sneak up on it?”

“How should I do that?” She didn’t sound thrilled with the plan.

“Just... get his attention somehow. Use your magic!” Herbert urged.

She thought for a second, then shrugged. “Alright.” She stepped into the open. The wizard brought his mad gaze to her at once with nostrils flaring, like a velociraptor honing in on some prey. Beatrix held her ring close to herself, concentrating. The gnarled, calloused hand clutched another nut between middle and forefinger, and let it fly. It bounced soundlessly off an invisible bubble around her. The wizard became startled, as if someone had set off a firecracker near his foot. He reached for more projectiles.

Herbert walked in a swift crouch along an outward perimeter to flank the unpleasant old man. He watched as it drew back its arm, curiously sinewy and taught when the limp ancient skin settled around the muscles the right way for a brief instant. It ripped another acorn at Beatrix. In spite of her force field, she flinched. The nut again bounced off it without losing speed, but this time came right for Herbert.

THWOP.

“Aaaugh!!” Herbert crumpled to the forest floor, clutching his head.

The wizard turned towards Herbert, muttering strange things in a tongue probably unique to him alone. “Thhgerrunge! Ep, ep. Frrrrrajerflaxus!” He plucked a hefty handful of nuts from his satchel, and winged them relentlessly at Herbert’s soft, vulnerable mass.

THWOP-thwop-thwop-THWOP-THWOP-thwop-THWOP-THWOP!

“Ow, ow, OW! Quit it! OWW!” Herbert’s body would later be peppered with small bruises.

THWOP-thwop-thwop-THWOP-thwop-BANG.

The wizard froze. His angry, rotten-toothed countenance melted into a look of tragic mortification. A strand of acrid smoke rose from the barrel of the M9, which was now out of its holster and pointed skywards. The smell of gunpowder, Herbert found, fit his current mood well. “Ok, that’s about enough of that nonsense,” he said, inching towards the trembling old man.

“Herbert, don’t shoot him, ok?” Beatrix said, looking nearly as alarmed as the wizard, albeit ever so slightly more photogenically.

“Relax. That was just a warning shot. He’s got nothing to worry about if he stays calm.” He raised his voice. “You understand that, wizard? Yes? No acorn, or bang-bang!” He sounded like an American trying to speak to a lost foreigner.

The wizard nodded along with Herbert, who was demonstrating the proper responding gesture for him graciously. He settled on his hands and knees in the language of submission even madmen seem versed in when the timing is right. He spat some strange sounds, now with a more conciliatory inflection. “Thhburzz ef! Ef jrrrifflizbit shuuu...”

“Hey, Beatrix. Come over here and help, won’t you?” Herbert was standing with his gun aimed nearly pointblank between the twitching eyes of the wizard, who was shaking like a leaf.

Beatrix sidled up. “So this is a wizard?”

“It’s gotta be. Fits the description.”

“Somehow it still isn’t what I pictured.”

“Well, the thing is crazy and dirty. It’s got a beard. I get the sense it doesn’t use any magic. Oh yeah, and it can whip and acorn like no one’s beeswax.”

“Oh, so a textbook wizard, then,” she scoffed.

“Ok, we’ve got to get his hair somehow.” The wizard sniffed, darting his eyes, possibly with a form of primitive comprehension. Herbert suddenly looked puzzled, automatically patting his pocket with his free hand. He cursed their lack of foresight in setting out to collect wizard hair without any kind of cutting implements.

“How do we do that?” Beatrix asked.

“Damn. I’m not sure.” He lowered his gun slightly, but brought it back to the ready when the wizard convulsed with something ghastly that might have been a sneeze.

Beatrix tapped her foot thoughtfully, then made a fist with her ring hand. She closed her eyes and pictured forms, as if drawing their shapes with a pen in her mind. Two looping shapes, one bigger, one smaller. Then two long, pointy shapes, and an axel. And then the thought of shiny metal, and sharpness. She opened her eyes to find a pair of scissors floating over her ring.

“Hey, nice!” Herbert congratulated. “Now just clip off his beard while I keep him at bay. That thing’s gotta weigh at least three pounds,” he said, referring to the monstrous thing on his face you might call a beard once you’d exhausted all other lingual options.

Beatrix made a distasteful sneer, but at the same time sized up the project, like one might in the first few moments of a mission-critical hog manure shoveling gig. It wasn’t fun, but the scientist in her knew it ought to be done. She’d been curious about seeing what happens upon actually completing one of these ludicrous quests.

She slowly brought the open blades towards the wizard’s face, which eyed the cold, surgical implement, but remained like a statue, aside from the nervous quaking. The beard was thick with hardened grunge and detritus. Foreign objects like twigs, plastic six-pack rings, and small ketchup packets were entwined in it. Herbert was probably right. It likely did weigh more than three pounds from the non-hair mass alone. The blades at their tips surrounded a bit of the hair, and she delicately clipped it. The wizard flinched on the clip, and she recoiled on the flinch.

“Herbert, I can’t do this. This is just way too weird. It’s kind of disturbing.”

“What? No, come on. You were doing great.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t! I’m not cutting the beard off a mangy old wizard! If you want to, be my guest.” She held out the scissors.

“Well... ok. Here, take the gun and make sure he stays in line.”

“No way! Last time I touched that gun, it almost set me on fire.”

Herbert sighed and felt his head, still aching somewhat from the nutty onslaught. It was all too often the he was called upon as the last resort to carry out dirty work in situations like this. (Not

much like this, mind you. Few situations were.) He'd wondered if he'd been sentenced to a lifetime of squeamish companions.

He flashed an ironic smile as he flipped the on the gun's safety. He held the grip tight, and brought it down on the wizard's head, knocking him unconscious.

It was a dark afternoon in the Eggwood residence. There was not a single light turned on in the house, except for one lamp in an unoccupied room upstairs. In fact, all the rooms upstairs were unoccupied, and so were all the rooms downstairs. The stairs themselves, however, were a different story, but we'll get to that in a moment.

Downstairs, photographs were hanging on walls and resting on various domestic surfaces. Most were portraits of goofily smiling boys. In a few years, there would be three boys in total. Two-thirds of them would be chubby lads, and among all three, they would boast a grand tally of five eyes. The names of the boys would be Louis Eggwood, Seymour Eggwood, and Wizardy Herbert. Herbert would later ruefully ponder why he, as the third child, had been spared the surname in favor of the somewhat less conventional naming syntax. But then on further reflection, the feeling was less of rue than of relief. Maybe "spared" was the right word, as an occasional shudder would travel his spine at the thought of the name Wizardy Herbert Eggwood.

Yes, these are the photographs that would be there, portraits of three boys, if it were a few years later. But at this moment there were portraits of only two boys. Herbert's parents had not yet decided to hang pictures of him, and they had a very good reason for this. This was not a reason Herbert could remember. Then again, there were many things, almost everything in fact, Herbert could not remember before the day of December 25, 1998, as well as many things during that day itself.

That day was today.

The stairs, previously alluded to as the busiest part of the house, practically its peak-hour Hong Kong marketplace by comparison to other locales, was stage to some curious goings-on. Between two worried-looking boys was a bit of heavy freight which made a deliberate "Thump" with each stair traversed. At the lower end of the freight was Herbert, taking up the determined lead

in bringing the freight downstairs. At the higher end was Seymour, who was pale and moist. His head looked like a white dewy melon.

“Her... Herbert... say something, won't you?” Herbert said nothing, continuing to stonewall his brother. Seymour anguished as two more Thumps marked the passing time.

“Excuse me... Herbert...” he tried again, more politely this time.

The freight settled heavily at the bottom of the stairs in the foyer. Herbert stood up and staggered backwards into the dimness of the living room, illuminated only through windows by an overcast afternoon sky. If Seymour could see him better, he'd notice his brother was pale too. Herbert shifted his eye around as if following an angry wasp. He rested on the arm of a sofa.

“Herber...”

“I heard you!” Herbert snapped. Seymour silently crept down the stairs, just as he had early that morning to see if there were any presents under the Christmas tree they didn't have. There weren't any.

“What are you doing?” Seymour asked with a pleading whimper.

“Weren't you the one who said you wanted it out of the house?”

“Um... yeah.”

“Yes. A house is no place for such a thing.” The vacant look in Herbert's face deepened as he paused. “... Why do you want it out of the house, exactly?”

“Why?? Why do you think?! If mom and dad come home and see this...”

“Mom and dad?” he asked honestly.

“Yes, mom and dad. I know it probably doesn't matter to you. Why would it? I don't understand you, or really one thing about what's going on here, but...”

“Right. Mom and dad. And I imagine there will be trouble if they find this. Or if anyone does, for that matter.”

Seymour looked at Herbert as if he'd just fallen out of the sky, and then pointed his finger at a dog, asking "what's that?" Then, upon further clarification, was found to be not talking about the dog, but his own finger. "Trouble? Sweet Zombie Jesus! Are you kidding, Herbert?"

"Yes... trouble..." The vacancy haunted his face again. It had especially staked claim on his eye, practically squatting in it like a beggar. He looked dizzy. He braced himself on the sofa cushion behind him.

"You ok?"

Herbert was whispering to himself. Seymour inched closer, trying to hear. "... gotta [mumble] the damp. Wonder [mumble] damp's in session..."

"What was that?" Seymour thought he heard the word 'damp' several times, or at least perhaps a word that rhymed with it.

"... [mumble] back to the dumber lamp..."

"Huh? Did you say 'dumber', or 'summer'?"

Herbert turned to Seymour with another look. It wasn't a look of vacancy. It was hard to say exactly what it was, but the vacancy had been vaporized like a dry leaf in the stream of his new mood's flamethrower.

"Well, are we gonna get this thing outside or what?" He sprung off the sofa arm and grabbed the freight by fistfuls of loose cloth. He suddenly handled the thing with ease, a thing which had to weigh at least 150 lbs. Seymour found it remarkable and sort of disturbing that a nine-year old could display such strength.

From the back yard, it sounded as if a frightened boar was loose in the house, crashing into furniture and clinking various china objects. The back door swung open and the two boys spilled out with the bulky cargo. Herbert continued to muscle his way with the load toward the back of the shed. Jets of vapor blasted out of his nostrils into the cold air. He dumped the freight on the dirt, which was so frozen-solid, the contact made a cracking sound no different than if it were pavement.

Seymour, breathing heavily with his own personal vapor clouds, stumbled to the shed's rear. He looked down at the pitiable heap. "Get a shovel," Herbert ordered.

“What? You’re going to bury him?? Here?! Sweet Zombie Jesus, Herbert!”

“Stop saying that. What’s that even from, anyway?”

“Isn’t this...” Seymour clawed his face with stubby fingers. “Isn’t this crazy? Shouldn’t we call the cops?”

“No. No cops!” Herbert became startled. He listened as the faint sound of sirens became louder.

Several blocks away, an ambulance was followed by police squad cars. In the trailing vehicle, a portly officer croaked something into his radio through a thick New Jersey accent. He seemed jaded, not one terribly moved to alarm by the notion of a singular crime in the Newark area, and at this moment he paid little attention to his vehicle’s singular passenger. The nine year-old girl sat in the back seat with her hands folded in her lap. She had a vacant expression. A kind of vacancy that would be familiar to anyone who’d witnessed Herbert a moment ago. The vacancy was only briefly unsettled as the car passed by the Eggwood abode. She turned as it went by, apprehending it with a dim recognition. She then felt without looking at it the hollow locket around her neck. She did not notice the two boys in the back yard, nor did they notice her, but for the agitating noise her motorcade was bellowing.

With held breath, the boys waited for the bellowing to subside, relieved they did not appear to be targets of the pursuit. Seymour exhaled. “Look, Herbert, I don’t know what’s going on... maybe you’re in some weird trouble I don’t know about. That’s fine, you don’t have to tell me. I don’t even want to know. But we can’t bury some dude here in our backyard! Pleeese let me call someone. They can take him away and we can pretend we didn’t know anything about it.”

“No. Now you listen to me... uh... uh...” he stammered erratically.

“Seymour?”

“Yeah.” He pushed Seymour against the shed, pinning him there, again with a show of unsettling strength. “Seymour. Listen up. No one knows about this. Not the cops. Not any school teachers. Not ‘Mom and dad’,” he said mockingly, as if doing an impression of his older brother. “Understand?”

Seymour shook like a wobbly pudding. Seemingly inherent in his fear, invisible, yet plain as day, was a nod of understanding. Herbert paused, mumbling to himself again inaudibly. When he halted and took a moment to think, he barely understood or remembered why he was angry or why this was all so urgent. He just knew he had to be, and that it was. He continued vehemently.

“Otherwise, if anyone hears a peep, I’m going to pin it on you, and I’ll make it stick. They’ll get the cadaver dogs out here, and you know how they’ll know it was you?” he demanded, as he handed a garden trowel to Seymour, held between fingers like a cigarette. Seymour took it obliviously, and then Herbert took it back from him, holding it with the kerchief he’d been wearing around his neck..

“N-n-n...”

“Because your fingerprints will be on the murder weapon.” Herbert plunged the trowel into the corpse’s chest. Seymour began to cry.

“Sweet Zom...”

“Understand, Seymour?” Seymour, wiping away some snot, nodded gingerly and looked down at the body. It was male, older than they were, perhaps eighteen. On his white, lifeless face he wore a moustache.

“Who do you suppose he is?” Herbert said, with a sudden strange casualness.

Seymour looked at him with a little surprise. “Don’t you know him?”

Herbert shrugged as he leisurely picked up a larger shovel. “Clothes are odd...” He examined them, again assuming an abstracted vacancy. Seymour agreed on that point. It wasn’t every day you saw someone walking around in—let alone deceased in—a burgundy suit, a white shirt, and a purple cape.

Herbert, drifting in some rarified mental space, became aware of something cold he was holding. He looked to see it was the handle to a shovel. He had momentarily forgotten what he was doing.

The sight of the body reinvigorated the urgency, although the nature of it was becoming more vague by the passing seconds. He wasn’t even sure what had just happened five minutes ago. Something about some stairs? It was all slipping away.

He had to dig.

The shovel's pressure against the sole of Herbert's foot caused a sharp pain as he stomped it into the frigid winter earth.

The stainless steel letters, in a font that might appear in a 50's diner, spelled out "Vend-o-Badge" at the top of the machine. Occupying the majority of its surface was a plate of glass, through which could be seen many rows of brightly colored square badges, held up by metal coils which undoubtedly twisted to surrender their prizes to gravity. It might have been remarked that the machine resembled a large prophylactic dispenser, if the children were more seasoned in such matters.

On the side of the machine was an unassuming hatch. It was unlabeled, but Herbert and Beatrix surmised that this was where one was supposed to place the loot, in lieu of depositing coins, to release a badge. The loot in question was a grotesque four-foot severed wizard's beard, which Herbert clutched in both arms like a pile of dirty laundry. The thing easily weighed more than three pounds, and Herbert would swear if it didn't weigh at least twenty pounds, he'd eat the thing right then and there. He hoisted it into the hatch putting the kind of oomph into it one uses to heave a large bag of dirt over a fence. A metallic thud signaled the beard's arrival at the bottom.

"Alright. Here we go." Herbert stood back and watched for interesting developments. Beatrix too waited, scouring the merit badges for signs of the slightest jostle. Moments passed, but the machine remained as inert as it had been before it was fed a pile of dirty whiskers.

The two were surprised, and Herbert was a little surprised to find himself surprised. Ultimately, what had they just accomplished besides the equivalent of hoisting a homeless man's beard into a kind of metal dumpster? (It would surprise no one if the beard had actually visited such a location regularly in the past.) If they really expected anything amazing to follow such an act, Herbert thought, weren't they guilty of harboring foolish, downright wizardy expectations?

"What gives?" Herbert muttered. Beatrix threw up her hands.

There was a beep. A button on the side panel became illuminated. 'E6'.

Herbert and Beatrix were suddenly covering their ears. What they were attempting, in vain, to prevent from entering their ears was a robust rendition of John Philip Sousa's "Stars and Stripes

Forever”, played at a volume no doubt intended to roust the patriotism of long-dead American presidents. The machine was suddenly dancing to its own tune, hopping around on its little peg-and-coaster feet, much like the way the toaster danced when they laced it with spooky slime during that scene in *Ghostbusters II*. Its metal slot at the bottom gnashed open and closed like an excited mouth.

Then it stopped, and there was silence. Position ‘E6’ uncoiled, and a bright green badge fluttered to the bottom.

Herbert reached for the metal flap to retrieve the badge, but stopped when it again clanged open and shut. It repeated this behavior vigorously, and it was hard for Herbert to tell whether it was an act of aggression, or of overexcitement, like a small dog yapping at its master. Herbert looked around and spotted by the coffee table a box full of old VHS tapes. He picked up one labeled in badly faded ink “GB II”, and lodged it into the flapping maw. He then slipped his hand in and out of the chamber, recovering the badge, pulling it out of the slot a millisecond before the flap shattered the cassette and chewed the plastic pieces and magnetic tape.

“Nothing’s easy, is it?” Beatrix commiserated.

They both huddled over the shiny green badge. It was an attractive item, in its way, and boasted a kind of quality craftsmanship. It was made of an odd material, not quite cloth, not quite leather, but something in between, and reflected with a metallic sheen. There was a peculiar aura around it which made it feel heavy, or not heavy so much as resistant to being turned in certain ways, the way two magnets can behave stubbornly when held near each other at like poles. Through intricate stitching on its surface was a rendering of a lively wizard dancing in the woods, nude.

“Ok, one down,” Herbert said. “What do you think Thundleshick likes about these so much? You’d think he wouldn’t covet them considering he’s probably the one that made them in the first place.”

“Maybe he’s more interested in the achievements they represent? Getting kids to rise to a challenge? Teamwork, and all that?”

“He’s a real sick son of a bitch, isn’t he? If I ever meet him I wouldn’t mind giving him a piece of my mind.”

“We’ll have to collect two more of these if you want the chance. No use in going to see him without the book.”

“The what?”

“Three badges.”

“Oh. Right.” Herbert looked into the machine which was simmering down from its fit. He browsed the badges, each bearing an icon depicting some inscrutable triumph of child over magical absurdity. “I think that’s enough for one day. We’ll try another quest tomorrow. I’m beat.”

Russet rubbed his eyes with his sleeve. He paused to take another swig from a bottle of lukewarm, near-flat orange soda before addressing Beatrix’s question.

“I’ve never been better. I was actually just thinking, just this moment now, about the majesty of life and all things. Each breath is a gift. A nectarean treasure pumped from the billows of sweet Mother Gaia Herself. A kind of gusty ambrosia which...”

“Ok, ok...” Beatrix said, yielding to his sarcastic volley. If anything could be said for Russet, it was that he could really lay it on thick no matter what mood he was in. “It’s just, finding you down here all alone in this...” she trailed off, her gaze becoming lost in the cavernous surroundings. She made her way back to a view of Russet’s dangling feet, his nice shoes clicking together. She gulped. “I know it’s none of my business, Russet, but... it’s your medication, isn’t it? You need more, right?”

His shrug appeared to serve as an affirmative.

“Maybe I can help? I ran into your friend. He’s been looking for you.”

He looked up this time, surprised. “You mean Grant? Where is he?”

“Yes. I’m not sure where he is at the moment...” She felt a little swell of guilt at the thought of first having ditched his well-intended friend earlier, and then not getting around to mentioning it to him until now.

“Well...” he sunk again. “Don’t worry about it. You shouldn’t trouble yourself on account of me. I don’t know if I feel much like seeing him anyway.” She started to respond, but idled. She found herself relieved that he wasn’t terribly eager to see his friend, which might have further fueled her guilt. But still, she was a little frustrated by his reluctance to accept her help.

“How did you find me down here, anyway?” he asked.

“I... heard you,” she admitted sheepishly. It was just a moment ago that Beatrix left the rec. room, debating with herself over whether to go right to bed, or to venture a visit with Russet to check on him. She’d nearly talked herself out of the idea—perhaps due to the mysterious inertias pertaining to gathering the will to approach certain members of the opposite sex—when she heard noises. They were a faint blend of whispers and muted sobs, coming from vents along the corridor floors. Beatrix charted a route to the lowest point in the bunker, which lead her to this room.

Though ‘room’ would be about as apt as referring to the inner volume of the Goodyear blimp as a ‘nook’. It was a vast space, damp and dimly lit. The concrete floor was sloped slightly towards the center, like a shallow funnel. It was wet, and streams of water trickled towards the middle, spilling into a large circular hole, about the size of an impressive park fountain. Russet sat perched at the edge of the hole, with his feet swinging freely over the ledge.

Beatrix approached the opening, then halted, shuddering at the drop-off into darkness below. Clinging to the cylindrical interior was an iron ladder, which emerged from the pit and bent over the edge to meet the floor. “What were you saying, anyway? Before I came in?” Russet remained silent. She risked another look into the pit. Holding her breath, she reached for one of the ladder rails, grabbed it for support, and sat down on the ledge.

“This soda is horrible. Sometimes not being able to use magic is a real pain in the ass.”

“I’m sure it doesn’t help that it’s not cold. Unfortunately the refrigerator doesn’t seem to be able to do anything other than keep things frozen.” They both made unpleasant faces, as the mention of it brought their awareness into the domain of hideous microwaveable Mexican food. “Maybe you should have something hot instead?”

She caught herself, and gave her forehead a scolding slap. “I’m sorry, I’m probably sounding like your mother. I’ll give it a rest, I promise.”

“That’s alright. I never had a mother. Except for Grant, of course.” He paused, and then leaned on an ironic note. “He’s about as maternal as they come, you know.”

“Oh? I didn’t realize...”

“Yep. I’m an orphan. Never knew my parents. We’re talking some seriously Dickensian shit, here. Terribly tragic.” Russet took a breath, halting his overly animated volley self deprecation before it spun out of control. “Anyway, how about you? I gather by your obviously well-adjusted nature that you have a rich family life. Something in an aristocratic vein? Big house with a tennis court and swimming pool? Dog named after some literary figure? Wait, don’t tell me, I’m really good at guessing these things. Was his name Tennessee Williams?”

“No,” she smirked.

“Vonnegut, then? I can just picture it now. ‘Here, Vonnegut! It’s time for your Saturday constitutional, and then you may join us for a light supper on the sun porch!’”

“No!” she laughed.

“Oh, yes, I think so. His name was Sir Edgar Allen Bones, and he wore a little canine’s frock as you trotted him from one box social to another to cause your elite circle of friends to swoon with envy over his championship pedigree and his exquisitely shampooed coat.”

“No, it’s nothing like that at all!”

“I know. I’m just messing with you. It’s never like that for people like us.”

“Like us?”

“Well, kids. Kids on weird, miserable adventures. We’re always orphans, you know. I suppose you’re going to tell me you’re an orphan too, then?”

“Um... yes, actually.”

“See what I mean? Kids like us. I’m telling you.”

“Herbert says he’s not.”

“Yeah, well, Herbert’s not a lot of things.” She nodded. It was a fair enough point. Russet stirred, not content with the direction of topic. “So did you ever know them? Your parents, that is?”

She hesitated. What purpose did it serve to keep it from him? At times, her need for secrecy verged on the dysfunctional, she felt. She wanted to tell him. Even so... “I have vague memories of family,” she stated noncommittally. “What about you?”

Russet looked away. He clicked the plastic of his soda bottle. “I think you’re right. I could probably go for something hot. Maybe some cocoa.” He made a motion as if about to chuck the undesirable beverage into the pit.

“Wait. Let me see it,” she interrupted. He offered it curiously. She sized up the bottle carefully, then raised her ring and closed her eyes. She opened them right away, though, startled by how quickly the spell took effect. Unlike the assiduous process of mentally sculpting a pair of scissors, it happened nearly all at once. The bright orange liquid flushed into a dark brown. Its plastic cocoon became malleable, as if melting, and fell away into a sturdy, white, open-topped vessel. It sprouted a loop for a handle. Steam elevated gently from the mug’s open top.

“You’re really getting good at this, aren’t you?”

“I guess so.” This belied her own satisfaction. It had been more natural and effortless than any spell she’d previously “cast”, if that really was the right word. It began to seem that it wasn’t, though. “Casting” spells was something you did in RPG video games, like *Final Fantasy*. This was more like a fluid engineering process through imagination. “Imagineering”, if you wanted a term that smacked of corporate lingo-babble.

Russet accepted the reconstituted beverage. “Thanks.”

Herbert was looking forward to a time of decompression and solitude, even if it was confined to a disheveled rat’s nest of a rec. room, which could have grabbed a featured spread in *Good Housekeeping’s* special edition, “Domestic Bloopers, Tidying Boners, and Egregious Hellholes of 2004”. Before properly unwinding on the couch with his burrito, he double-checked the Questpro Plus terminal. Seeing no new quests posted, he quit the application and reclined in the chair.

Amidst the clutter of the desk, a blinking green LED light caught his eye. The light was embedded in a small object, about four inches tall, conical in shape, resting on top of a dusty VHS cassette. It was made of black plastic, rounded at the tip, with a small hole pointing up at the ceiling. There was a cord coming out of the base. Herbert followed the cord to the rear of the computer, where it was plugged in via USB port.

Herbert, having an idea, reached down to unplug the cord, then plugged it back in. The computer supplied its characteristic plaintive chime, alerting the user to some new hardware found on the system. A window opened, recommending an application. Herbert clicked it.

The application's window was small, quite plain and unlabeled. The only features were a checkbox labeled "Active", which was checked, and a sliding meter from a scale of 1% to 100%. The marker was currently set to 80%. Herbert dragged the marker down to 50%, which seemed to have no effect. Then, with the spirit of experimentation most of us are born with when it comes to technology, randomly dragged the marker back and forth rapidly. Out of the corner of his eye, and just above him, he saw something flicker in the room. Something bright, and fast.

He looked up. There was nothing there.

He then dragged the marker slowly, and quite warily, down to 10% as he looked up. There it was, but not flickering. It was fixed in space, poking out of the ceiling as if it was stuck in the concrete. It was rotating slowly.

Again, cautiously, he lowered the marker further, to 5%. The object unstuck itself from the ceiling, shrunk by half, and lowered, hovering halfway between the desk and the ceiling, directly above the plastic cone device.

It was now immediately recognizable to Herbert. It was the spinning icon displaying a picture of his own face. It appeared to be a type of hologram.

He dragged the marker the rest of the way, and the icon reduced to the size of a silver dollar, hovering just over the tip of the cone. Herbert picked up the cone, and the icon moved with it. He found the bottom could be unscrewed. He opened it. The base, once separated, was like a small dish. There was nothing inside.

But Herbert looked again, noting it wasn't quite empty. There were a few strands of hair inside. Herbert pulled them out, and identified three separate strands, two short, one long. Respectively, they were brown, sort of dirty blonde, and the long one was black. In the interest of science, he removed them and closed the device. The hologram did not reappear. It reappeared, as he suspected, once he placed the hairs back into the device.

He was about to place the device back where he found it, but hesitated, placed it to the side, and picked up the VHS tape. "Seinfeld: season 5," it read. He swept enough dust off its surface to ball up into a wad the size of a quail's egg. The tape looked old, the way an antique VHS tape would look if they'd been invented in the 1950s.

In any case, he hoped the tape worked. Seinfeld was one of his favorite shows. It was one of those syndicated programs you could count on seeing if you flipped the TV on at nearly any hour of the day, and Herbert feasted off the aggressively regurgitated comedy without compunction. His imagination at times dwelt in the vacuous canon of Jerry, Kramer, George, and Elaine's lives, and their frequently intermingling crises, which were always superficial, but highly amusing. Herbert related to it all in some absurd way that could only possibly make sense to himself.

He tucked it under his arm and assessed the condition of the burrito he'd left to cool. He was encouraged. It had only burned through three layers of paper plates.

"It's good, then?" she inquired, regarding the conjured cocoa.

"The finest I can remember having." He rebounded for another sip, and his mouth behind the mug—she almost, almost thought—cracked a smile. "If you must know..." He placed his mug on the concrete thoughtfully. "I was praying."

"Hmm?"

"When you heard me. Before you came in."

"Praying?"

"Yes, I know how it must sound. To a girl like you, who doesn't believe in God. No, you're too smart for that, I guess."

She searched his tone for derision. It was the kind of sentence that usually carried it. But couldn't detect any. "I wouldn't put it that way."

"You don't have to. In any case, it doesn't matter how you put it, or which diplomatic cap you propped on it. It's true. Hell, maybe if I were smarter, I wouldn't believe either."

"Isn't that sort of a contradiction? If you actually think believing in God is illogical, or something unintelligent people do, then why bother?"

"It's not that simple. In a way, I feel it's all I have. Well, that and the Home Shopping Network."

She started to reply, but snickered at his oddball addendum. "So it's more like a dependency thing? I'm not trying to talk you out of it or anything. It's great to have a passion for something. But just because something fills a personal void, does that give it credibility as truth?"

"Again, that is a very logical assessment. But here's what I'm trying to say. During those more pressing times, when life pukes on you, as it inevitably always will, something in you gets worn down. Something you guard with your horde of treasures like pride and dignity and such. I mean, those things are long gone, mind you, but one of the last things to fall are basic ideas about the way everything has to be. You might call these ideas part of the intellectual faculty."

"I would think that would be important to hang on to in times like that. Once that's gone, you've really lost it all, haven't you?"

"To some extent, yeah, you don't want to turn into a gibbering madman, or God-forbid, some kind of dirty wizard. I'm talking about what happens when certain assumptions are let go of, or driven out of you by circumstance. This isn't even about atheists, either. It could also happen to someone who believes in God, but until it all hits the fan, he didn't quite know he believed. Or really Believed, you know what I mean? Haven't you ever felt chewed up by life, and found yourself looking inside?"

"Yeah. I think so. I can't say... I can't say it's driven me to see God, though. Is that what you see when you look?"

“Not God per se, but I think it is a perceived cusp of some great, all-around benevolence. That’s what I mean. When hard times soften some of the rigid features of yourself, it gives you a different view of things. And that has to be a good thing, right? And I feel what I’ve experienced, that benevolence and all that jazz, points to God for sure. Also that God’s word is spoken through His son, Jesus Christ.”

She almost laughed. “Whoa, that’s quite a leap, isn’t it? Why Jesus?”

“Well, you pick a horse and you stick to it, you know? I’m sure there are lots of fine horses out there. But when you pick a horse and bet on him, suddenly there’s no other horse in the universe. It must be glory and victory for my horse, and all the other horses can go eat hay for all I care.” For a moment Russet became very animate with a lively jockeying pantomime. “That’s how I think about it, anyway. I suspect you’ve seen more than you give yourself credit for. I’m sure you pride yourself in staying analytical and whatnot. That’s great. It’s who you are. But not everyone can stay alert one hundred percent of the time. I’d bet glimpses of understanding seep through sometimes.”

Beatrix considered her response carefully. “Maybe. If whatever it is seeping through really is understanding, and not something else. Like some kind of delusion. I’ve never been sold on the idea that a complete understanding isn’t accessible through rational thought. And maybe the conclusion that God doesn’t exist is wrong rational thought. Like, faulty logic that could eventually be demonstrated. But it’s hard to imagine rational thought itself would be an impediment to understanding.” She seemed to be ruminating on what she’d just said, and then switched gears. “So what happened to all that ‘God responsible for making you miserable’ stuff?”

“I was just being a dick.”

“Oh...”

“I don’t really believe that. Well, maybe sometimes I do when I’m really tanking. I’m only human, you know.”

Beatrix wanted to respond to the broader thread of the conversation, but found her usual avenues on the subject unsatisfactory. Russet had caught her off guard. She was finding him not only difficult to categorize personally, but religiously as well. In any case, she had the strange feeling he was

getting inside her head, and against all odds, managing to make her think about her own beliefs. Maybe the truth was, at her most honest level, she didn't quite know what she believed.

"If you don't mind my asking," Russet breached the silence. "What do you think about Jesus?" She looked into space abstractedly. It was an odd question, one that more often than not was answered with something on the order of, 'Ok, I'll take your brochure, but I have something on the stove inside and must go now.'

"I think he was likely a great person. Compassionate, probably a tremendous philosopher of his time."

"Well," Russet nodded, after a moment. "That sounds good enough to me." He then, startlingly, produced a smile. It soon dissolved though, and the dark circles under his eyes resumed their dominance over a gloomy face.

"You should get some sleep," she said.

"I will. In a bit."

She stood up carefully, backing away from the dark void, and before she turned to leave, said, "So you were praying to Jesus, then?" He nodded.

"About what?"

"I was just praying that..." he said with a deadpan expression. "He would give me the strength now to stop myself from jumping into this pit."

JERRY

Hey, my parents are just as crazy as your parents.

GEORGE

How can you compare your parents to my parents?

JERRY

My father has never thrown anything out. Ever.

GEORGE

My father wears his sneakers in the pool. Sneakers!

JERRY

My mother has never set foot in a natural body of water.

GEORGE

Listen carefully...

Herbert laughed, as George paused with the serious magnitude of one about to play his trump card in a critical dispute.

GEORGE

My mother has never laughed. Ever. Not a giggle, not a chuckle, not a “tee-hee”. Never went “Ha!”

Herbert continued to guffaw at the exchange of family dysfunction. No one was ever going to one-up George when it came to a showdown of hard luck or neurosis. He wore his achievements in those fields like medals, or patches, or maybe something sewn onto a sash as a symbol of merit. Herbert admired that, for some reason. In fact, he admired a lot about George. He always thought it would be great, in his own strange way of romanticizing stupid things, that if he ever had to live a humble life of quiet failure, he’d like to model some of his affectations after George Costanza. It would all be terribly eccentric in some grand way to wander around pretending he was an architect, and when things didn’t go his way, shout funny trademark phrases like “You’re killing independent Herbert!”

This was only one of numerous quaint ambitions he harbored. When he saw shows on the Discovery Channel about space and astronauts, it really stirred his inspiration, and with stars in his eyes he imagined, one day, with enough hard work and dedication, he might be able to land a job at space camp. Preferably something in upper-management, though he would operate one of the rides if he was asked. He even began entertaining vague ideas about a future in accounting while he was

packing for his trip to summer camp. If he gained enough real world skills over the summer, he might be able to parlay that into an internship with the IRS when he turned 16. It might look good on a résumé later. Nowhere on his list of ambitions, you'll note, was the notion of having magical adventures.

He aimed low in life, preferably trying to take out its knees. This was a conservative assault tactic, and in a harsh way, merciful.

The din of typical sitcom noises continued in the background of Herbert's awareness as he spaced out at the coffee table. The paper plate of caked-on burrito residue rested there. Next to it was the M9, dormant in its holster.

That gun.

The more he got to know it, the more he felt a strange sense of presence from it. And by the same token, the more he felt a disturbing ease with it. It was comfortable in his hand. The balance felt perfect. Aiming and firing was proving to be an act which suited his nature as well, which was simultaneously exhilarating and unsettling. He wondered whether there was a type of Bourne Identity thing going on. He recalled the summer he saw the film in the theater with his parents. He'd found it entertaining enough, but now chuckled at the notion of a George Costanza-like character playing the lead, rather than the ever-assured tough guy Matt Damon. George with a killer's instinct sounded like a force to be reckoned with. If they didn't believe he was an architect, he'd make them believe.

In becoming acquainted with the gun on a personal level, whatever that meant, he'd learned more about its unique characteristics. After firing the warning shot to keep the wizard at bay, he later checked the clip. He found no rounds spent. He later fired more shots to verify his theory. He then emptied ten clips worth of ammo into a nearby oak, while Beatrix covered her ears, looking impatient. The M9 had a marvelous rhythm of rapid fire, with fluid semiautomatic action. He might have kept firing, but stopped upon hearing a crack from the badly eaten away tree trunk. As the great oak toppled, he checked the clip. Sure enough, all fifteen rounds remained unused. It truly was a magic gun, or at least had a magic ammo clip.

He went to polish the grease from the silver grip when he noticed another detail. There was a tiny engraving, "F.H.C.", perhaps the initials of a previous owner. Speculating about this person was

fascinating to Herbert, and served to deepen the weapon's mystique. He suspected the more time he spent with it, the more it would establish a subtle power over him. Even when it wasn't at his side, it probably wouldn't leave his mind in peace.

Herbert exhaled, and tuned into the show again with the not-terribly-keen kind of awareness one treats to an episode you've seen two-dozen times already. He was simply happy to be engaged in the familiarity of vegetative inactivity again. As long as his vision's funnel stayed on the TV, he could imagine himself sitting at home.

KRAMER

You know that Leslie is in the clothing business? She's a designer.

ELAINE

Oh?

KRAMER

In fact, she's come up with a new one that is going to be the big new look in men's fashion. It's a puffy shirt.

Herbert snickered, as the low-talker made an inaudible clarification on the subject. The puffy shirt episode got him every time.

KRAMER

Well, yeah, it's all puffy. Like the pirates used to wear.

ELAINE

Oh, a puffy shirt.

JERRY

Puffy?

KRAMER

Yeah, see, I think people want to look like pirates. You know, it's the right time for it, to be all puffy, and devil-may-care... BZZ.

BZ-ZZZZZZZZ... ZZZ... ZZZZZZZZ

FSHWERRRRRR... RRR... RRRRBERT, OR WHOEV...

ERRRRR... FSHHH... HAVE FOUND THISHHHH...

SHHHHHHHHHHHHHH...

Herbert sat up, alarmed by the sudden lapse in tape quality. It had already been nothing to write home about (assuming that was actually an option). It was now an erratic display of noise, distorted images and fluctuating sound. Though the image was no longer clear, one thing was. This was no longer an episode of Seinfeld. Instead, it appeared to be footage of some guy sitting in a chair.

SOME GUY

FZZZZZ... confusing to you... ZZZZZSHH... ZZZ... you've already... ZZZZZSHH... by now, if you've made it here.

On closer inspection, though not much closer, since it was plainly obvious, the guy was wearing an eye patch.

SOME GUY WITH AN EYEPATCH

You're here for... FZZZZ... don't just mean here, now, in this place. This underground ZZZZSHH...ever it is. ZZZ... ZZZ... FSHHH... alive... FSHHHHHHHH... this world for a purpose, unlike us. Unlike... ZZZZZSHH... cruel mistake. Some terrible... FZZZZZ... going to die because of... ZZZ... very important. You all... ZZZ...

And on the subject of the obvious, Herbert could not escape noticing this guy bore a striking resemblance to himself. Or what he very well might look like in a few years. The young man had short, dirty blonde hair, and wore a rough stubble, which bloomed at the chin into a modest goatee. The eye patch covered the same eye. And there, slung in its holster around the guy's waist, was the M9.

Beatrix sat up in her bed, leaning against the wall. It was a monastic space she'd carved out, with no personal effects in the room (a possible side-effect of having one's luggage incinerated). But it was beginning to take the shape of her personality, as lived-in spaces do.

On a table there were notes she'd taken on preceding days' events. Resting on the scraps was her ring, as if a tiny paperweight. It didn't weigh much, but whatever potency the piece of jewelry concealed, it made you suspect those pages might hold fast in a stiff breeze.

On a sheet in her lap, she was drawing. Her pen made trails of ink, which took the shape of quirky doodles, reflecting what was on her mind. There was a cartoon sketch of an eel with a human head. Next to it was a bearded old man in hysterics, tossing enormous stylized acorns. In the corner was a more detailed rendering of Herbert's face. Not immaculate, as it was done from memory, but enough character put into the expression to be convincing. There was a similar rendering of Russet, which she was scribbling away at now. Unlike Herbert's expression which rankled with some unaccountable aggravation, Russet's was calm, permitting a more careful flattery of his fair features. She concentrated on their lines, as if gently sculpting the whitespace they bound.

She wrinkled her brow, turning her thoughts to him. She shuddered at the thought that he might hurt himself, and gritted her teeth at the prospect, as if serving as a prayer of dental self-sacrifice to ward off the event.

She wondered what he might do. (Well, no, not that He.) He always seemed to be facing adversity himself, whether legal trouble or financial woes. He never let anything distract him from his creative projects, never lost sight of his dreams. It struck her, in his absence especially, that he'd been as much a father figure as any she'd had. He encouraged her to be creative too, and keep pursuing her art. She wondered if she'd ever see him again.

But... what would he tell her now? About Russet? What a tragic waste it would be if he didn't get help. She had to help him. That's exactly what he would say. You've got to do anything you can to help a friend who's in trouble.

She felt like a charlatan. Like barely a person, even. Would anyone else have given it even a second thought in helping him get his medication the first moment it was possible? Wouldn't Herbert have done that? Even a guy who didn't seem to like him? Why did she hide it? Why was

she hiding everything from everyone? Why couldn't she let Herbert in on at least the basics about her situation? And his? Maybe she didn't even deserve to like someone like Russet.

Her neck sagged under the weight of her head. She felt exhausted thinking about it. She put the paper aside and flipped the light switch beside the bed. She tried to drift to sleep, unable to stop tormenting herself, her eyes threatening the strain preceding tears.

The darkness was interrupted by a faint trim of light around the door's edge. It was coming from the corridor outside.

She forced herself out of bed, finding it hard to move. She felt like a bag of cement with arms and legs. But she needed to know what it was. There was something otherworldly about the light. The hinge squealed as she opened the door. There was nothing there, but the light was moving. It seemed to have just disappeared around a corner.

She followed, but the source of the light remained elusive. The fort was silent. She crept after it, not wanting to disturb the silence, fearing she might scare it away. It led her to the surface, out the main entrance, and into the woods. Outside, there was no sign of the glow, or anyone she may have followed. The woods that night seemed different than they had before. Especially still, not a breeze or sound, and the starlight gave all the trees and plants a soft, milky quality.

There was someone behind her.

She turned around. There was a tall man standing there. He had long brown hair and a beard. He wore a simple white robe. All around him, where his edges met the darkness of the forest, there was a subtle shimmer, one that seemed to vanish if she tried to examine it directly. He had calm, deep eyes. It seemed as if they were fixed in space, and while everything in the world around them moved and changed, they would remain a constant.

HERBERT?

FZZZ... guess I... ZZZFSH... the obvious point. FZZZZZ...fusing one... FSHHHHHH... look like you. Well, that's... ZZZZZZ... Sort of. No, not a clone. FSHHHHHH... future, e... ZZZZSHH...

same... FSHHHH... later in... ZZZZZZZZZ... I know, I know, it doesn't make any... ZZZFSHH... promise. I just don't... ZZZZZZZSHH... it. Dying... ZZZZZZ...

Herbert watched with the stupor of an experimental lobotomy recipient. The older boy ranted through a cacophony of magnetic tape faults, then paused. A female hand presented him with an object from off-screen. It looked like the locket Beatrix carried, only it had something in its center. Herbert couldn't make it out clearly.

HERBERT?

This... ZZZZZ... Mobius Slip... ZZZFSHHHH... this world, how we all... FSHHHH... how, just list... FZZZZZ... when it's assembled. It co... SHHHHHH... locket part with one of... ZZZZZFSHHH...edallion part with ano... ZZZ... ZZZ... leave a copy of... FZZZSHHH... help you figure some of this stuff out. Don't have a... ZZZZ... ZZZZZZ... you probably got it by now... FZZZ...

Herbert looked around wondering if there was anything obvious he'd missed, which might have been a "copy of" something he "probably got by now". Nothing jumped out at him.

HERBERT?

ZZZZZ...portant it stay sep... FSHHHH...den. That's why we'll... FZZZZZZZ... you guys... SHHHH... book. The... ZZZZZZ... keep it away from Slinus Marle... FZZZZZ... killed us, in case you didn't... ZZZZZSHHHHH... cure before then. God, I hope... FSHHHHHH... cover our bases, and that's why... ZZZZZZ... he'll be looking... FZZZZZZZZZ... security of the world depends on it. Yes, big surprise, I kn... ZZZ...

The boy grew more agitated as the tape progressed. He spoke hastily, short of breath, either due to nerves or some anomaly in the medical sphere. It made him even harder to understand, even disregarding tape quality. Herbert brought his listening resources to such a focus, you could fit them on the head of a pin.

HERBERT?

ZZZZZZZZZ... We've been trying for some... *FZZZSHHH*... what happened to us.
FZZZZZZZZZ... who can help you... *ZZZ*... Slinus' agents. God only knows... *SHHHHH*... figured
it out yet, time... *ZZZ*... *ZZZZZZZZZ*...

FZZZZZZZZZZZZSHHHHHHHHHH...

Here, there was a long interruption of indecipherable noise.

HERBERT?

Speaking of time, ours is run... *ZZZZZ*... a few notes on the... *FZZZZ*... this for you here as well.
Good luck. Enjoy... *FZZZZSHH*... love the puffy shirt episode.

His older doppelganger lumbered from his chair, visibly perspiring. He removed the gun from the holster, showing to his audience, and slipped the harness from his waist before moving off-screen.

Jerry and Kramer were suddenly on the screen, hashing out some hysterical misunderstanding. Herbert watched the rest of the episode blankly, quietly. It was similar to the feeling of noticing the car radio still running right after a major accident, playing something cheerful like a Beach Boys tune.

JERRY

I... I can't wear this puffy shirt on TV! I mean, look at it! It looks ridiculous!

KRAMER

Well, you gotta wear it now! All those stores are stocking it based on the condition that you're gonna wear this on the TV show! The factory in New Jersey is already making them!

JERRY

They're making these?

KRAMER

Yes, yes. This pirate trend that she's come up with, Jerry. This is gonna be the new look for the 90's. You're gonna be the first pirate!

JERRY

But I don't want to be a pirate!

Beatrix stood in unapologetic stupefaction. She had the impression that this was sort of what it was like to run into a huge celebrity in the grocery store. Like hearing someone clear his throat behind you, and turning around to discover Tom Cruise with a host of polite questions about produce.

“Do you know who I am?” He asked. The voice was deep, and kind. She shook her head slowly, though not very convincingly. He continued, “I was a great sorcerer in my day, before I Rose.”

“Rose?”

“The Rising is a profound incantation. Few are more difficult. You may be ready for it one day. It all depends on what's in you.” He smiled. His smile had the same strange quality his eyes had. Gentle, but potent, and completely arresting.

“I don't think there's much good in me.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I...” She hesitated, but knew immediately that she could not lie to this man if she was inclined to. And perhaps most amazingly, she wasn't. “I'm not a very honest person. I lie all the time. I feel like a phony. I don't think there's anything genuine or redeemable about me. Even all my good acts have been selfishly driven, I think.”

He offered a nod of compassion. “My Father has given men words to live by. He's enumerated the sins, guidelines for those choosing a path of devotion. But it is not the only path. For those travelers walking a more independent road, it does them well to travel light. There is only one true sin to bear in mind, from which all others follow. The one great sin is not to realize who you are.”

“Your Father?”

“And yours.”

“I hope this doesn’t sound like a silly question, but you are... Him, right?”

“I’m a man who did what His Father asked of him, who did what was necessary for mankind. I didn’t have to die that day. I had more than enough powers to elude my enemies. I died because I had to. For you. For everyone.” The man paused, then his smile took on a different meaning, one surprisingly playful. “Besides, as you can see, death is not all it’s cracked up to be.”

Beatrix’s head was spinning in a way that made her feel clueless about everything she thought she knew. It was not an entirely unpleasant experience, but at the same time, she felt foolish and childish for daring to think she had ever had anything figured out.

“So, what is it I really am, then?”

“You are not selfish. Your heart is in the right place. You genuinely wish to help your friend. He knows this, and I can tell you he does appreciate it. To him it is uncommon kindness. You are not a liar, or a phony, or any of those things.”

She felt somehow that just having him say it, it instantly became true. A previously unknown weight had been lifted. The real answer to the question suddenly seemed like it didn’t matter. No hardship mattered at that moment. Everything was ok.

“You are not your sins. They become nothing in the light of the divine. They wash away like stains, perhaps with a bit of club soda, or some white wine, leaving the fabric of your soul white and spotless.” He felt his pristine garment between his thumb and finger.

Amidst her spellbound face, an eyebrow crept upwards. “Huh?”

“Yes, I’ve gained much acclaim regarding matters of the spirit, but not many are familiar with my miracles in the realm of laundering. Did you know I once got Worcestershire sauce out of the shroud of Turin?”

She leaned forward just a bit, examining the man suspiciously.

“OxyClean is phenomenal stuff, too. I once thought about purchasing it in bulk from the Home Shopping Network. I would give it my full endorsement, though I’m afraid such gestures

present a conflict of interest for me. There are too many in the world already who believe I pick sides.”

“... Russet??”

At once, the bearded man morphed through a display of intense luminance into Russet. He stood with his hands in his pockets and a broad grin, simmering magically. By the signs of his tailoring, his cheerful demeanor, and his devastating good looks, he was back in rare form.

Beatrix was catatonic with surprise. She tried to say something, but the words bottlenecked in her throat. The bottleneck was then cleared by laughter. She laughed—harder than she could remember laughing in recent memory—at the absurdity of the charade. Russet laughed too.

“Oh, wow.” She paused, yielding to the final throes of laughter. “You actually had me going there.”

“Nothing terribly duplicitous intended, I assure you. Other than, you know, convincing you I was the Son of God. But other than that, all in good fun.”

Beatrix looked like she wanted to ask another question, or maybe she wanted to ask every feasible question at once. She settled on the tone one uses when addressing an incorrigible prankster. “So, was this supposed to be some kind of religious awakening or something? Like, to really open my eyes?” She chuckled a bit more at the notion.

“I guess I sensed you were in need of... well, I dare not presume what. Faith, belief, it’s all your business of course. A friend, I suppose. But, you seem well now, yes?”

She did. She nodded, and evaluated herself more discerningly. She actually felt quite good, sort of cozy and warm even though standing in the cold night air. Then she noticed it wasn’t really cold, but for the idea that it was. And now that she thought of it, she couldn’t really feel her body at all. Not in the usual sense. She looked around. It was all stunningly quiet, and the visuals were crisp. It was all surreal.

“This is a dream!” she realized.

“Yes!” he nodded.

“Are you really here?” she asked, suddenly looking slightly worried. “Or is my mind just imagining you? And all this?”

“Do you figure I’m really ‘there’ when you’re awake? What about that?”

“I don’t know. Maybe that’s a good question. But... come on, seriously. Are you?”

“I will at least give this assurance. I’ll be fully aware of this encounter in our waking lives. In fact, I will be there to greet you when you wake, if you would like.”

“Ah! So it really is you!”

He nodded again. “I’d supposed the concept of such an encounter would come over as less... obtuse, played out in the comfort of your own mind. Though I hope, on the flipside, you did not find it invasive or impolite.”

“No. Not at all.” She thought about it. If anyone had mentioned their plans to do something like this in advance, it might have seemed creepy to her. But in the timeless here-and-now of a lucid dream, it was perfectly comfortable. A pleasant rendezvous point, in fact. “And I would like,” she added.

“Hmm?”

“For you to greet me. When I wake up.”

“Grand.”

“Hey... all that Jesus stuff... you’re not actually that serious about it all, are you?”

He shook his head slightly with a devious smirk. “Nah.”

“You have a pretty strange sense of humor.”

He pleaded guilty as charged with a subtle expression.

“I like it,” she said with an expression to match his coy brand of guile.

He reached for her hand, and held it.

She was suddenly sitting up in bed in darkness. It barely felt as if she'd been asleep at all. Her mind was still bubbling in a way, feeling vibrantly fertile from the experience of the dream.

There was a polite knock on the door. Her lips curled into a little smile.

Part III

“Where’d you find this old thing, anyway?” asked the boy with the sleeping cap, which had stars and moons painted on it with glow in the dark paint. It was by now flecking off in an unbecoming way, like the leprous skin of a jaundiced zombie.

“On a quest,” said the boy with the brass curtain rod, which you might mistake for a really cool magical scepter if you were quite gullible, or otherwise unfamiliar with the concept of drapes.

“Was it a quest for some type of... large munitions?” asked the plump boy squeezed into an inaccurate Sailor Moon cosplaying getup.

“No, it was a quest for...” The curtain rod boy paused, grimacing with exasperation. “I don’t know why I’m even repeating this nonsense. It was a quest for a unicorn’s song. A unicorn’s song. How do you even... how do you go about collecting, and then containing a song? It doesn’t even make any sense. I didn’t think unicorns even sang songs. Don’t they just whinny?”

“I gather they whinny quite magically,” chipped in the boy with a fake beard hanging around his neck. It looked as if on a prior, lighter occasion, it had been worn on the face with the gusto of a zealous masquerader. “And perhaps they whinny melodically as well?”

“I guess you could maybe translate it into sheet music if you knew how...” said the Sailor Moon boy.

“Can we bear down here? Who cares about the unicorn and its song or dance or its ground up horn processed into some kind of black market aphrodisiac? If we pull this off, we’ll be free, and I won’t have to worry about being punished for failing the quest. Pass me one of those shells. Carefully.”

“Has anyone here ever completed a quest?” earnestly wondered the sleeping cap boy.

“Has anyone here ever been fed?” hungrily wondered the fake beard boy.

“Ok, let’s rehearse this a second.” The boy lifted his curtain rod and tapped it on the long metal barrel. “If we blow this, I don’t think I have to tell you what happens.”

The Sailor Moon boy wore an expression of sudden shame and guilt. “I really wish I had a change of skirt.”

Elsewhere, in his fastidiously maintained industrial loft, Counselor Slinus blistered away at a keyboard. Line after line of cryptic-looking code streaked across the monitor at a pace that appeared to have trouble keeping up with his keystrokes. Though he seemed less focused on the programming than he did on the conversation he was having into his wireless headset.

“M-hm. No. I don’t know. I can’t get a hold of him. He must have his phone turned off for some reason.” His conversation partner murmured something through his earpiece. “I don’t know. I’ve stopped trying to understand how that little horse brain of his works. Listen, that’s why I’m calling you. It looks like someone’s been into the Quest Pro system at Crossnest. It seems someone’s actually been completing quests. Can you believe it? I wouldn’t mind seeing some of that initiative around here.”

As he said this, he made an accusatory glance towards his right hand man, Gilbert. Gilbert withered in his tragically snug camper’s outfit.

“The point is, it means there’s someone there. It could be her, or any one of them. And since Terence is busy with God knows what, I need someone else to check it out.”

Gilbert’s eyes darted back and forth. He added to the moisture gathering in the cloth sandwiched by his armpits.

“Don’t we have someone stationed there? Isn’t your other half there?” Slinus sniggered. “Your better half?” The murmurs in the earpiece did not sound like laughter. “Yes, ok. Calm down. Sounds like someone could use a milk bone.”

Gilbert eyed a digital clock as it ticked another minute. He was wringing his sash with pudgy fists, as he was prone to do when he was nervous, which was always.

“It’s just that this is all coming together finally. I’m almost done hacking this targeting system. It was a real doozy of a job, but when you’re blessed with skills like mine...” He caught himself before plunging into one of his self-aggrandizing spiels that are compulsory to the trade of hacking. “Anyway, I need those codes. Trust me, those I can’t hack, not even with some killer magic

algorithm. Just get in touch with our Crossnest man. You can do that, right? You have some sort of... telepathic thing, don't you? A kind of beastly communion?"

There was a begrudging murmur to the affirmative through the earpiece. Slinus hung up the phone, marking the first time he'd removed one hand from the keyboard in the last several hours. He used the opportunity to grab his bottle of Mountain Dew and take a swig. The bottle felt cool on the scar on the palm of his hand. It was a circular shape, lined by infinity symbols around the perimeter, and one larger infinity symbol in the center. If you inspected it closer, it might look more like a seared brand than a typical scar. The other hand kept typing.

The most annoying thing about computer hackers was that their infuriating lack of modesty always seemed to be justified. This was especially the case with those who incorporated the practice of magic into their programming methods, and there were few who did this as effectively as Slinus Marlevort. Such practitioners of this obscure craft have sprouted numerous branches in the categorization of magickers. Along one branch, you had your siliconjurers and your binary prestidigitators, to name a couple of the obvious ones. Among the more nefarious offshoots were your IT druids, your open sourcerers, and those who reveled in the arcane religious practice of Wiki. These were all fine traditions, but none were quite apt in describing what exactly Slinus was, and he personally felt the most appropriate classification for himself was "1337 dark mage arch-h4xx0r", and when asked about it, that was the term he would supply.

Magicians of this ilk were generally capable of some dreadfully potent feats. Combining computers and magic in most people's minds was a highly unintuitive proposition, and even widely thought of as (and this is a verbatim quote) "kind of a stupid idea". But for those with the aptitude for it, it held some possibilities which were downright unfair to other magic users. It was unfair in the same way it would be inequitable to other students if some were allowed to outsource their homework assignments to Einstein's living brain, floating in a jar containing a substance suspiciously similar in look and taste to pickle brine.

The digital clock struck 11:59. Slinus paused his typing, leaned back, and stretched. He turned to look at Gilbert, who was also watching the clock, which might as well have been a sunlamp by the way he was sweating.

“Just about lunch time, then. What do you say, Gilbert?” By which of course he meant it didn’t matter what he had to say about it.

“Um... sounds good. What... uh... would you... uh...”

“Is something wrong, Gilbert? Why do you keep looking at the clock?” Slinus stood up, evaluating his stuttering lackey with increasing suspicion. He placed his hand, more casually than menacingly, on his holstered sidearm. It was an old Zapper for the 8-bit Nintendo Entertainment System. It was refitted to have a shiny silver barrel and grip, ensconced in the original gray, angular plastic. It naturally no longer had a cord, as it was now presumably a weapon of potent self-contained magical energies. He thought it was a very cool and original solution to his magical weapon needs, although to be fair, he had never seen or heard of the cartoon show “Captain N: The Game Master”. He probably would have liked it. Notwithstanding, it arguably was cool, at least with respect to those who shared his mindset. The piqued nostalgias of retro gaming could always be counted on for a great deal of traction in those circles.

“Gilbert? Hey, buddy, down here.” He snapped his fingers in an ineffectual attempt to bring Gilbert’s attention away from the clock.

“Oh. Yeah. Uh... could you... please... um...”

Slinus folded his arms. “Yes? Could I what, Gilbert?”

“Maybe, please, um... move a few steps to the right?”

With arms still folded, Slinus humored him. “Ok, Gilbert. I am moving a few steps to the right. Here I am, a few steps to the right. Now what?”

“Ok... um... just...” Gilbert stalled as he watched the blinking ‘:’ in the middle of the clock’s digits, ‘11:59’.

“Yes?”

The clock struck ‘12:00’. Gilbert drew his tiny wand and waved it through the empty space next to him. Four boys materialized, and materializing with them was a large metal object, terminating in a long, 105mm-wide metal tube aimed at Counselor Slinus. The counselor made a motion for his Zapper sidearm, but did not reach it before the tube made an earsplitting BANG.

Two things at that point were instantly evident. The first was that Slinus was now just a pair of legs standing on the floor. His upper torso, which had been ripped from the legs, was tumbling through the air. The second was an explosion in the back of the room in the direction the tube was pointing. The blast rocked the ground, causing the disembodied legs to topple.

As the smoke from the tube cleared, and as the smoke from the smoldering wreckage took its place, the boys stood speechlessly by their high-powered armament. The sleeping cap boy finally spoke up. “Did... we do it?”

The question was in the process of being given a grim answer. The upper stump of Slinus’s torso was dragging itself across the floor towards the lower stump. His severed abdomen was leaving an unbroken streak of deep red across the metal. He was now much like a human paintbrush.

He pulled the Zapper from the holster, propped himself up, and pointed it at the motley rebellion. “Yeah. I think you did it.”

The large cross-dressing boy wistfully examined the final moment of his tragic life. “This is the worst summer camp ever.”

With four Zaps, the boys were reduced to a sparse cloud of cooling embers. The only remains were a sleeping cap, a curtain rod, a fake beard, and a Sailor Moon outfit.

Gilbert tucked his wand back into his belt, and breathed a sigh of—it almost seemed—relief, as he anticipated his demise. It didn’t come.

“Gilbert, will you follow me to the safe, please?” Slinus left a shiny trail like a garden slug on his way to the safe in the wall. He paused to pick up a tall, slender staff. It was black, with occult runes and dire imagery carved into it. He gripped it with both hands, and used it to help him drag his mangled torso along.

He used it to tap the safe, and the combination quickly entered itself. The door popped open, revealing many stacks of books. Though they weren’t really books so much as stacks of plain white 8.5”x11” paper, bound by black rings, like manuscripts one might submit for review. They were all identical.

“Hand me one of those books, won’t you? Shut the safe when you’re done.” Gilbert complied. “Thank you.”

The book’s cover was blank, except for the title which was blacked out with a rectangle. Beneath the black rectangle, the number ‘Seven’ was printed. Slinus smeared blood over the fresh white pages as he flipped the book open to a spot marked by a yellow Post-it. He read a passage.

“Spirit’s of the 00000000 000000 give me you’re powers and vanquish my eniemiEEEEE...”

“EEEEAAAARGH!!!” shouted the young man who was suddenly standing in the room. His arrival was ushered in by a brief flurry of pyrotechnics. The young man was striking a dramatic pose, with his hand raised in the air, his fingers curled into a claw as if clutching an object he was no longer holding. His hand was smoking, the smoke rising from a freshly seared circular scar on his palm. This was not the only similarity between the young man and Slinus Marlevort. In fact, there were no differences at all. The two young men appeared to be identical.

The new Slinus brought his smoking hand in front of his glasses, ogling it with mystification. “Oww!”

The half-Slinus held his staff like a gondola rower holds his rowing pole, and stood himself up on his severed abdominal base.

“Where did it go?” asked the confused duplicate. “Who are you people?”

“Those are good questions. But I’ve had this conversation for the sport of it too many times already. It never goes anywhere that interesting.” Spencer aimed his staff and shot a current of ghostly energy into the forehead of his nonplused doppelganger. He then dropped the staff, and fell over backwards, dead.

The fresh, non-bisected Slinus stooped over and picked up the staff. He then nodded towards the mess of his bisected previous incarnation. “Gil, clean that up, won’t you? Oh, and get rid of that, too,” he said, gesturing towards the hulking Howitzer cannon. “It was an admirable try, but I think it’s time to get back to business.”

“Um...” Gilbert said as if he was trying to swallow a potato. “Ok, sir.”

“And for God’s sake, put out that fire.”

“Counselor? Why didn’t you shoot me, too?”

“Gilbert, you may learn some day, if you find yourself in my position, that it always pays to have someone around who fully appreciates the futility of mutiny. Now what about that lunch?”

Herbert trudged up the side of a hill, snapping the tall, dry grass under his feet. It was one foothill of many which preceded the great mountain range as if they were the marching band blazing the trail for the impressive floats in a highly stationary, geologically-themed parade. Herbert paused, waiting for Beatrix and Russet to catch up. He looked over the forested valley they’d left behind. The spinning icon maintained its serviceable vigil over the hidden fort Crossnest, now some distance away.

Another Camp Quest had recently popped up on the Quest Pro terminal, and they were at the moment pursuing the dubious prize listed in the quest profile. Though you would never suspect they were pursuing anything with determination, the way Beatrix and Russet were carrying on.

“Oh, what about the one where Trick broke into the... what was it? The crypt, or vault of...?” Beatrix wondered aloud.

“Volume 23. Rutherford Trick and the Vault of the Prurient Oracle.”

“Oh yeah! And the vault just turned out to contain the king’s pornography.”

“That’s right,” Russet nodded. “And when Trick found out there was no gold there, he got so mad he set it all on fire. This sent the king, and thus the whole kingdom, into a period of grieving. While the king was distracted by grief, Trick made off with the Elysian Manacles of Pulchritude. He sold them for a fortune.”

“That was great.”

“The best part was how the Oracle King predicted it all in a dream. On the first page! And he still couldn’t stop Trick. What a rascal.”

“What about...” she paused, as she searched her memory. “The title was some pun about bacon.”

“Volume 35. Rutherford Trick: Bacon Business.”

“Yes! He swapped the wife of the evil Governor for a prize sow he won at a fair. It was kind of a joke in a plot to hold his wife for ransom, but throughout the whole book no one noticed the difference. People just repeatedly commented on how the Lady’s table manners seemed to have improved. And the Governor kept being ‘taken with her beauty’, as if only noticing her for the first time.”

“Florentine, my succulent truffle, why, if I wasn’t sure the cognac had got the better of me, I’d swear your skin was softer than the day we met.” Russet quoted.

“Ha! And later, Trick for some reason forgets about the whole ransom plot, or just loses interest. Then he and the real Governess loot the historic cemetery of all its most valuable mummies. She became kind of like a mother figure to him, and at the end, he promises to return all the mummies if the Governor would legally sign over his wife to become Trick’s mother. But when he does, Trick just sells the mummies and gives the money to an orphanage.”

“It was a treat to read. We were lead to believe Trick had finally found the mother he never had. But it turned out he was only wooing the Governess to gain access to her key to the fabled chest of Yggdrasil wood. He then ditched her and fled by steamboat across the Mississipiatic Ocean. We wouldn’t find out what was in the chest until the next volume.”

“Wow, there were just so many. I haven’t even read half of them. I’ve read other series, though. There’s one I like, but you may not have heard of it. Harry Po...” She was interrupted by a glaring Herbert. He’d been maintaining an impatient posture as he’d waited for them to catch up.

“Well, aren’t you two just like a couple of peas in a pod?” he sneered. Beatrix giggled at the remark for no apparent reason. Russet smiled in her direction, then threw his cape behind one shoulder before addressing Herbert.

“Come, dear Wizardy. It’s such a lovely day. No need to assail its serenity with a foul disposition.”

“Wait, let me check and see if I’m receptive to your advice on foul dispositions. I want to be totally sure your opinion on the subject holds the least bit of credibility with me.” Herbert theatrically groped his skull, invoking the discredited science of phrenology. “Ok. Nope, I’m not a retard.”

“We were just talking about some books we’ve read, Herbert,” said Beatrix.

“Yes,” added Russet. “Some really all-around smashing tales. Trick is one of our favs. What about you? Maybe we’ve some common ground yet?”

It took a surprising amount of restraint, Herbert found, not to blurt out the time Dean Brimstale attempted to crash one of Vera’s séance slumber parties by concealing himself in the stuffed torso of the late varsity mascot, Heidegger the walrus. Little did he know, though, that Vera had been aware of his spying, and during the séance, misinformed him by confiding in the other girls with a false location of the coveted Laurels of Erudition. The avaricious dean then spent the entirety of the semester probing for the Laurels by shouting the magic phrase “I would fancy a lengthy gander at your bottom, miss” into each toilet in every public ladies’ lavatory in Cambridge.

“In case you’ve forgotten, we’re out here to do something Vera, I mean, very important.”

“Of course. What was it again, if you don’t mind refreshing my memory?”

“We’re supposed to be looking for…” Herbert checked his notes. “The spiraled incisors of a…” Again, back to his notes. “Central Asian reticulated snoogerfitch.”

“Does it say what a snoogerfitch looks like?” Beatrix asked.

“Well, I imagine it has spiraled incisors, for starters,” Herbert replied.

“It is also reticulated,” said Russet.

“How so, do you think? Like a snake?” The two boys shrugged.

“Have you tried using some…” Russet grabbed the page of notes from Herbert, and read. “Guds root? Maybe if you place some out in the open the…” He read on. “Aroma will tantalize its sensitive and curious proboscis?”

“Gee, Russet, I think I used up my last batch trying to lure African spoonfoodles and European dippety-flumsnarks. Gotta catch ‘em all, you know?”

“A pity.”

“Hey, Russet!” Beatrix was suddenly excited. “Can’t you magically create those things? The guds root, or even the snoogerfitch itself? I think doing that is probably beyond my own abilities, but you...”

“Would that I could, Bea. Unfortunately, I don’t know what either of those things looks like. If I did, it would be no problem at all.”

“How convenient,” Herbert griped.

“I see. Makes sense. Could you... you know, just guess?” she said with a facetious turn in her voice.

“Hmm. Maybe you’re on to something!” Russet played along.

“I mean, we already have a pretty good loose physical description. Maybe we can piece it together.”

“A la some sort of Frankenfitch!”

“Yeah!”

“Let’s see... spiral incisors, check. Curious proboscis... check.” Russet checked the air with his wand as if checking off a real, physical list in front of him. An ambiguously animalistic form took shape in the grass. It was a small, hunching bipedal thing, roughly exhibiting the contours of a furry baboon. It had corkscrew fangs and a long, pink snout, like that of a proboscis monkey. It sat unintelligently, twitching its absurd nose. “What do you think? Is that proboscis curious enough for you?”

“Hmm...” Beatrix considered the proboscis carefully. “No, I don’t think it’s nearly curious enough.”

Russet waved his wand. “How about now?” The pseudo-primate’s nose tripled in length, as well as pliability. It was suddenly quite frisky, and instantly magnetized towards Beatrix. It

aggressively sniffed up and down her pants, its nose making little slapping noises against her leg with each sniff. It tickled ferociously.

“Ha-ha! No! Too curious! Too curious!”

“Oh, no. I think it is just right!”

“What about the reticulation?” She brought her ring towards the nasally zealous creature, and magically supplied it with the body of a snake. As it wriggled, its bulbous nose continued slapping the dirt.

Herbert eyed the proceedings with a grim void of humor. They obviously weren't taking this seriously. But that wasn't even what was bugging him. It wasn't even Russet's cocky flamboyance that was getting under his skin, either. It was Beatrix, and the way she was now behaving with Russet. What happened to the two of them? Where before he felt at least a vague rhythm of personable interaction with her, it now seemed like she and Russet were both in their own world together. And it was becoming clear he had little hope of visiting that place.

Whatever was going on, it did not inspire him to trust her. She'd already supplied some of the fuel for that sentiment herself, with her peculiar habits of secrecy. He was thinking last night that today he would discuss with her the baffling message he'd found on the Seinfeld tape. But seeing her act this way with Russet made him quickly reconsider. If she wanted to keep things from him, couldn't two play at that game?

His muscles tensed involuntarily at the thought of the tape. It hadn't allowed him much sleep last night. What did it mean? If only the message weren't so irritatingly incomplete. What did it have to do with the locket? A curse? Death? A book? Was it that book? The one that had so infatuated him?

And the list he found on the bulletin board. That bugged him too. The list appeared to be right about wizards, in its own editorial, qualitative way. The other statements were more absolute, though.

“There's no such thing as time travel?” That tape would beg to differ. Herbert couldn't think of a better explanation. What else could it really be, other than his future self traveling back in time to warn him about something? The scenario played itself out a thousand times in movies. Why not in reality, especially in a reality revealed to be rife with all sorts of magical nonsense? Unless of

course it also happened to be a reality in which time travel didn't exist by law. But what about dragons? "Dragons don't exist?" That was just...

The mock-snoogerfitch was now laboring under some highly impractical and outlandish physiological modifications. It was finding it difficult to sate its proboscis' curiosity with its tentacles getting tangled up in its own antlers. Herbert pulled out his gun and shot the thing, with the same casualness Indiana Jones used to blow away the sword-flailing Arab in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*.

"Hey, Russet," he said, as he holstered the gun. "Can you make a dragon?"

Russet looked somewhat sad. He flicked his wand, and the indecipherable carcass disintegrated into the earth. He turned his attention to Herbert's question, seeming to only now realize one had been asked. "Oh. A dragon..." He spoke slowly. "... don't..."

"You don't think you can? Is that because dragons don't exist?"

"That is what I've heard."

"But, come on. You can create anything you want, magically. And if you create it, then it exists, doesn't it? Who cares if it doesn't occur naturally otherwise?"

"I suppose that is true."

"Well?" Herbert gestured toward a patch of land that, by implication, might make a sensational location for a conjured dragon.

"I just... don't..."

"Don't you know what a dragon looks like?"

"Of course I do!"

"Then hop to it! Big, scaly, and mean!"

"I really don't think it's a good idea though. It just doesn't sound right."

Herbert sighed, frustrated. He had an idea. “Ok, how about this. You know what dinosaurs look like, right? And they exist, don’t they? I mean, they used to. At least they aren’t completely fictional.”

“Right...” Russet agreed.

“Well, how about you just start by creating a dinosaur. A big one. Like a T-Rex.”

“Yes, that I can do.”

“Sounds pretty hard,” Beatrix said. “I’d love to see that.”

Russet concentrated, using more effort than either of them had seen him use previously. Shortly, there was a mighty Tyrannosaurus Rex milling about on an adjacent hill, a reasonably safe distance from where the kids stood. It produced an authentic-sounding roar, or at least authentic if you used the film Jurassic Park as your guide.

“Great. Fantastic. I couldn’t have asked for a better dinosaur,” Herbert commended. “Now comes the tricky part. Listen carefully, Russet. Can you cover the dinosaur in scales?”

“Scales?”

“Big, green scales. Lots of them. All over.”

“Uh... yeah...” Russet agreed very cautiously. His attitude towards this entire experiment seemed odd to Beatrix. It was strangely lacking the usual bravado he put into things like this.

A coat of shiny, emerald-green scales swept across the dinosaur’s skin. It now shimmered attractively. It sniffed the ground, still appearing unaware of its guinea pig status. “Super. Now how about some wings?”

“W... wings?”

“Big and leathery. Like a bat. You know.”

The dinosaur suddenly had two huge wings protruding from its shoulder blades, and began to strongly resemble a you-know-what. It took to the air with a couple of powerful flaps. “Now bigger teeth! And claws! And give it some horns!”

Russet began to sweat. As the features Herbert named grew in length and deadliness, the T-Rex seemed to notice the kids. It flapped toward them and issued a monstrous half-squeal, half-roar.

“Uh-oh...” Beatrix said.

“Now one last thing! Make it breathe fire!”

“Herbert, are you crazy?!” she yelled. Russet, in an odd stupor, mindlessly complied. A small cloud of white-hot flame puffed out of the beast’s mouth, but it instantly became extinguished. The Tyrannosaurus, now officially a dragon, rolled its eyes back into its sockets to reveal the white of surrender. It came thundering to the ground, plowing a deep, dark scar into the hill as it slid to a halt, several yards away from Herbert. Smoke rose from its nostrils.

Herbert reached up to its massive neck to take a pulse. He looked at the others and shook his head solemnly. He gulped. He felt dismay at this event, and he was troubled to admit he didn’t know what the dismay, or the event, meant at all.

Jivversport was a very different place from the one occupying Grant’s memory. Years ago, it was a thrumming hotbed of trade, intrigue, and of course, adventure. But he knew in this realm, a lot could change in a little time.

It was once a melting pot, an intersection of so many factions and interests that even the lifelong native had difficulty cataloguing them. There was naturally a thriving pirate’s district, but really, what respectable seaport hub didn’t have that? There was an active underbelly. Baffling networks of street urchin guilds clogged the alleys and sewers. They bartered magical secrets and pickpocketed goods, and the savvy ones climbed the ranks of power through inscrutable political machinery. A high-ranking urchin could rival the sway of even a “legitimate” city politician, which was usually just a puppet figure for pirate interests, or the Charmsmith Union, or the Consortium for Binary Prestidigitators, or outside military interests, or the Jivversport Wizard Herders’ Association... you get the idea.

That was all far from the case these days, as Grant noted with a bit of melancholy. He strolled a cobblestone thoroughfare with his motley band of allies, the two pirate counselors and

Samantha, as they searched for her brother. There was an alarming number of places for a lost orphan boy to tuck himself away.

“Siiiiimon!” This was not the first time Samantha had sent her brother’s name echoing through the vacant streets.

There was no response. The sound bounced off the dilapidated façades, knocking loose a slate shingle, sending it shattering on the ground. The architecture was eclectic, to say the least. It resembled in places a dense, poorly organized villa somewhere in Italy or Switzerland or France. It might give you the queasy feeling of unfocusing your eyes at the whole palette of European atmosphere. The resulting jumble of awnings, shingles, beams, siding, glass and stonework seemed a good approximation of the environment. But you couldn’t get too caught up in that comparison, because not infrequently you’d see signs of modern American suburbia. You’d turn the corner and find yourself in the shadow of a badly deteriorating, but otherwise modern 7-11. They might have represented thresholds of heavenly commercial sanctuary, if not for the fact that the broken windows all but assured the Twinkies and savory Hostess snack cakes had been plundered long ago, not even to speak of the highly collectable plastic Big Gulp cups. But it would be clear to any visitor that Jivversport at one point had anything you needed to lead a civilized life (albeit a life of charmsmithing or street urchinning). It had restaurants, hotels, post offices, a Walmart and a Target, and even a Six Flags amusement park, complete with several Batman-themed roller coasters, all ground to a halt by decades of rust and scarcity of power.

“Siiiiimon! Where are you!” Samantha tried again.

“Samantha,” Grant began with his style of kid-handling diplomacy, “I’d dearly like to find your brother too. But I think if he were in the position of hearing us shout, he’d have responded by now. Besides, all the noise may attract the wrong kind of attention. Why don’t we let these good folk take us to their fort, and we can make a solid plan for recovering your brother?”

“Siiiiiiiiimon!”

“Aye, friend, it be a tall order if ye wish to get a lass to stop pinin’ for her brother,” Daniel said in his pirate’s drawl, which somehow managed to seem less like a stylish affectation, and more like something he was actually raised with. “But not to worry too much. ‘Hospitality’ of any persuasion in this place is seldom and little between. E’ryone’s been spirited off by the Slurpenook

rogues over the years. Or found themselves some sense and fled. Or they're dead. But we'll get ye to our fort swiftly. It'll be yer best bet at anything like comfort in these parts."

Daniel nodded toward his silent partner, Nemoira, who said nothing, narrowing her eyes under the brim of her silly hat.

"That is a really & \$#@£ nice outfit. I should be taking some #!%@\$ %*#Ω& notes on that \$#!@," Russet said, referring to the 80's street attire of the break dancer known as 'Ozone'.

"It's \$&@!# unbelievable," Beatrix agreed, continuing to be startled and amused by the profanity spontaneously emerging from her mouth.

"What do you think? Long, dangly \$*©#@ earring in one ear, tiny \$!#¢® vest with no shirt to show off my rock-solid &β#\$© abs, and some sort of ∑@%& Jheri curl formula. I'd be some Φ\$!¢##& smooth #@€ \$#!Jl."

"You'd be one bad Δ!%\$® &λØ\$°#," she confirmed, unable to suppress the laughter at her own crudeness.

The rec. room's VHS video library left something to be desired, and that something was good movies. After rummaging through the cardboard box and passing over such cinematic jewels as "Look Who's Talking Now", "Patch Adams", and "Mr. Holland's Opus". There was a copy of "The Goonies", though to their dismay, the case contained a copy of "Ernest goes to Camp". This proved to complement a bold blend of camp-themed entertainment, including a number of taped episodes of the late John Candy's "Camp Candy" and Nickelodeon's "Salute Your Shorts". They eventually settled on a diamond in the rough (albeit diamond-like for reasons the filmmakers didn't intend), a movie called "Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo". It was a film about young break dancers who fought against evil corporate forces to save their dance studio from demolition, and tragically, against all odds, succeed.

The two spectators erupted with profanity-laden laughter as Michael 'Boogaloo Shrimp' Chambers—after stealing the lunch of a workman charged with demolition the studio—fell down a long flight of stairs, shattering several bones.

“Oh Φ\$#£∞! Poor Turbo!” Beatrix lamented.

“I think this film is probably a kind of &∑#φ\$ modern tragedy about the ¥@β@Иμ American Dream. Sorry, Turbo. It doesn’t matter how totally πЯ@Ψϕ# sweet your moves are. I don’t Ж!#!φΩ give a Ø°ξ\$& \$#!Ψ how sick your pop-n-locks are. If you Θ##^@¥ get in the way of progress, you will be @φΔ# \$∅\$∑% crushed.”

Beatrix wholeheartedly agreed with the statement in the facetious spirit it was intended. She turned her attention to the gradually subsiding ‘whirring’ noise in the room. It was coming from an object on top of the cinderblock coffee table. It was a plastic toy doing a lively mechanical dance, now slowing to a stop.

“Do you think we should wind that #φΔ\$!\$! up again?” she asked.

“I don’t see why the πφ\$@β# not,” Russet said while reaching for the monkey. “He really livens up the ϕИφЯ∅% \$#ΔИ out of conversations, doesn’t he?”

The ‘Singe Vilain’ was one of those obscure charmed items that could perplex an advanced sorcerer for a lifetime. He could open its plastic frame manufactured in Hong Kong, and scour its humble mechanical components to no avail. Even the most learned occultist might never fully understand to what purpose it gives its vast magical energies, until one day by chance, he happened to wind it up and place it near the right kind of subject. It was hard to guess by its cheaply crafted shell and badly painted exterior that the Singe Vilain, when dancing, causes children to swear.

The monkey now had an extra spring in its step, which nicely complemented the onscreen cavorting of the Breakin’ 2 hospital scene dance number. Funky synth-rhythms roused the wheelchair-bound and open heart surgery patients, as if they were the dead responding to a grim song of the damned. Scantly dressed nurses, probably hired from stripper agencies by production, executed vaguely lewd choreographed procedures with spiral telephone cords. Boogaloo Shrimp, maybe through a woeful dearth of facility with the art of acting, looked simultaneously exhilarated and horrified as his rowdy dance troop pushed his sickbed through the hospital like it was a shopping cart on an “all you can grab in a minute” shopping spree.

“Am I completely @&#∂@ or does this \$Δ#!∅ make no ©#@%-#*∅?¥ sense at all?” Russet pondered.

“I think it’s Я∅\$\$!\$ marvelous. His \$@\$\$%!¢ friends are coming through for him, and healing him through the beauty of Φ°ξ\$& song and dance. This movie is clearly all about friendship and Ψ\$!¢# !%\$@ like that.”

Russet tacitly agreed with the wisdom of the remark. “So where the ЛИ#°Ø £&!!& is good friend Wizardy? It’s getting on in the &\$#Σ\$ evening, wouldn’t you say?”

After the unsettling dragon debacle, Russet and Beatrix had informed Herbert that they were getting a little tired. After hours of searching for the reticulated snoogerfitch, they didn’t hold much hope of finding the creature. Herbert dismissed them gruffly, in his way, though he had no intention of giving up on the quest. He was determined to get his badge even if it meant shooting every goofily-named woodland creature he could find, and prying out their teeth, spiraled or otherwise.

“Beats %Ξ@Δ me.”

“What do you make of that bit of φ!ЯΨ#\$ dragon silliness? What do you think Herb was @ @Ж\$π\$ on about there?” Russet wondered.

“I guess you can \$%λ% ask him now,” Beatrix said, facing the door. Russet turned. Herbert stood with a dismal expression, covered in dirt from head to toe, and under one arm carried something bulky, limp, and bleeding.

The pair of ungainly lobster claws grappled with the shiny red doll. Through some effort, the claws managed to twist the upper half until it was facing the other way, and then back again. This action produced no effect. A snort of distaste fogged up the doll’s happy face.

“Mister... um, mister small horsey-crab. That is mine and I have to protect it for mister Grant.”

“Regard for duty is a noble quality. You seem like a fine young man. But I am going to keep this doll for a little while, and there is nothing you can do about it.”

“Oh. Ok.” Simon frowned. He did have regard for duty, but at the same time, he was not one for challenging statements of fact.

Terence scuttled across the damp stone floor, rattling off a chorus of rhythmic, echoed clicks. He placed the doll on top of a pockmarked, mossy pillar, and scowled at the mocking cheerfulness of its demeanor. There was a sound of a lone drop of water hitting the head of a tied-up orphan boy. Terence about-faced quickly and looked his captive up and down. Behind his intensely still pupils, a tiny, yet frighteningly powerful brain was calculating.

“What are you going to do with me, horsey?”

“The name is Terence. And I have no plans for you as of yet, other than to keep you tied to that statue as my prisoner until further strategic opportunities present themselves.”

Simon exhaled the exaggerated sigh of a child warned about the cancellation of dessert in the event that any uneaten vegetables were found loitering on his plate. Another drop of water pelted the top of his moist head. He looked up at the leaking stalactites covering the high ceiling of the underground chamber. Surrounding him in this chamber was a great deal of ancient stonework, an indication of a once very different-looking Jivversport, paved over and forgotten with time. And judging by the modern-day Jivversport, this seemed to be a frequently occurring cultural/geological phenomenon.

He squirmed against the unforgiving relief-marks in the statue he was tied to. He couldn't see what it looked like, but he could see the other eleven in the room, spread out radially and spaced by the hours of a clock. They were wise-looking bearded figures, possibly authorities of their day on facets of the arcane. One of them looked like a Chinese wise man, and another had a beard that curled to a point which came back to almost touch his face.

“So am I in trouble, mister horsey Terence?”

“Trouble? Unless being tied up suits your convenience, yes, I'd say you were in some trouble. Your life is in no immediate peril, if that's what you were after.”

“It isn't?”

“No more than it is with that sword-flailing delinquent you've been following about.”

“Mister Grant?”

“If you knew who he was, you wouldn't put your trust in him.”

“But mister Grant was going to get us some pizza!”

“There will be no pizza! He is lying about his intentions. In fact, I believe he intends to steal something from someone dear to you.”

“No way!”

“An older girl you know. She has helped you before.”

“You mean miss Beatrix??”

Terence held his head still, a gesture which seemed to suffice as a nod for him. Simon erupted, “Whoa! I thought I heard mister Grant say something about Beatrix and my sister was all like ‘whoaaaa’ and I was like ‘is it really her?’ and I thought ‘whoa, no way!!’ but then we didn’t ask him if...”

Terence grunted a deep, brooding whinny of displeasure. Simon remained undeterred. “He wants to steal something from Beatrix? That can’t be right. He is a very nice man!”

“Believe what you will. The only thing I want from you is that doll there, and I already have it. I have no reason to tell you false stories.” Simon looked worried. He was trusting to a fault by nature, and this presented a conundrum when faced with blindly trusting, as he always did, the multiple conflicting accounts of others.

“But Grant is my friend...”

“No more than I am.”

“You’re not my friend?”

“Well...” Terence was caught off guard by the question. “No, it doesn’t look like it, does it?”

“Can I be your friend?”

Terence deliberated silently behind his gruff horse features. “... Maybe.”

Simon beamed. “Do you want to play some games to pass the time?!”

“... ... Yes.”

“Wizardy, good & ☺! ☺# chum!” Russet said with genuine delight.

“What in the #&! \$!! name of Ω@ΩΩ\$-Δ°@!&-\$€*€Ж? is going the \$*Ø@! ?Ξ?© on in here?” Herbert asked, followed by a look of absolute disbelief at what he’d just said. He’d simply meant to say “What’s up?”

“Nothing %%Φ#μ! much to report, friend. We’re spending a little И^¢¢\$ quality time with one Sir Boogaloo §&%!@!!ϕ Shrimp.”

Herbert wrinkled his brow at the baffling response, hoping it didn’t mean what he thought it meant.

“What the ##Ω§%! is that?” Beatrix asked mildly, belying her own coarse language.

Herbert’s look of confusion was seamless from moment to moment. “Oh. This &*λ@?&. I \$πΘΔ# found it. The snoogerfitch.” He dumped the lifeless load onto the floor, and presented in an open palm two long, spiral-shaped teeth. He again screwed up his face and sort of twitched, feeling like he was a malfunctioning robot whose blown fuses were causing him to curse.

“That’s the \$#☺*& snoogerfitch??” Beatrix said in disbelief.

“Sweet ☺\$§© Ж!#!ϕΩ. Who’d have thought the πЯ@Ψ would look like that!” Russet said.

“Hold on a Δ!%§@ second. If I can just &#∂@ interject a little #*Θ? sanity here before we get carried away with snoogerfitches and &☺! reticulated curious proboscises or whatever the # \$☺§Σ%. Since when did everyone around here turn into \$!¢##& Andrew Dice Clay, including my-Ψ\$!¢#-self??”

“It’s the \$Δ#!Ø monkey,” said Beatrix plainly, as if answering a question on the current cost of postage stamps. Herbert looked at the toy monkey. It pranced around via cheap mechanically whirring parts. It was almost as if it gained a little more energy with each foul word issued by the mouth of a child.

“You mean that @&#̂@ thing is making us say all this @¥#?Θ \$β@Иμ?” Herbert flinched with each involuntary obscenity surfacing in his speech. They were almost like belches bubbling up uncontrollably after eating some terribly gassy food, like a microwaveable burrito, to name just one, completely random example.

“Only when the #Ω\$% dances,” she clarified.

Herbert was about to say something, then stopped himself. While Beatrix and Russet seemed to be having fun with it (and with the way they were acting lately, he thought they would probably manage to have fun with a sack of rattlesnakes together), something felt unnatural about it to Herbert. Something subtle about the medium of their reality, of which they were all only barely aware, tugged at his mind persuasively. It was an invisible force which funneled all of his intent and actions into a discrete compartment, an alphanumeric sector of human behavior labeled ‘PG-13’.

“Well, I’m going to £&#°& stop it now, ok? It’s getting a little &λØ\$°# distracting.” Herbert picked up the Singe Vilain and sped up the dance with the winding key to exhaust its wound-up state. The plastic whirring became shrill, and the monkey’s limbs went into spastic quadruple-time. The kids helplessly spat furious volleys of unspeakably excremental language until the monkey became still.

“€°%@\$ \$ \$! ?Θ*% Ø#^!#@ \$#\$ @%Ω&!&^\$%Ɔ@\$Σ\$ &©©@\$&\$Φ\$^& %!@&¥#Ω #&\$J&J\$&φ @ΔΔ &#Δ&\$ \$Я* & πΔ&!@##&@\$Я&@β @Ψ#%β% @&%\$Φ@%#@ Φ♦%♀♪Θ\$ ♣\$☺ \$@ ♂\$\$&^⊙♪\$#@♥♪\$ &⊙\$!”

Beatrix and Russet sat frozen, with their lips open. Interspersed crudeness throughout casual conversation was one thing. It was an entertaining novelty, like watching a fireworks display. But that volley was like lighting up the entire fireworks barge at once. Beatrix wondered if she would ever feel the same way about her mouth again after such an unusual sort of violation. Herbert had already moved on from the incident, though, and was sizing up the Vend-O-Badge machine the way one might do with a budding arch-nemesis.

“These teeth better work. I went through hell to get them. Seriously, I probably shot the last snoogerfitch on Earth.”

“It looks... well, the creature doesn’t look like I pictured at all.” Beatrix tilted her head, scrutinizing the carcass.

“Nasty son of a gun. The thing bit me. Those corkscrew teeth hurt like hell!” Herbert massaged a small wound consisting of two holes and a stained pant leg.

“So that’s two badges down, I guess.”

“Yeah, we’ll see about that. Fingers crossed.”

Herbert dropped the teeth into the hatch. They rattled metallically at the bottom. They all waited, holding their breath. And waited.

Beep. ‘G14’ lit up. Stars and Stripes Forever followed, at its typical skull-jarring volume. “YEAH! IT WORKED!” Herbert yelled.

“WHAT?”

Upon finishing its clunky yet highly patriotic dance routine, the machine halted, and the position G14 unscrewed, sending a badge forward. Herbert, with an enormous grin of gratification, picked up a VHS copy of ‘Hook’, and held it at the ready for jamming into the machine’s flapping maw to retrieve the badge.

The badge stopped. The coil at G14 snagged the front badge together with the one behind it. Neither fell. Herbert dropped the cassette, and his jaw, simultaneously.

“\$&©#@\$!!!”

Beatrix and Russet turned to see if the Singe Vilain had begun dancing again. It had not.

Fort Pizzahut was not what Grant was expecting. This was not for lack of speculation, though. In one far-fetched variation, he imagined the fort as a rugged treetop village, complete with rickety suspension bridges, makeshift elevators involving large buckets of water, and foolhardy children precariously swinging on vines for no good God damned reason. While this cliché might have made for a fun read, it was not to be.

“This way, mates.” Daniel said, entering a deteriorating storefront. The building had a shallowly slanting red roof peppered with missing shingles. Unlike most businesses, the roof of this establishment was its trademark feature, causing it to be instantly recognizable.

“So wait,” Grant just wanted to be clear on this. “You mean fort Pizzahut actually is a Pizza Hut? Like, literally?”

“Aye. Inasmuch.”

“I knew it! Simon was right, there is pizza!” Samantha enthused.

“Well...” Daniel hedged. “I’m ‘fraid to disappoint ye, but the pizza reserves have been dried up for ages. But we’re not without hope. The good lady Nemoira here is a crackerjack with the culinary magicks.” Nemoira nodded graciously. She was a girl for whom communication seemed a tiresome chore, but she wouldn’t stand by while an incredibly true fact went unverified. “She might even set ye up with a pizza, if you wish. Though she’s never quite got the hang of that stuffed crust trick.”

Samantha’s mouth watered at the mention of hot, edible things. She frowned. “I wish Simon was around to have some too. Oh, Simon, where are you?”

“Don’t worry, Samantha. We’ll go in and rest for a while, and then go find your brother as soon as we can, ok?”

Inside, there were only a few sad traces of a once functioning restaurant. It appeared to be gutted of anything valuable. The cash register, the beverages from the case, and even those huge spatulas used to take pizza out of ovens, all were gone. The only things left were either too big to carry out, or actually bolted to the floor, such as the pizza ovens themselves. The space was small, gloomy, and hot.

“This is your fort? I know you said there weren’t many people left, but isn’t it kind of small?” Grant asked.

“‘Tis only the gateway, friend.”

While the actual location of the fort caught Grant by surprise, he was at least aware “Pizzahut” was not its original name. According to the lore of the camp, as operations expanded and mingled with the energetic Jivversport economy, the fort too evolved. To compete with other forts, enterprising

counselors sought to attract endorsement dollars from major corporations to subsidize the increasingly complicated affairs of camp participation. They'd be cashing a healthy paycheck every time they competed in the exhilarating and oft-calamitous Dr. Scholls □ Capture the Flag Tournament. And the Fruit of the Loom □ Musical Bonfire Jamborees were so riotously spirited, the kids would almost forget that the levity was made possible by the snug, soft support offered by the undergarments of Fruit of the Loom □. But the real windfall came when the Pizza Hut □ corporation, caught up in the frenzy of carving up endorsement space in this property (the way one slices up a hot pie), offered to bankroll the fort's activity for exclusive representation. Thus the fort's name changed officially to Pizza Hut □ Presents Fort [the fort's former name], and this colloquially was soon truncated to simply Pizza Hut □. Soon after, the company realized the endorsement, in addition to costing them a fortune, was pulling in very little revenue for them. It also did not prove to be the tremendous tax write-off initially indicated. The U.S. government, instead of viewing it as the charitable bolstering of an organization focused on the enrichment of character and physical fitness among youngsters, regarded it as a confusing and possibly nonexistent entity serving as a tax shelter, and slapped the company with some stiff fines. (The accountant who made the original recommendations would later prove to have attended a less than credible Accounting Camp earlier in life.) Needless to say, Pizza Hut □ pulled the plug on the deal after it didn't pan out (one of many pizza puns now associated with the fort as time-honored tradition). The name remained though, and became further truncated to simply Pizzahut, with corporate watchdogs no longer present to ensure brand fidelity, or that the crucial '□' symbols were positioned properly.

Nemoira turned the temperature dial on a large pizza oven back and forth as if entering the combination for a safe. She then tapped the oven with her silver telescope, and it opened. The party crawled inside.

"That was quite a story," Russet said, as he held the unassuming Xerox copy.

Beatrix smirked in acknowledgement. Russet reclined in his luxurious, magically crafted bed, pondering the related events quietly. Beatrix sat in a handsome armchair. The two furnishings complemented a rich décor of antiques, wall coverings, fully-stocked armoires, and cluttered vials

of lotions, colognes, and obscure cosmetic supplements. Beatrix wasn't sure when Russet manifested the interior upgrade, but figured it was during the surge of his recent meteoric upswing.

His fertile synapses turned the information about. On one hand, he was titillated to learn some of the more intimate historical facts about the ever-cagey Beatrix Tipplepot, and was so in direct proportion to their sensitive nature. On the other hand, the darkness of the tale jostled something hazy and troubling from his own memory. Things that rarely surfaced with everything else that preoccupied his busy mind (such as whether to opt for a lavender or puce dust ruffle for his conjured king-size bed). But in his current unflappable condition, the affirmative side of the dichotomy would prevail. His smile broadened, as if a simple token of gratitude for her confidence.

“So what do you think? About Herbert?” she asked.

“I think many things about Herbert. And in spite of those things, above all, I think highly.” He laughed the jovial laugh of a consummate good sport. He continued, more frankly. “But I'm sorry to say, Bea, that I don't know the foggiest thing about Herbert. Never met him before in my life.”

“Oh. I guess I didn't actually expect you to have met him. I just wanted to run this all by you in case you could tell me anything. Doesn't any of this sound familiar? Anything at all?”

“Hmm.” Russet again looked at the grainy black and white image of Herbert. He focused on the eye patch, but the focus soon became more like a trance. “You know, now that you mention it, I believe Herbert seems familiar to me. But then, this was always a subtle impression I had, ever since I met him. If I think about it for a moment, the familiarity becomes a little more palpable.”

“Can you think hard, about where you might have seen him before?”

Russet's eyes were still, fixed on the paper. The dichotomy in his mind was particularly vivid at the moment. In an unnerving realization, it seemed all of his thought on this topic was gushing down the darker branch. Much darker. His current chemical balances simply would not permit the thoughts. He buoyed himself out of the grim rumination. “Nope! Not at all, regrettably.”

“Oh well.” She toyed with a fancy hairbrush on the small mahogany table beside her. “I thought for sure once I met him, he'd be able to tell me something. Even inadvertently, which

would help me understand all this. I thought he might recognize my locket, or something. But he doesn't seem to know anything."

"Maybe you are just not asking him the right questions."

"... I haven't asked him anything, actually," she was embarrassed to admit.

Russet paused, shrugging off the remark. "I'll say this about the man. He's charged with saving me from certain pulverization. And in giving me a little more time in this mortal coil, I was able to make your acquaintance. I'll always have that owed to him."

"That's true," she said, feeling herself blushing faintly. Russet, rather innocently, made it hard to concentrate. His eye contact was the kind that could really derail a train of thought. No matter how sturdy the locomotive, it was no match for those two crisp, glacier-blue landmines on the track ahead.

What should she do in such a situation? What does one do, she'd put to herself. She'd never liked a boy before, so the playbook was as blank as one of her new sketch pads. She was forced to defer to the common wisdom on the subject, or at least her perception of it, which suggested that waiting for the male to express his feelings first was a sound guideline. In any case, it wasn't as if (to her limited awareness) there were a lot of pizza parlors to hit up, per some formulaic stab at a "date", even if she were inclined to take more initiative. What could she really do? It seemed doing what they were doing, staying friendly and getting to know each other, was the best and only option.

She returned to the matter at hand, which was no less confusing, but more comfortable through familiarity. At least she'd spent years thinking about it, as opposed to only a few days, as she had in the matter of romance. "Could she have been wrong?"

"Your sister, you mean?"

"Yes. Wrong about Herbert. Maybe he isn't relevant to any of this? To knowing what the locket does, or why she died, or what we're doing here?"

Russet leaned forward, and with some measured meaning to his voice, said, "What are you doing here, if I may ask? Aside from proving yourself a beguiling storyteller?"

She hesitated. Something else occurred to her. “That reminds. Does the name ‘Tristin’ ring a bell?”

“Tristin? I’ve never met her. Mind you I haven’t met many people.”

“No, Tristin is a guy. Sounded like a young guy. I only heard his voice. I spoke to him over a radio. He’s the one who told me about this summer camp, and told me to come here. He didn’t tell me anything about himself. He just said we’d meet when I got here. But I haven’t heard from him at all. Tristin Sheeth. You sure it doesn’t sound familiar?”

“I’m afraid I don’t know. I am proving to be a wealth of un-information, today! At least I’m consistent. Maybe if you changed your line of questioning to something dry-cleaning related? I have a whole slew of answers when it comes to getting a gravy stain out of a lace doily.”

“When I soil one of my many doilies, I’ll know who to go to.”

“Have you been practicing any of those laundering spells I taught you??” Russet became animated.

“Yes. My shirt has never felt so soft, and it smells like honeysuckle,” Beatrix said as she stroked her short sleeve. It was like the pliable ear of a newborn lamb.

Russet watched her enjoy the unlocked magnificence of her fabric. She smiled back at him as he silently puzzled over the pretty girl. An alien feeling had been gathering momentum. Was it attraction? Was this what it felt like? He’d had so little experience with girls, the feeling of falling for one was confined to his feeble efforts of speculation. The flimsy pageant played out in his mind like a Disney World parade, with no real texture or emotional gravity to anything. It was just something that happened plainly through a sequence of maudlin clichés, because it was something that was supposed to happen.

The reality of it, if this indeed was ‘it’, was more exhilarating. But also disquieting. How should he act upon it? When it came to everything else, he knew exactly how he felt. Fashion. Magic. God. Those things were resting on sturdy foundations. But this...

“Anyway, I regret I can’t be of more help. But now that you have told me these things, I would relish the chance to help you solve this riddle.”

“That would be great!”

Russet picked up the locket. “I can say with certainty at least that this is an article of magic. I think it is very powerful, but I can’t imagine what it does.”

“It’s been plaguing me for years. There is something kind of captivating about it though, isn’t there?”

“That’s a testament to its power. Much the way you probably have a similar feeling about your ring. I’ve noticed the feeling with my wand, too.” He patted the instrument’s holster. “I am convinced we will get to the bottom of this. Maybe we should consult with Grant on it? He knows a lot about these things. He taught me everything I know about magic, you know.”

“Oh?” Beatrix again felt not only guilty, but now somewhat foolish for stonewalling Grant, keeping him locked out of the fort with her opened doll. Maybe if she’d been more trusting with him, she’d have had answers sooner. “So you would like to see him now?” she asked.

“I think it’s about time we pay the old man a visit. He’s probably worried sick about me.”

“Ok. Let’s go see what he thinks.”

Russet’s mouth grew around a tremendous yawn. “How about in the morning though. It’s awfully late, and I’m beat.”

“Um... alright,” Beatrix reluctantly agreed. She wasn’t the least bit tired and was sort of itching to get going, but had to acquiesce. “Do you think we should bring Herbert along, or should we leave him out of it for now?”

There was no response, but for the low swell of a charismatic snore.

“I know you said most of the kids are gone. But if I didn’t know better,” Grant said, as he surveyed the cluttered underground lair of fort Pizzahut, “I’d say you were the only two members left.”

Daniel twiddled apprehensive fingers in the frills of his puffy shirt. “Um... do ye know better?”

Grant thought about it. “No, not really.”

“Well, ye were right. ‘Tis but the lady and m’self. Someone’s got to stay about the place and guard the treasure, after all.”

Grant was organizing a collection of small bones into orderly rows and columns. They might have been human finger bones, scattered on a dusty table. The table looked like the sliced-off top of a huge barrel. The lair’s décor on the whole was barrel-themed, as well as chest-themed, as well as anchor, rope, cannon ball, and map-themed. If Pottery Barn were run by pirates (and who knows, it might have been in Jivversport), it would have been the chief contributor to this chamber’s interior motif.

“Treasure?” Grant asked inattentively. “Would that be all the endorsement dollars collected over the years?”

“Nay. All that’s long since been swindled ‘way from us by the scurrilous Thundleshick. We’re protectin’ something far more valuable than a few doubloons.”

Grant yawned, tuning into the fact that he hadn’t slept in more than 48 hours. He shifted his knee, bumping the table, jarring the phalangeal bones out of rank. He exhaled in aggravation, and set about recomposing them.

Samantha sat in a nautically-purposed net suspended from the ceiling as if it was a hammock. She was polishing off a third slice of pizza, storing excess crusts in her pocket. Nemoira was using her telescope to roll out more dough for another pie, while quietly muttering pirate-specific profanity. She was having a devil of a time with the stuffed crust spell, and was this close to giving up.

“The pizza is terrific, miss pirate lady. It is the best I’ve ever had. I’m sure my brother would agree.” Nemoira smiled and tipped her cap without turning away from her work. Samantha became sullen. “Oh, where is he? What do you think could have happened to him, mister Grant?”

Grant was startled out of a creeping slumber at the sound of his name. “I’d like to find him just as much as you, Samantha. Remember, I entrusted him with something I need back. Uh... not even to speak of the fact that he is a member of our team. No man left behind, right?”

“Isn’t it possible,” Daniel supposed, “that if ye gave him somethin’ valuable, that might a’ made him a target for some rogue?” Grant looked dismayed at the plausible notion. It hadn’t occurred to him, but then, he wasn’t used to thinking like a pirate.

“Oh no!” Samantha said. “We must save him from the rogue!”

“Now just a minute. We don’t know that.” The reassurance betrayed Grant’s own concern, though. Thoughts of scuttling, claw-clicking and small whinnies produced ominous kaleidoscopic patterns in his imagination. “Simon will be fine for a little while out there. He is an orphan, after all. He’s used to making it alone in the world, isn’t he?”

“Not without me! We always stick together. Come on, we have to go look for him now!” Samantha was out of her nautical hammock and tugging at Grant’s sleeve.

Grant said, fighting off a yawn, “Aren’t you tired?”

“No! Come on!”

“Samantha, it’s dark out there. The best hope for Simon is to wait until tomorrow. We’ll leave first thing in the morning. I promise.”

Samantha glowered at him as if he’d just run over her favorite doll with a lawnmower. “I would like my marble back, please.”

“What? Now, Samantha...”

“Please?”

It was silly, but Grant found he suddenly felt the shame of a cop being stripped of his badge and gun. He took the marble from his pocket and gave it to her.

“I’m going to go find my brother!” she said before disappearing into the cavernous hall leading up to the pizza oven door.

Grant sighed, then lumbered to the vacated hammock. He collapsed into it. “Alright. I guess we have two missing kids to find tomorrow.”

He began to doze, but was again jarred out of it by Samantha's voice. "I am leaving a trail of bread crumbs so you can find me! And Simon too when I find him!"

Grant turned away from the voice and grumbled to himself. "Orphans..."

It was the following morning, and to Russet's eye, Beatrix appeared to be standing upside-down and smiling. Her smile was in fact only an illusion caused by the fact that she appeared to be upside-down. It was in fact a frown. Russet was lying strewn over the side of his bed, his head and arms dangling over the edge. His glassy eyes bulged from a pasty face.

She'd had a sickening feeling she knew what to expect in his room. She woke up to discover Fort Crossnest in worse shape than ever before. Smelly, unidentifiable rubbish choked the corridors. Fluorescent bulbs flickered stuttering sentences which, in bulb language, were the equivalent to the ravings of a lunatic. Large sheets of paint peeled off the walls revealing moldy concrete. Stampedes of rats escorted even larger, less common vermin through the halls (some might have been identified by the zoologically astute as the rare whelping sewer snoogerfitch). Whatever magical forces were holding together the tidy appearance of the fort had become extinguished, and then some.

Russet's room looked like a trailer park after taking the brunt of a tornado, one especially vindictive towards affordable blue-collar residences. The armoires were reduced to gnarled, angry chunks of splintered wood. It looked like an alien had laid eggs in the hefty armchair, and the offspring had made a savage exit before skulking into a vent somewhere to leak phlegm. The many vials of lotions and fragrances had all simply exploded. Russet was tangled in a heap of frayed, shredded bedding, breathing shallow breaths, otherwise motionless.

Beatrix's heart sank upon encountering the scene. She managed to reconcile with the sobering reality of Russet's crash enough to address him. "So I guess this means you're not feeling up to seeing Grant today?"

Russet gurgled something without moving. Beatrix leaned in closer to interpret the guttural sound. "nhhrghh..."

"Huh?"

He slowly mouthed the nonexistent words. Beatrix leaned in further. “nrrr...”

“I’m sorry, Russet, I can’t...”

“Nooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo.”

Herbert stared at the Vend-O-Badge machine. If you looked closer, it might have resembled the stare a hit man gives to a poor slob who’s up to his neck in gambling debts and mafia loans. If you looked closer in the other direction, towards the Vend-O-Badge, you might have noticed a number of bullet-sized pockmarks in the resilient glass façade. The badge with an iconic depiction of two spiraled incisors remained pinched by the coil, taunting Herbert with its immobility.

“Herbert...” Beatrix had entered. Herbert put his finger to his lips.

“Shh. I think it’s sleeping.”

“What? The machine? How do you know?”

“I’ve got a feeling. I know how this piece of crap thinks.”

“Oh. Well, I wanted to talk to you about...”

“Hold the thought. Can you give me a hand?”

“With what?”

“Magic. I need you to get that badge for me. Like, magically, somehow.”

“Hmm.” She considered the proposition. It was plausible in theory, but then, it was quite an ornery machine. “I guess I could try to magically duplicate the snoogerfitch. Or I could have, if it were still around for me to get a good look at. What happened to it, anyway?”

“I have no idea what happened to the wretched thing. It crawled off somewhere, I guess.” Herbert gestured towards the trail of blood on the floor leading out the door. Beatrix made a troubled face at the thought of a wounded, toothless feral snoogerfitch scampering about the fort.

“What did you have in mind, then?” she asked.

“I don’t know. You’re the sorceress in training, aren’t you? Can’t you levitate it out of there or something?”

Beatrix looked at her ring, making the dubious calculations of an amateur magician. She got an idea. “How about this.” She walked to the computer station and examined the morass of archaic, dust-clogged wires. When she found one she deemed suitably useless, she yanked it out. She brought it to the Vend-O-Badge while coiling it into wide loops.

“Open it up,” she said, more like a question than an order.

Herbert was at the ready with his trusty VHS copy of Hook, which was proving to be far more useful in this newfound phase of its existence than it ever had. The slumbering machine’s wide mouth was carefully propped open. Herbert backed away and watched Beatrix with interest. She fed one end of the cord into the slot, then directed the energies of her ring inside.

The cord began to dance like a charmed snake, and slithered up towards the stubborn badge. The cord sprouted further similarities to a limbless reptile, most notably a fanged mouth with which to pry loose a badge. It struck the badge as if lunging at a succulent rodent, and descended with the prize in its mouth.

“Wow! That was so easy!” Herbert said. He admired the shimmering badge with light piercing two tiny fang holes. “I can’t believe I didn’t think of that sooner. I must be an idiot.”

Beatrix noted the gracious absence of the pronoun ‘we’ in the statement, and accepted it as a form of gratitude, knowing Herbert. “It’s a little tough to get used to, isn’t it?” she said.

“What is?” he asked.

“Magic. Or the whole ‘doing pretty much anything your imagination can come up with’ aspect of it. It makes you wonder why any of us still have problems left to solve.” She became pensive. It was the type of remark that often kick-started an inner soliloquy. Herbert wasn’t about to wait around for it.

“Hey, it all comes down to ability, just like anything else. Practice makes perfect. Those better at magic get more of what they want than those who suck. And even in a perfect world, where everyone used magic perfectly and got everything they wanted, people’s desires are always

at odds. So if one guy gets everything he wants, it means some other guy is getting a raw deal because of it. There's no such thing as a utopian society, I don't care how many dancing monkeys or magical feather dusters or enchanted kazoos you're packing."

"You think so?" she asked, but the question betrayed her own agreement with the remark. On some occasions she reflected on the unexpected parallels between her own thought process and Herbert's. She'd always considered cynicism and pragmatism to be cornerstones of her worldview. But Herbert seemed to take it to a different level.

"Yeah. Absolutely. Anyway, speaking of getting things we want... How about you get us some more badges with your cool snake trick? If Thundleshick thinks three badges are impressive, wait 'til he sees, like, fifty."

As the lively cord-snake went on an all-you-can-bite badge spree, Beatrix presented a casual change in subject. "So, I'm going to go see Grant today. To get Russet's medication."

"Whoa, check these ones out!" Herbert was like a kid in a candy store, fixated on the windfall of vibrant badges. He ogled one bearing an iconic depiction of a unicorn with musical notes levitating from its open mouth.

She continued. "I'll be taking the doll to find him, wherever he is."

Herbert remained engrossed. He felt like he'd found a way to crack a Vegas slot machine. "Ok."

"I guess you're going to see Thundleshick with all these badges, then?"

"That's the plan. Carmen told me how to get to his castle. Speaking of which, she's made herself scarce lately. Wonder what she spends all day doing in this dull place..."

"I was sort of wondering that myself. Anyway, I imagine it'll be a long hike to his castle. I was thinking we could do something like this. I'll go get the medicine and come right back. Then you could take the... well, one of the sub-dolls, for lack of a better word. That way you could instantly travel back here. It might come in handy if you get into trouble."

"That sounds..." Herbert was mystifying over a badge bearing a crank-operated wire whisk, and a plump udder. "That sounds like a pretty good idea."

Herbert cradled the heap of badges to his chest and beamed with the pride of a new father. “Thanks a lot, Beatrix. That was awesome. It’s amazing none of those idiot campers ever thought to do something like this.”

“Maybe there was some kind of code of conduct against it. Like a scout’s honor thing. Or maybe they were just afraid of having their hands chewed off.”

With that, the copy of Hook cracked, disintegrating into plastic bits as the slot snapped shut. The machine was briefly agitated, but quickly settled back into the dull purr of its slumber.

“So...” Herbert asked conversationally. “How is Russet, anyway?”

If there were invisible elastic bands holding up her facial expression, it was as if they’d suddenly been cut.

Herbert watched the doll, formerly red and held by Beatrix, now blue and hovering in midair. It fell onto her bed.

He slouched onto the bed next to the freshly-teleported doll. It seemed to him as if it should be emanating steam from the trans-dimensional journey, maybe like the DeLorean from *Back to the Future* does just after Marty gets back from dicking around with his parents’ prom in the 1950s. He looked around uncomfortably. He’d never seen Beatrix’s room, and it was an odd feeling being left there by himself. She was such a private person, he couldn’t imagine she would be thrilled leaving anyone alone with her stuff. This, more than anything, told him that she did not intend to be gone long. Maybe a few seconds, even.

He’d had no intention of snooping in any case. Snooping in a girl’s room struck him as a low-reward, high-risk scenario. On the one hand, you might find exciting artifacts quite mysterious to the male universe, such as peculiar clasps and instruments for channeling long hair in certain ways, or cryptic products for which absorbency is a touted virtue. Herbert just wasn’t interested. But when it came to articles in plain view, he thought it was hard to classify those items as contraband. In the same way that it was a stretch to say that scooting down the bed a couple feet to get a better look at them could be considered snooping.

Herbert was surprised to see the doodles. But to be fair, he was surprised at the very notion of artistic inclination in any human being. It might even be speculated that his curmudgeonly lack of creativity could be to blame for his impotence with magic. Unfortunately, Herbert wasn't quite creative enough to make this postulation himself.

The more he looked, the more he found the sketches charming. There was something innocent and unassuming about them. They were the byproduct of a quiet, idle girl simply trying to pass the time, not meant for any kind of consumption outside her own. Though each drawing was scattered haphazardly on the pages and seemingly unrelated to each other, Herbert found they all told a story together. It was a tale of a dashing boy with a gun and an eye patch, his trusting subordinates, and a myriad of whimsical creatures for them to study, tame, conquer, and in all likelihood, slaughter, for the bountiful riches and magical lore they might supply. Herbert smirked as he turned the page.

But on this page, the story took an abrupt and disturbing turn.

It was not a drawing at all. It was a black and white photocopied image of himself, mingling with text. It plainly listed personal information about him, such as his blonde hair color and blue eye color, and some less complete information, such as his unknown date of birth, his unknown social security number, and his unknown place of residence. Herbert felt his fist tighten around the crinkling piece of paper.

"Beatrix..." he hissed, again invoking his Seinfeld-angry-with-Newman impression.

He didn't know what this document meant, or why exactly it made him mad, but he was certain that she was being dishonest with him from the start. And the more his fist tightened and the more he paced the room, the more dishonest she became in his mind. He stopped and stared at the doll on the bed.

"Alright, you want me to take one of these dolls? You got it." He opened the blue doll. He then removed the smaller doll inside, and as he'd seen Beatrix do before, split it into an identical red doll and blue doll. He put the drawings and the document back on the small table, along with the newly-created red doll. He pocketed the blue doll, and left the two halves of its larger parent lying on the bed.

He left the room, and proceeded to the lowest point in the fort, per Carmen's instructions.
Уровень 37. Nobody knew what that meant, or how to pronounce it.

With the sunrise over Jivversport, the ludicrous hidden bird population cracked the silence. Samantha watched the cobblestones as they passed beneath her. Her weary face relaxed into a more satisfied expression. There was one. Then another. She'd recognize that trail anywhere. Those were Simon's bread crusts.

What did she tell him? Keep a spare crust in reserve at all times, in case of emergencies. She felt proud of her younger brother.

The trail led her into the cellar of a deteriorating, sinking stone building. Simon's tenacity in maintaining the trail surprised her. She slogged through the black water of the murky catacombs, but became silent when she heard voices ahead. She crouched behind something that looked like a crumbling, bearded statue.

Terence shot a humorless glance towards Simon. "The pieces cannot move backwards."

"Uh-huh! It can when it is a king!" Simon said, leaning forward to make his move. The rope tethering him to a statue tightened in resistance.

"That is not a king. A beetle used to king one of my pieces recently crawled on to one of yours," Terence explained. It did not sound like the first such explanation in the course of the game.

"Really? Which one?"

"That one there. The curled up grub."

"That was your grub? I thought it was mine!"

Terence exhaled over the checkerboard drawn onto the floor with a piece of white stone. It was frustrating enough handling a hyperactive orphan boy without also having to manage the ambiguities of a game played with an assortment of stones, grubs, and lethargic beetles. In retrospect, the whole exercise seemed incredibly stupid, since he could have just magically created

a fine checkerboard set. However, Simon's enthusiasm in gathering up the ingredients for street checkers had preempted the thought.

Samantha breathed harder at the sight of her captive brother. She removed the shiny marble from her pocket, and lobbed it into the darkness behind the crustacean guard. Clicks echoed from unseen stonework.

Terence about-faced with a terse snort. "I'll be right back. Do not move the game pieces. I will know if they are different."

"What if they move by themselves?"

Terence scuttled away to investigate. Simon shrugged, and mindlessly picked up a beetle and some sort of larval cocoon. He crashed them together as if they were kamikaze aircraft. "Pchoo, pchoo! Pshhh! Pow, pchoo! Pch—huh?"

"Shh! Keep quiet, Simon!" Samantha whispered as she untied the rope.

"Hi, sis! You found my crusts! Hey, do you want to play a game with me and mister horsey crab?"

"No, Simon. We have to go. Don't you realize you've been captured by a rogue?"

"A rogue?"

"Yes! Now hurry, before he sees us!"

"Ok. But first I have to get something. It belongs to mister Grant." Simon squirmed out of the loosened rope. He grabbed the red doll.

The two children froze at the terrible sound rumbling from the darkness. It sounded like a deep, brooding whinny. Samantha grabbed Simon's shirt collar. "Run!"

"Why can't orphans leave behind a sensible trail?" Grant lamented. "Like fixed markers. An arrow drawn on a wall, or string tied to a post. Anything that doesn't get blown around by the wind or eaten by birds would be fine."

Grant scoured the pavement for signs of a dwindling trail, cursing his orphan tracking abilities. His nautical partners supplied little help. “Is that a crust there, mate?” Daniel said, spotting a fleck of white near a gutter.

“I think it’s just a pebble,” said Grant, who suddenly sprinted towards a flock of bobbing pigeons. “Hey! Shoo! Get away from that bread!” The feathered pack of diseased creatures scattered into the air. Grant found the vacated pavement empty.

He threw up his hands. “Where would you guys be if you were a couple of lost orphans?”

“Couldn’t say, mate. Ye can be sure though there’re more places to get lost beneath the streets than above.”

“I was afraid of that. So do you have a map of this place I can look at?”

Daniel made a face like he’d just walked in on his own surprise party. It was one topic sure to get a pirate fired up, sort of like asking an avid stamp collector if he happened to have anything kind of interesting or unusual that one might put on an envelope. “Do I have maps, ye ask? Do I ev...”

“What’s she looking at?” Grant cut him off. Nemoira was looking through her telescope down an empty street. She lowered it from her eye.

“Do you see something?” asked Grant.

Her gaze was fixed. “Regrettably, you may have what you’re looking for soon.”

“What do you mean?” Grant walked to her vantage, and saw nothing. A crestfallen Daniel was putting rolls of yellowed maps back into his satchel.

The ground shook. At the end of the empty street, smoke rose from the source of the explosion. Dust from the ancient buildings around them was shaken loose, sprinkling gently on the ground. The glass storefront to a Coldstone Creamery® shattered.

Grant looked at Nemoira decisively. “This way, then.”

A four storey brownstone building sailed upward like a rocket, riding above its trail of crumbling brick, ash, and fire. It reversed direction and plummeted. It crushed the hood of a vacant gas station, disintegrating into a textured cloud of gray. The blast knocked the orphans to the ground. They picked themselves up and resumed their frantic flight.

Terence scuttled with a terrific velocity for such a small creature, much the way the speed of an ant is considered tremendous when scale is taken into account. He walked up walls, across roofs, and underneath awnings upside-down. One claw opened, cradling a swelling ball of fire. The projectile obliterated a building placed in his path. His red eyes momentarily wandered into the sky as a flock of birds decided a different preening location might be in order. As he did so, the upper half of a museum was sawed off diagonally by ocular lasers. The ornate roof slid down the sliced slope, then collapsed into the structure beneath.

“We’ve done it now, Samantha,” Simon huffed. “I should have stayed to finish the game with the horsey. Now he’s mad!”

“Keep... (huff...) running... (huff...) I told you he was a... (huff...) rogue!”

Behind them, a high-pitched noise grew to a crescendo. It was an otherworldly neigh, the kind you’d expect from the great black steed mounted by a warlord commanding an unholy army. Windows exploded from the sonic assault. The façade to a stretch of row houses leaned forward under its brunt.

Samantha skidded to a stop in front of an alleyway entrance. “Simon, turn here!”

The children bounded through the winding alleys, dipping into cellar windows, out back doors, down sewer grates, and up to the street again. These were the standard alleyway evasion tactics of a practiced street urchin. They took to it as if fleeing from a red-faced vendor after pilfering a loaf of bread. Terence’s path of destruction was inexorable, though. They knew soon there’d be no alleys left through which to wend.

Simon and his burning lungs were about to complain to his sister, when he felt something jostle in his hand. It was the doll. It twitched, and then again. He dropped the doll to the floor of the dim alley. “Oh, no! Samantha, help! I need to protect that!”

Samantha looked up at the tall walls squeezing the alley, feeling no more confident in their permanence than if they were theater props. “Forget about it, won’t you? Let’s go!”

Simon opened his mouth. The doll was no longer red. Nor was it on the ground. It was now blue, and cupped in Beatrix’s hands. She stood there processing her new surroundings. And her new company.

“Simon?” she said.

“Beatrix! It is you! I knew it!”

Samantha’s disbelieving eyes showed signs of tears. She ran to Beatrix and hugged her around the waist. “We knew you’d come to save us.”

“Um...” Beatrix started, nonplussed. “I’m happy to see you guys too. But what the heck are you doing here?”

“We’re running away from the horsey crab rogue,” answered Simon.

“The what?”

“Yes, we have to go now. He is ruining the village, and he is very dangerous!” Samantha warned.

It did seem there were signs of trouble. There was a sulfurous smell in the hazy alley. There was a growing rumbling, as though they stood over a subway train rolling beneath. She couldn’t have known it was the sound of structurally weakened buildings collapsing nearby. And she couldn’t have known that the source of this destruction was now clicking through the alley towards them. It stood no higher than her shins.

“What’s that?” Beatrix asked, with understandable innocence.

“That’s him! Oh, Beatrix, please! We should run away!” warned Samantha.

“Really? It doesn’t look that dangerous,” she said, but instantly felt foolish for blundering onto such famous last words.

“He is chasing me, Beatrix!” Simon pulled at her garments.

“No, son,” Terence said. “You have nothing to worry about. I’m not chasing you any longer. I am chasing her.” His eyes glowed like red laser pointers in the direction of Beatrix. She inched backwards.

“Oh crap.”

Herbert took a final moment to look around before climbing down the iron ladder into dark well. The chamber was enormous, enclosed by smooth concrete walls curving to form a domed ceiling. The concrete was tinted with layers of caked-on muck, perhaps a kind of algae. The saturation of muck ended at a blurry horizontal line several dozen feet above the floor. To Herbert, this was evidence that the chamber had been filled with water. Above this line was a label in very large, faded lettering which said “Уровень 37”. Herbert couldn’t read Cyrillic, but presumed the word roughly translated to “level”.

He held the hand rail, and backed on to the iron ladder. The pillowcase tied to his holster swung behind him and dangled into the darkness. Inside was a flashlight, a bottle of orange soda, an assortment of dubiously-gotten merit badges, and a crude map to Thundleshick’s castle based on Carmen’s instructions. In his right pocket was the blue sub-doll.

His metallic footsteps echoed against the mossy, dripping stones.

Between gasps, Grant mentally cursed his decision to leave the doll with Simon. He cursed thinking it was a good idea to let it out of his sight. And for that matter (after pausing for another gasp), he cursed allowing that crafty girl to elude him in the first place. He wasn’t sure why his thoughts were being staggered by his struggle for oxygen. Maybe in truth, his mind was out of breath too.

He turned a corner, adjusting his course towards another loud explosion. The pirate counselors kept pace behind him, their fancy metal accessories jangling in their loose clothing with each step.

“Been waitin’ on this for years,” Daniel said with a challenging grin. “High time these Slurpenook scalawags took to our streets for a proper showdown. Their skulkery in shadows has turned my stomach, no less’n the choppy waters of monsoon season.”

As he jogged, Grant marveled at the bottomless supply of nautical aphorisms and “Piratese” peppered throughout Daniel’s casual parlance. Was there a handbook on it somewhere? Daniel unsheathed his shiny dagger and waved it at the sky. Nemoira glanced to her side.

“Daniel, will you please put that away?” she said.

“Nonsense! Best prepare ye for battle, woman. It looks to me as if the villains’re taking us across the south side. If we head for town square, we’d surely cut em’ off!”

Daniel flicked a long braid over his shoulder and blazed a trail into a crooked alley between storefronts.

BANG.

Herbert shut his eye and made a face like he was popping his ears. He hadn’t expected the gunshot to be quite so loud. It seemed the noise had ricocheted around the cramped space bound by the walls of the subterranean cave.

He gave the limp creature a little kick. Its prickly torso and flaccid bat wings tumbled end-over-end down into a narrow underground stream. He shined his flashlight on it. Were those corkscrew teeth? He sighed. They even had a little serration. He thought if one were inclined, it wouldn’t be too difficult to round up an assortment of indigenous animals and cobble together an exceptionally diverse Swiss army knife using the prodigious dental yield.

He pointed the flashlight at the path ahead of him, and tapped it when it flickered. It was supposedly a magic flashlight, since it was retrieved from the same cardboard box of mesmerizing wonders from which he obtained his gun. Maybe the thing was horribly potent. A sort of battery-operated portal for ruthless demigods, the one final piece critical to a cruel magician’s sinister ambition. But Herbert would be damned if he was going to coax any grim enchantments out of the mystical Black & Decker.

It wouldn't be long now before he'd reach a critical juncture on his map. One or two miles, perhaps. What did that say? The things that came from Carmen's fancy peacock feather quill pen were almost as difficult to solve as the things that came from her mouth. They looked like initials.

Ahead, there was an indistinct flapping. The flapping was leathery, like several pairs of flimsy bat wings producing the commotion of haphazard flight. Herbert reached into the pillowcase and retrieved two merit badges. He wadded them up, and shoved one in each ear.

BANG.

BANG.

If Jiversport was dense with the decay of commercial enterprise, then town square was the jewel of economic depression in its crown. Storefronts packed themselves tightly among each other like boxes in an overcrowded warehouse. Some seemed practically inserted into rectangular grooves carved out of ancient, likely historic stone buildings, through either lapse in zoning protocol, or the greed of corrupt civic administrators. Or maybe the venerated artisans centuries ago had intended all along for a Bath and Body Works® to occupy their baroque stone carvings.

Missing letters punctuated the signs of otherwise easily recognized franchises. *Cr//te & Bar//el*®, *Old Na//y*®, *Tac// Be//l*®, to name a few, which by sheer coincidence, were once the frequent shopping haunts of pirate-types. The first two for obvious reasons, to service nautically-themed décor and apparel needs, and the latter-most of course to cater to the legendary zeal for Mexican food shared by all rugged seafarers.

It was quiet. Over distant rooftops, black smoke pooled into the sky, like ink drops into a glass of water, upside-down. Town hall loomed over the square, menacing in its great stature, and in its abundance of gothic fixtures. It seemed to be weighed down by gargoyles and statuary, like a crazy man's coat with too many strange trinkets affixed to it. Grant strained to view the top of the spire. Atop it was a statue of a man in a suit.

The face of the building erupted. An enormous twisted metal javelin punctured it from within, and exited its stone and glass chest. The mangled piece of rollercoaster track thundered into

town square, smashing the non-functional fountain. It halted, still enough for Grant and the counselors to see its car still intact and affixed to it, and the Batman emblems decorating the ride.

The rest of the building came down.

The party maneuvered in time to evade the tipping spire and its statue. The spire was demolished on the cobblestones, making a sound like a huge payload of porcelain dishware hitting the ground. The statue too was shattered. Grant, crouching against the cloud of dust, could make out a centuries-worn engraving on its base. It was an eagle, and the letters “//o//al////////aga//”. Grant began to wonder if anything in this village was spelled in its entirety.

Through the dust-choked void left by town hall, three unimposing figures fled into the square, stumbling over the stones with all the grace of baby waterfowl. Daniel and Nemoira readied their weapons, but eased their grips. It was the orphans, followed by a taller, slender girl.

Beatrix’s expression of surprise matched Grant’s, though amplified through the adrenaline of flight. “There you are!” she said, winded.

“Beatrix...” he said. “I see you’ve figured out the doll, finally.”

Through her look of urgency, there was a hint of culpability. She couldn’t tell if he was being sarcastic, or just naïve. “Oh. Yeah, I guess I got the hang of it.”

“What the hell is going on here?” he asked, preemptively gripping his sword’s hilt.

“I’ve come back to tell you I found your friend. But that can obviously wait. We really should get out of here.”

“Who?” Grant said absentmindedly. “Oh, right, right. Russet. How is he?”

“Grant, the pirate was right,” Samantha spoke up. “Simon was kidnapped by a rogue! I helped him escape, but now he’s furious with us. We have to go!”

“Uh-huh!” Simon affirmed, as if vouching for something by which he’d sworn all his life, such as a quality panhandling mug, or a reliable brand of bootblacking brush.

“A rogue?” Grant’s sword was already unsheathed. “You mean the little horse-thing?”

“Yes!” Simon said. “But he does not make a small whinny at all. I would say he makes a very big whinny.”

“None of this matters.” Beatrix had decided to take charge. “Everybody come here and touch the doll, quickly. It’s time to go.” Her hands shook as she prepared to operate the doll. But then it was gone. It was riding a small, hot projectile, whipping this way and that until settling into the town hall’s remains.

Through the fog of demolished architecture, there was something crawling over the rubble into the square. It was the least imposing form yet.

Herbert waded out of the knee-deep water onto a dry landing of rock at the foot of a staircase. He climbed the stairs. There was an open doorway in the rock wall facing him. A hanging lantern flickered the shape of the doorway on to the ground with warm light.

With his hand on his sidearm, he passed through the door and found himself looking up right away. There was another metal ladder, this one of studier construction. It traveled up a small tunnel a great distance. To the side of the ladder was another door, just as rugged-looking as the one he’d passed through. Adjacent to both doors was an old wooden sign with hand-carved letters.

◀ F.C.

▶ T.C.

▲ W.H.

The left arrow pointed in the direction he came from, so he presumed it stood for “Fort Crossnest”. He gathered “Thundleshick’s Castle” was to the right. This guess was reinforced by the fact that climbing a ladder was not in Carmen’s instructions. Progressing through the other door seemed like the logical choice.

The “W.H.” left him unsettled, though. On another occasion, he might have chalked up to coincidence the fact that the letters were also his initials. But given recent events, not the least of which was discovering the unusual video recording, he wasn’t sure what to think about it.

Cool, musty air poured from the vertical tunnel. Something was drawing him up there. He didn’t know if it was mere curiosity, or something more insidious. He started to feel ill at the thought of what might be up there. Maybe it was inevitable. It might be his inescapable peril. Or worse yet, it might hold his destiny—a threshold to even grander adventures.

Without dwelling on it for another moment, he headed through the door, towards “T.C.” If all went according to plan, adventure would be a thing of the past. A blemish on an otherwise spotless record, nothing more.

“It’s just as I told ye. A wretched Slurpenook agent. He’s probably after our heads for a new badge from his dark master. Mark my words!” Daniel flailed his silver dagger and made as if to charge the creature. Nemoira restrained him by the loose end of a colorful kerchief.

Terence rolled his eyes. “Yes, that’s what I want. A merit badge. All glory to Fort Slurpenook and whatnot. You there, pirate boy. Do I look like an imbecile to you?”

Daniel wasn’t sure how to respond.

Terence proceeded. “All of you disperse. There’s no need to bring harm to yourselves. I’ll have a few words with the girl, and that’s all.”

“The problem is,” Grant summoned his most nonchalant voice. “I owe her one, so I can’t let that happen. Also, you’ll have to pardon me if I suspect you have more in mind than polite conversation.”

He had the look of one who wasn’t going to hold anything back this time. He had a feeling he couldn’t afford to.

He raised the sword, now burning as if being tempered by a blacksmith. The huge broken stones from the town hall rose into the air at once, levitating and spreading to fill space evenly. They too began to glow bright red, as their hard edges softened, appearing gelatinous. Each stone

soon became a globule of molten rock, trimmed with fire. With one motion, Grant brought the full volley towards the tiny target.

Terence's deceptively nimble claws deflected each piece towards the skeletal remains of town hall, reconstructing the building out of red-hot bricks. The building stood strikingly similar to the way it had before, though now smoldering at hundreds of degrees, and wobbling under the suspect rigidity of molten rock. The building sagged as it cooled. The final missiles, the blazing statue bits, were reassembled and carefully positioned on top of the spire.

As Terence was distracted with the process, like crowning a Christmas tree with an angel, Grant brought his sword down on the small adversary. The furious finishing move, however, was halted; the sword was immobile between pinching claws, as if stuck in stone.

Grant felt his internal organs rattle from the concussive force. He flew backwards through the air, riding the front of a mighty sonic neigh.

"Sam, Simon! Help me find it! Hurry!" Beatrix and the orphans scurried to retrieve the doll in the fresh absence of the clattering debris.

At a distance from the fray, Daniel's dagger quivered in his hand. They were not the jitters of fear, but of resolution.

"What are you doing?" Nemoira asked. But she already knew. Her expression pleaded with him to reconsider.

"Lass, there comes a time when a man's got cause to leave his blood on the deck." His dagger traced steady, wide circles in the air. "Ye'll understand, one day."

The sky condensed with swirling, black clouds, flickering with sporadic pockets of lightning. The black whirlpool spread, projecting darkness onto the melee below. The combatants paused, craning upward at the development. Something lurched from the eye of the dark storm, something large, like a ghost ship emerging from fog. It was a great trident, maybe the one wielded by Neptune himself.

The trident stopped. It slowly retracted itself, back into the darkness. Just like that, the clouds dissipated.

There were two small holes in Daniel's forehead. Piercing the holes were two steady beams of red light. The lasers traced back to their sources, each from a small horse nostril. Daniel's eyes rolled up, revealing white. He pitched backwards, dead.

Nemoira's cheeks were already wet. She sank next to the body, and covered his eyes.

"I got it!" Samantha yelled, waving the doll.

"Good work!" Beatrix said, rejoining Samantha. "Everyone, gather around the doll, quickly."

Grant lumbered to his feet. Each organ felt like it was individually masticated by a large herbivore, and then sewn back into his torso. He hobbled towards Beatrix, but the hobble became an urgent sprint. He dove, knocking her to the ground. The flaming, severed head of the town hall statue scorched past them, detonating moments later.

He looked at her through a pained grimace, though his eyes nevertheless appeared to be asking politely if she was alright.

"Thanks," she said. "I'm ok. Here, let's go already." She held out the doll. The hands of Grant, Simon, Samantha and Nemoira all found the doll. Beatrix twisted it.

Her lower lip dropped a bit.

She twisted it again. And again.

"Herbert!" she hissed, unwittingly invoking her own Seinfeld impression.

It had been hours since he'd removed the doll from its mother, and its red sibling, so to speak. Herbert held the glossy blue item as he plodded up the absurd quantity of stairs.

He felt guilty. Maybe Beatrix had a good reason for the deception. Whatever she was up to, perhaps it didn't warrant being stranded indefinitely with some guy named Grant. After all, wasn't she only trying to help Russet? It was more than he could say he'd ever try to do.

The stairs were shallow, and offered generous room for the feet. He noted what they lacked in height, they made up for in contributing to the most gratuitously long staircase in the universe. The stairs spiraled lazily and gradually upward, presumably to the surface where he would find the castle. He'd already been walking for miles, all upstairs. He was soaked in sweat, and had left the empty orange soda bottle littered somewhere around mile two.

He looked at the doll again. He considered for a moment returning with it and putting it back together.

But he'd come too far already. And soon he'd be home.

As he thought this, daylight ahead greeted him. The closer he came to the opening, the more he could make out what looked to be the forms of a castle. Though it seemed the forms were bleary, and somehow unaccountable for how they were attached to the larger structure. Maybe it was just a foggy day.

Though he was tapping one of his little exoskeletal legs on a cobblestone, Terence's demeanor was otherwise patient. He wore a big smile on his elastic horse face.

His audience looked wholly defeated, with the exception of Simon, who was distracted by a lame pigeon bobbing around in circles nearby.

Terence's claw became malleable and soft, and bloated into a plump tentacle, complete with suction cups. It wrapped around Beatrix's neck, and lifted her wriggling body into the air. Grant felt for his missing sword, no longer in its sheath. Nemoira extended her telescope. It shimmered with magic as she readied herself to wield it like a baseball bat.

Terence's smile dissolved. Short puffs from his nose became longer, deeper. Soon little streams of sulfurous vapor spilled from them, and the puffs were accented by clouds of flame. Nemoira's grip loosened around her weapon. Her posture slackened. She knew they were goners.

A singsongy, metallic voice broke the atmosphere of impending demise.

"Tender me answers, or those of their ilk,"

“To the riddle I’ve sung, should you give it a listen!”

The puzzled group looked around. Terence sniffed back and forth. There was no one to be found nearby. He again focused on his captives, drawing a deep, almost serene breath.

He released a great cloud of nasally-produced fire. But as quickly as it expanded, destined to engulf the party, it had shrunk into nothing. It was sucked into a small point a few yards from Terence, close to the ground, swallowed.

Swallowed, literally, by a hefty can of soup with a jagged mouth and eyes. Pleased with itself, the can embraced the self-conscious posture of a thespian.

“Tender meat bathed in an ocean of milk,”

“The soft portions sprung from its carapace prison,”

“They temptingly swim, slathed in buttery silk,”

“Rescued by spoon should the need be arisen!”

Grant coughed. He wiped a few drops of blood onto his sleeve. Nobody spoke. Aside from Simon’s silly smile of gradually dawning recognition, the scene resembled a dining party which, upon receiving the bill, found it to contain not a tabulation of menu items, but an array of crudely scribbled phalluses.

“Mister Soup!” Simon waved.

“Yes, undersized man? What is the answer is what you would care to supply me with?”

“Lofthter... fithk,” said the voice from above, currently being strangled by a tentacle. Lentil repostured himself so his eyes pointed upward.

“Yes, what was that? What solution is it you wish to give is what you...”

She interrupted, loosening the grip of the slimy collar, raising her head up. “Is it... lobster bisque??”

Lentil’s face scrunched with delight. He began a self-satisfied jig.

“Uh... was she right?” asked Grant. A small huff came from Terence’s mouth, which was hanging wide open.

It was so fast, they could barely follow it. Maybe only a flash from the can’s metal reflecting the sunlight. The tentacle was severed by a razor-sharp mouth. Beatrix fell, choking. The cylinder, midair, flipped and came down hard on the small, recently amputated creature. He stomped on Terence repeatedly. Terence protested, muttering at the unintelligent pest.

CLONK CLONK CLONK.

“Chilis of fury, chipotles of doom!”

“Stop.”

“Bring scalds to the tongue, pains that you’ll hope-end!”

“No more rhymes about... ow... soup, please.”

“It fills me with worry you’ll have to consume...”

“Relent with this idiocy at once.”

“This can of five-alarm whoopass you’ve opened!”

“OW.”

CLONK CLONK CLONK.

Lentil halted his clonking assault, and focused his eyes as if narrowing upon a bee that had landed on his nonexistent nose. If being cross-eyed made him appear any less dignified, it was only by a smidgeon.

The air in front of his face warped, like a spatial pinch. And then he released it, along with some magnificent pent-up magical energy with a POP.

The small lobster-form hurtled miles through the air, towards a distant mountain range. Everyone sat in silence, watching the dumb can.

Part IV

Herbert didn't know what to make of what he was looking at. It was recognized as a castle easily enough, in the same way that if you viewed one through a prism, you'd likely be able to guess it was a castle. A spire floating here, an archway drifting there, a winding stone staircase meandering over there—the astute ear can tell when a building is attempting to speak Castlish, even if the structure itself seems far from fluent in the tongue.

However one decided to categorize the thing, it was vast, and somewhat nauseating for Herbert to look at. He monitored a particularly active tower looming above. There was no clear way it connected with the rest of the structure, save a bit of indistinct stonework boasting dubious spatial properties. It lurched forward, tipping slowly, as if destined to fall forward. It then quietly disappeared, as if dissolving into space. Numerous (literally) flying buttresses jockeyed to fill its place.

The only features that appeared to be stationary, luckily, were the grand doors of the front entrance. If this building could be said to have a formal “front”, that is. Locating the front was a task similar to identifying the corner of the Oval Office (a challenge which some former presidents would have their less intelligent visiting diplomats undertake).

Herbert went in.

The streets of Jivversport had regained their characteristic void of activity. All was silent but for the footsteps of a beleaguered troop, and a metallic clonking on cobblestones bringing up the rear.

Beatrix looked to her side at the pirate counselor. She'd been leading them through the streets, but had barely said a word since the catastrophic town square melee.

“Maybe we should say something to her,” Beatrix said softly to Grant, who walked on her other side. “She looks miserable about losing her friend.”

“Maybe.” He thought a moment. “But I'm pretty sure that's how she always is.”

“It's ok,” Nemoira said. “I'm not upset about Daniel.”

“Oh?” Beatrix said.

“It’s fine.” She cracked a faint smile. It might as well have been an eruption of euphoria by contrast. “I know where he is.”

“Miss Pirate?” Simon said, while channeling every ounce of his orphan resolve into the task of avoiding the gaps between cobblestones. “Where are we going?”

“If we’re to get to Fort Crossnest, by sea is the fastest way.”

“Yay!”

This was news to the others as well, but then, they wondered why it should be. What other means of travel would a pirate be likely to offer, or anyone, for that matter, who was in the process of leading them to the town’s seaport?

Dormant hulks of metal and wood littered the shallow waters. Conspicuous among them, even before Nemoira guided them to it, was a smaller vessel, burdened with an overabundance of colorful sails. What *The Rubicund Wayfare* lacked in certification from a competent maritime engineer, it made up for with the nod from an eccentric interior decorator.

They boarded the ship.

Thundleshick’s castle wasn’t the type of place you wanted to get lost in. Luckily for Herbert, his short, knuckle-dragging guide led the way through rambling halls with an earnest diligence, if also a gruff temperament.

Upon entering the castle, he’d been met with a grand hall. Grand was just a word affixed to it though, much the way any lower-income household technically possessed a master bedroom. It sort of resembled Count Dracula’s gothic, capaciousy-built sewer. Lounging about were several dozen monkey bellhops. Their little red vests and hats were, putting it kindly, gloriously unlaundered. Through the shrill hoots of primal intimidation, one monkey calmly separated itself from the pack and gestured for Herbert to follow.

As the simian led Herbert on what had proved to be the beginnings of an epic journey through the dark, pungent halls, he had to wonder. Had Thundleshick been expecting him? Had he appointed this taciturn, mite-ridden sentry to lead Herbert to him? What plot was the perverse old bastard hatching now?

The monkey slowed, then planted himself with the stoic discipline of the Queen's personal guard. It raised its furry paw and pointed. Herbert looked into the dark corner he was being shown, squinting to make it out. There was a lump. A very smelly, dark lump, of not-so-mysterious origin. It was a pile of fresh primate feces, one over which the small ape had clearly invested some amount of personal importance.

Herbert slouched. He supposed, now that he was officially lost, he'd have to find the campmaster himself. All wasn't hopeless, though. For starters, he could follow the odor that smelled even worse than the monkey shit.

The salty breeze was refreshing. It whipped Beatrix's long hair about as she looked into the abnormally blue sky. Impossibly puffy clouds levitated, not high above the ocean. They all occupied distinct shapes, doing the lion's share of the work for the daydreaming sky-gazer. One of them looked like a white sculpture of a bearded southern gentleman holding a pale and corralling poultry. Another was a giant wearing a tunic of leaves, lovingly tending to a field of produce. And yet another was a smiling cherubic man holding what looked to be a small grill. The man was either Buddha, or possibly former heavyweight boxer George Forman.

She began to realize these weren't so much randomly whimsical manifestations so much as strategically placed advertisements. The effect was nevertheless mesmerizing. Beatrix now and then had to remind herself that this was in fact quite a magical place, even if most of the time, nothing all that magical was happening, and when there was, its application tended to be a bit crass.

She looked back down at what she was doing, which was making unsuccessful attempts at healing Grant's wounds. Grant, too, was looking skyward, but with a more pointed objective. With one hand he pulled on his eyelid, and with the other, gingerly poked about the iris to remove his contact lens.

“Anyway, yeah, it just started getting so frustrating after a while,” Beatrix said, returning to her train of thought.

“Huh?”

“Russet. The way he was acting. He obviously has a serious problem, which is why I came looking for you.”

“Oh. Tell me about it. But believe me, just because you give him his pills doesn’t mean he’ll actually take them. He’s an awfully stubborn fella.” Grant paused to sneer at the small malleable lens stuck to his fingertip. “I think these things are shot. They’re filthy. It’s a shame he’s not around. Cleaning things magically is sort of his specialty. I’m afraid I’d just butcher the prescription in the process.”

Beatrix strained her face as she made another futile effort with her ring. “Damn. I’m still not having any luck with healing magic. I guess there’s another way Russet would be useful now. If he were feeling better, I mean...”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll be alright,” he said, poking at his sore ribcage.

She reclined, relaxing on the deck of the ship. The cacophony of busily flapping sails overhead was hard to ignore. Through the racket was the giggling of orphans and the various noises particular to a living can of soup. The three were playing some sort of game on the other side of deck, and even from a distance it seemed clear the children were having trouble getting the soup to understand the rules, or anything not soup-related for that matter. To the other side was Nemoira, leaning against a rail. She watched Beatrix and Grant with a sullen expression.

“Why is she looking at us like that?” Beatrix whispered to Grant. He shrugged, still preoccupied with his contacts.

“My apologies,” Nemoira spoke up. “It’s the curse.”

“What?”

“I believe you both share the curse of the Mobius Slipknot.”

Grant stopped what he was doing. With one stinging eye shut, he glared at Nemoira. “What do you know about that?”

She was silent for a moment, reluctant to continue. She then explained, “It is a type of locket, of complicated design and purpose. When assembled and wielded improperly, as I suspect it was, it can have effects on the memory.”

“What kind of effects?” Beatrix asked.

She turned to look at the ocean. “If you can’t remember, then you may surmise the answer yourself. It’s probably best you don’t know, anyway.”

Beatrix found her instinct to remain quiet on the subject overwhelming. But as she ruminated on the locket, and her resolution to be more forthright about things, she found the gumption to confess.

“I... I think I have this... Mobius Slipknot. Or, part of it at least.”

Grant’s look of surprise was compellingly genuine. What his face could not conceal, though, was his intense interest. “You do? Where?”

“It’s back at Crossnest, somewhere safe. Actually, to be honest, this was the other reason I wanted to see you. I thought you might know something about it.”

“Maybe.” He stood up, and said as casually as he could through his wince of discomfort, “I’ll take a look at it when we get there.”

“It should be no time at all,” Nemoira said. “We’re here.”

Off the bow, a rocky landmass approached. The ship neared a cave entrance.

Grant frowned at his used-up contacts, then flicked them into the ocean. With little pleasure, he pulled from its case a pair of stylish black-rimmed glasses. He put them on with no less trepidation than if they were the mandatory goggles preceding a punitive pie to the face.

After spending hours wondering if he was getting lost in the unpleasant castle, Herbert was now sure of it. The room was a dead end in his fruitless search. It was a cramped hovel with a low ceiling. Just a sliver of daylight pierced a murky window. Bowls and plates supporting ancient food

products covered the floor. Crates of miscellaneous knickknacks teetered on heaps of dusty old furniture. It might have served as a storage room, or a garbage room, or both.

Or, Herbert suddenly thought, it might serve as a bedroom. In the corner was a damp mattress, with one rumpled sheet and an uncovered pillow. Judging by the torso-shaped depression, it looked recently used. Herbert became wary. He looked around, his assessment of the room becoming more of precaution than curiosity.

He backed into a crate, jangling its wares. Something familiar caught his eye. It was a ceramic frog atop the crate. He was sure he'd seen it before. Other items about the room were familiar as well, such as a crystal swan on a nearby shelf, and a broken cuckoo clock on the floor. He'd be damned if that "2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney: Women's Gymnastics Competition" DVD didn't ring a bell, too.

He became aware there was someone in the room with him. This awareness was mostly experienced in the nasal passages. He dropped the DVD case.

The cheerful voice spoke. "Ah! A fellow patron of the female athletics. A firm thigh and supple rump are guaranteed to stir the competitive sprit, don't you agree?"

The strange remark was accompanied by a number of agile motions from a pair of unkempt eyebrows, and a quantity of winks not usually attempted by someone who hadn't recently suffered a stroke.

Herbert's open mouth slowly became a thin, irascible line.

"Thundleshick."

Russet's slouch was so pronounced, the end of his cape mopped the floor of the corridor. It had been hours since he'd heard from anyone in the fort. Had they all ditched him? Was his company really that difficult to bear? Such rhetorical questions were the bread and butter of those practiced in the art of self-loathing. He shook his head viciously and made swatting motions at his hair in a seemingly involuntary act of repudiation.

Even Carmen was nowhere to be seen. But then, no one was really sure where she lived in this labyrinthine facility. For such a vivacious personality, she guarded her privacy well. He shuffled in the direction he surmised might hold her quarters, but wasn't holding out much hope.

Behind a door, there was a noise. He stopped, and heard nothing. The hair on his neck stood on end.

[Stop. You. Rucksack.] The sounds chimed in his consciousness.

“What?”

[Let me out of this prison. Free me from this tyrannical wench.]

“Hey...” Russet held his cranium. “Get out of my head!” He waited a moment for the voice to resume, but it didn't. He watched the door with caution. Again, in his mind, there was a swell of thought. A visceral, menacing rumble.

[rrrrrrRRRRRRRRRR...]

With a yelp, Russet turned and fled.

Thundleshick stooped in front of a greasy oven. He was attempting to peddle some of his legendary toadloaf to a reluctant Herbert. It was a sales pitch well-rehearsed, but never perfected. “Are you sure you wouldn't care for some? It's just above room temperature, you'll find.”

“No thanks.”

“You must be eager to stray from the refrigerated ethnic fare you and your bunkmate chums enjoy. Just a nibble...” He offered a tool that sort of looked like a garden trowel. It supported a quivering helping of the pale material.

Herbert slapped it out of his hand. “Enough with the toadloaf business. Why don't we just cut the crap.”

Thundleshick was startled by the outburst, and made a face like he just sat on something that could pop the tire of a monster truck. Herbert went on.

“I don’t like you. You’re some kind of repulsive, magical old man. Ok, so maybe you’re not a wizard. I don’t know what you are. Maybe you’re just a pompous bum who thinks he’s better than everyone else, and who thinks he can keep children hostage for as long as he damn-well pleases, chuckling to himself in his stupid castle like a stupid, smelly jerkoff. What kind of summer camp is this? Where do you get off? Who do you think you are?”

Herbert paused to catch his breath, reddened by his tirade. Thundleshick stood speechless, with a kind of fatherly sympathy in his eyes, as he twirled a bit of his moustache hair between his fingers. Herbert composed himself.

“Anyway, I’m sorry. I just had to get that off my chest. I’m not here to make friends, or kiss your ass, or anything like what all the other campers probably do. I’m here because I just completed like fifty of your idiotic quests, and by my understanding, this more than entitles me to go home.”

He tossed the limp pillowcase into Thundleshick’s arms. As the campmaster peered inside, an expression of unadulterated, childlike glee spread over his face like a rapidly advancing fungus. He was so happy, he began to weep. And then he laughed.

“Boy, this is tremendous! How ever did you collect so many?”

“Well,” Herbert said, dusting off his embellishment cap. “It wasn’t easy. You have no idea how many snoodleflips and blunghumpers I had to shoot to collect those. It was pretty gruesome.”

“This tickles me to no end. Boy... Wizardy Herbert, you must surely have had a wealth of wisdom in your upbringing. I feel I too have been touched by the sagacity of your parents.”

“Yeah, they’re alright, I guess. So what do you say? Is this gonna cut it?”

“Oh, yes, yes, my word. I should say all this entitles you to a stiff reward indeed. One moment...” Thundleshick was suddenly a blur of effluent elderly energy. He scurried to the other side of the room. In his excited haste, he bumped into Herbert, nearly knocking him over.

“Oof... hey, careful.”

Thundleshick’s busy hands upset piles of junk. Herbert quizzically observed the furious search.

“Hey, what are you doing? Can’t you just, you know, wave your wand, or do a dance, and just

transport me home? What are you getting there? Something like a... shooting star I ride back to New Jersey?"

"Yes! Yes!! Ah-ha, here it is, here it is! Been saving it for an occasion just as this one. I only hope you appreciate the amenity as much as those of us for whom chronic nether-regional chafing is a maligned way of life."

Thundleshick beamed as he presented him with the hefty 24-pack of Charmin double-quilted toilet paper.

The Rubicund Wayfare bobbed through the rough waters of the cave passage. The waves were loud in the narrow tunnel, but became silent when the space opened more generously into a cavern. The water was calm, almost like glass, and in the center was a statue. Its pose appeared designed to roust the passions of a patriot, while its face wore a certain severity, the kind ensuring commitment to political and militaristic resolve.

Nemoira stood on the bow, pointing her telescope toward the statue. A beam of light projected from the lens. The statue began to glow, and then turned deep red. The subterranean lake bubbled. The surface of the water lowered.

In Fort Crossnet, a low gurgling sound filled the great chamber labeled "Уровень 37" in weathered paint. The wide circular opening in the floor began to overflow with dark, foamy water. The water level rose to match a hazy line of scummy demarcation on the wall.

From the large tunnel in the chamber, opposite the entrance to the rest of the fort, the ship sailed in.

Herbert was waiting for the punch line he knew would never come. Irony to this man was likely as distant a stranger as a hot shower. Herbert's eye made fierce stabs at the toilet paper, and then at Thundleshick's beaming face. His hand drifted toward his sidearm. Thundleshick's puffy, smile-bolstered cheeks appeared to deflate.

“What’s wrong, boy? If you’re worried I’ve been too generous, think nothing of it. Your valor has been proven beyond question.”

Herbert took a step forward, scowling poisonously at the awarded toiletry. Thundleshick’s eyes moved back and forth, as if following a schizophrenic pendulum.

“Hmm... Boy, this is not the first time you’ve encountered such a luxury, is it? You wouldn’t need... a demonstration of its use, would—”

“No, I sure as hell wouldn’t!” Herbert backhanded the soft, bulky package. It skidded to a stop nearby the small mound of jiggling toadloaf. “Now give me the real prize. I know you can get me out of here. I know you’ve got... powers.”

Thundleshick’s face spread into the smile of a complacent sage. A smile that typically concealed wisdom, but in this case, likely only concealed centuries of dental misery, and wads of meat so large and so old, one of them might be pointed out by a tour guide as the birthplace of a famous 19th century poet. “Ah... I see. I shouldn’t be so surprised to find such pluck in your spirit. Then it’s more you want!”

“No, I don’t want more. I don’t want any Kleenex, or a bottle of Toilet Duck, or any Depends adult undergarments for that matter. I just want you to please... send... me... HOME.”

Thundleshick placed a brown, turd-like finger to his lips and became pensive. His eyes twinkled with a realization. “You... still haven’t seen yet?”

“What? Seen what?”

“Yes, your vision is still impaired. It’s plain as day.”

“What are you talking about?” Herbert became conscious of the eye patch pressing against his left eye socket. He reached up, as if to touch it, but his hand quickly dropped again to the vicinity of his sidearm.

“I believe I have just the thing.” Thundleshick groped within his grisly tunic, producing a small vial. It looked like something a medieval apothecary might keep in great supply. “Take this, young Herbert. It will help you see again.”

Herbert's livid hand snatched it away. He approached the campmaster, becoming more agitated with every gift that had nothing to do with transportation to his house, or at least somewhere in the tri-state area. "I can see just fine. I don't need one of your bogus remedies or stupid elixirs. My eye patch doesn't bother me, and it's my business anyway. Now are you going to send me home, or is this going to get ugly?" Herbert's hand unfastened the securing strap of the holster, and settled lightly on the gun's grip.

Thundleshick took a step back, his brow wrinkling with wretched folds of intimidation. He dwelt on Herbert's bullying tactics, which were enough to cause even a powerful magician to freckle at the advance of a slightly-built, temperamental teen boy. But then, Thundleshick's natural cowardice wasn't to be overlooked, nor was the powerful weapon clinging to the boy's hip.

"I... I believe I can arrange some sort of transport accommodation," Thundleshick stammered. "Could... could you just take a step or two to your right?"

Herbert immediately looked at the floor to his right. "You mean you want me to stand over that little trap door? You must think I'm a complete id—"

"You might want to tuck and roll at the bottom." Thundleshick's smudgy sausage-fingers twiddled furiously as if playing a tiny piano. The small hatch swiftly relocated itself beneath Herbert's feet. There was the sound of wooden shutters snapping open. Everything went dark.

Beatrix climbed one of the many staircases in the jaundiced, ever-flickering light of Fort Crossnest. She was nervous about seeing Russet again. Who knew what he'd gotten himself into while she was away. But whatever trepidation there was, her excitement outweighed it. She was happy to be helping him.

"Grant?" she asked, sort of sheepishly. "Do you think I could take a look at Russet's medication?" Was it petty of her to want to be the bearer of good news? She didn't know. After all, she was the one who went to the trouble of getting it for him. Grant handed it over without a word about it.

Higher up, Russet moped through the corridors, massaging his head. The voices had subsided for now, but only served to leave his own tormented inner voice with the stage to itself,

chewing the scenery like an off-Broadway ham. Shouldn't Beatrix have returned by now? She must have washed her hands of him completely, and he couldn't blame her. He wished he could have seen her at least once more before she disappeared from his life.

He leaned against a wall and slid down to the floor. He took out his wand and gave it a bored examination. He played with it farcically, sneering, as if lampooning an effete orchestra conductor. In his current state of mind, he'd have better luck cajoling magic from a toilet brush (a non-magical one, at least). He felt like an idiot when he thought about his prior gusto with magic, and the way he behaved in general during his fits of exuberance. It disgusted him. Only a complete jackass would act like that. He threw the wand down the hall.

A hand picked it up delicately. The corner of Russet's mouth turned upward slightly. Beatrix smiled back.

"There you are," he said. "It's been... well, I'd lost track of how long!"

"Hey, Russet," she replied. "Yeah, I was gone for longer than I..." She trailed off. Russet was on his feet, approaching with a wide grin. The closer he got, the more apparent it was he was not looking at her, but a step or two to her left. The place where Grant stood.

"Hi, buddy. Good to see you, finally," Grant said wearily, but with a sincere smile. Russet threw his arms around him for an impromptu brotherly hug. Grant returned the gesture, or maybe humored it, as he glanced at Beatrix with look of mild embarrassment.

"Um..." Beatrix began, feeling taken aback by the reception. "I have your pills... if you want them."

"Oh. Many thanks, Bea!" His shimmering eyes flashed at her, then returned to Grant. The two of them were already striking up an animated conversation, presumably as if they'd never parted. Lack of medication aside, Russet appeared to be in a better mood already. As much as she wanted to think so, it was hard to believe this development had anything to do with her.

Herbert felt like he was walking through a poorly kept zoo. The sounds of agitated creatures filled the cavern-like room, a place he assumed was a kind of dungeon. A very loud dungeon.

The menagerie's hootings only became emboldened as the fittest systematically conquered and consumed the weak, and celebrated with the triumphant swelling of throat sacks and flaring of proboscises. Over there, a baboon postured over the broken frame of some kind of iguana. And sitting there atop a suitcase was a beefy tomcat washing itself nearby the remains of something that was optimistically a rat, but more realistically was a Chihuahua judging by the collar.

There was a substantial heap of suitcases and backpacks in which the beasts burrowed tunnels and built whelping nests for their young. Herbert began to suspect it might not be a dungeon so much as a luggage room. And then again, it might not be a luggage room so much as a place serving as dumping grounds for an overabundance of goods confiscated from mistreated children.

This notion gained further plausibility when he encountered a navy blue suitcase. It was the very one he'd surrendered to a helpful simian paw only a few days ago, just moments before being persecuted by large skeletons.

Herbert's heart sped up. There was nothing special in it of course. It was hard to get bent out of shape over parting with a few pairs of socks, and a few reluctantly-purchased tools of the accounting trade. But there was one thing, something he'd thought he was glad to be rid of once and for all. Now, though, his thumping heart suggested otherwise.

He crouched to unzip the suitcase, but noticed he was still clutching the vial thrust into his hand by Thundleshick. He stood up and put it into his jeans pocket. He made a face, feeling around inside the pocket, then checked the other one.

The doll was gone. The bastard picked his pocket.

Herbert looked up into the great, dark void, unable to detect a ceiling, let alone the trap door from which he fell. Who knew how long it would take him to get back to Thundleshick's chamber from here, or if it was even possible in this architecturally capricious castle. There had to be another way. Indeed, from a distant source there was daylight, perhaps an exit to the swampy castle surroundings. At least he might be able to start again from the main entrance.

He sighed, and sifted through the contents of his luggage. He tossed aside a small pocket ledger, moved a neatly folded pair of underwear, and with both hands, hoisted an antique adding

machine, once belonging to his great grandfather, over his head onto the floor behind him, where it broke apart noisily. He stopped.

There it was.

The pages were stained, folded in places. A simple manuscript, bound with black rings. The cover was a plain white piece of paper. It had no title. If it did, it was covered by a black rectangle where the title would be.

One

He'd been plagued by an unsettling obsession with the manuscript for as long as he could remember. He couldn't explain the fascination. Other than the fact that it was littered with black rectangles blotting out parts of the text, it was quite a mundane work of literature.

In fact, it was awful.

Herbert flipped it open and read a random excerpt.

“_____ was astonished! He had never even seen a manticorn before which was half unicorn half mantitee. Although more like mostly mantitee, because it was just a mantitee with a horn. It's blubbery body rolled around playfully in the shallow water beckoning with his big fat flipper. Magic emanated from it's horn, the magic power was so overwhelming. It almost rivaled the power of the fabled _____! He almost fainted but then came to his senses and approached with his hacksaw towards...”

Herbert winced at the copy. He rolled up the manuscript and tucked it into his pocket. He thought about Thundleshick as he tugged on a part of his M9, making a perfunctory locking sound.

The son of a bitch was going to pay.

Russet's mouth had become a runaway locomotive, and all Grant and Beatrix could do was stay off the tracks. "Mind you, it's hard to find anything in this place. I've been muddling through this postindustrial labyrinth all day. Seen neither hide nor hair from old Herb. Of course he's a sensitive fellow and does like to keep to himself. Oh, how I would like to introduce you to him, Grant. I believe you'd get along famously. Maybe he is in here," Russet bludgeoned on as he followed Beatrix around the corner and into her vacant room. "No, I guess not. Guess old Herb's given us the slip again. What did you say you wanted..."

Grant raised his hand in a limp plea for conversational mercy. It was all too clear to him Russet had returned to his rosy temperament. He opted to lean on verbal affectations like "old Herb" rather than talk like a normal person, a practice which had come to tax Grant's patience like an old mule. Over the years, in spite of his well wishes for his friend, he'd concluded he preferred the other Russet. "It's ok," he said. "We'll find him when we find him. For now it would do me to just rest in a safe place." He took a heavy breath, wincing from internal injuries.

Beatrix knew exactly what to look for on entering the room, and had her suspicions confirmed right away. "I don't think he's in the fort."

"Why do you say that?" Grant spotted the two halves of the blue doll lying on the bed. A red sub-doll was standing on the table. "Ah... he's taken the other half somewhere. Do you... do you think he's taken this Slipknot thing from you as well?" Grant voiced the troubling thought, then coughed a bit of blood onto his pants.

Russet broke in. "You're right, I've been silly. We should all rest and relax. What's the hurry? I suppose I became overexcited with your return. After all, we became separated so quickly after our arrival! There's so much that's happened that I've wanted to tell you. And I trust so much you've seen I want to hear about."

Russet eased on to the bed next to Grant. He continued warmly, "No worries. Take whatever time you need. Maybe we can watch a film later via this compound's extensive home theater resources. Like we used to. There are many titles you have never heard of, and I believe you

will enjoy wholeheartedly. Some of them include the urban gyrations of various street performers!” With this, Russet slapped Grant on the back. Grant recoiled at the threat of physical contact. But he found the moment he was touched, he instantly felt better—completely rehabilitated.

He sat up, feeling better than he had since he’d arrived. “I’ve missed you, friend.”

Russet’s expression suddenly seemed serious. “I wouldn’t trade the adventures I’ve had here for anything. I prayed for years to leave one day, have adventures with you, and meet new people. But it’s hard not to pine for the simple times we had in the old haunt. Honestly, I can’t wait to return.”

Beatrix watched the two as if she were lurking in the jungle, spying unseen on a couple of extremely rare apes. She’d been about to answer Grant’s question before the conversation was again derailed by Russet. She didn’t know what to say anymore. This was all so weird.

“So wait,” she finally said. “You two used to live together?” Russet turned, smiling an affirmative at her. She paused. She didn’t know why she found this peculiar. Maybe it wasn’t. Maybe if they knew aspects of her own living arrangements, they would find it odd too.

“Where?” she asked. But the two were already rampantly trading tales from their respective adventures. She exhaled, and looked at the red sub-doll neatly standing on her secret printout of Herbert’s data. She decided that all boys were crazy. She didn’t understand any of them. As she unfocused at the muddy photo of Herbert, she considered that in some cases, she only managed to create enemies. She’d been careless and foolish.

She picked up the doll and twisted it, and to no surprise whatsoever, nothing happened.

Somewhere in a filthy parlor, halves of a blue doll lay opened. A fat, spotted hand picked up the upper half, and from a sticky-looking bottle of scotch, filled its volume with brown liquid, as if a shot glass.

Another hand cracked open a DVD case covered in photographic celebrations of virtuosity in women’s gymnastics. The DVD was fed to a stout black box which whirred in appreciation. A bemused, purple pair of lips met with the rim of the inverted doll half, and downed the liquid.

Herbert's eye felt naked in the searing daylight. His efforts to relocate the front entrance to the capricious castle proved fruitless, like looking for a quarter he'd dropped on the beach before the tide. He had no choice but to walk back to the fort, haunted by the abject failure of his mission. For all his guile, he no longer even had his doll for the return trip. He'd never hear the end of it from Beatrix when he returned... assuming she'd even make it back herself.

And for that matter, assuming he'd make it back himself.

Herbert stood at the juncture he'd previously puzzled over, with the sign pointing in three directions. Through the door in the direction of the fort, the stairs descended several steps, then vanished into dark, salty water. The pathway was flooded. He squatted at the edge, as if ruminating on some tactic hidden in the recesses of his memory for removing millions of gallons of water from a cave.

What could have happened? Maybe a spontaneous subterranean spring, or a cache of ice somewhere melted all at once. He could have no way of knowing. Even if left to his own cynical imagination, the irony of sabotage by unwitting friends from afar still wouldn't have occurred to him.

He looked up, in the direction of "W.H.", as the sign indicated. He swallowed, putting his hand on the cold rung. Destiny suddenly felt like a ball and chain around his ankle, and it weighed heavy on the climb.

Gilbert's face was red, and his plump head perspired like a slow-cooked roast. His hands were stuffed into the pockets of his ill-fitting shorts, with a demeanor made progressively less nervous by Counselor Marlevort's apparent disinterest in killing him. Hence the sweat was not on account of nerves, but a symptom of being surrounded by a sea of bubbling lava. "Does this have anything to do with your big plans?" he asked, strolling alongside the counselor on the broad deck of the aging, heat-scalded aircraft carrier.

"What?"

“Those missiles or whatever. Isn’t that what this is all about?”

“No. This has nothing to do with that. I was talking about my final form. Bouncing some ideas off you. Is that ok?”

“Yeah.”

“I still haven’t decided what I’ll call it,” Slinus said with earnest concern. He fingered the fog of ash from his glasses. Gilbert said nothing. He continued. “I’m torn between ‘Final Stage OmegaSlinus’ or ‘Marlevort Prime’. I think they’re both pretty good.”

“So you turn into something, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“You mean like in anime or something?”

“Yeah, pretty much like in anime. A big monster or something. I’m still designing it. I’ll let you have a look at the mockup sometime, if you like, Gil.”

Gilbert wrinkled his nose. “I think that sounds pretty stupid. Why would you want to model your powers after something in a Japanese cartoon?”

“I like anime. A lot of it is really intelligent and well drawn. If a little over the top as well.”

“Is that why you chose this place as Fort Slurpenook? Because it’s over the top?”

“It certainly is over the top, isn’t it?”

“And really hot. Sort of unnecessarily so...” The shapes of sweat under his arms were beginning to resemble sizeable continents on a primitive world map.

“It so happens that this ship is the centerpiece in a powerful naval fleet. It makes sense to command from within a concentration of military strength. The fleet also happens to float in lava because this is a magical world and in a magical world you will find many such marvelous and whimsical realities present. Did I ask for this sea to be made of lava? No. Do I mind that it lends the perception of a kind of brutal severity to our forces? No, I’ll take that. Do I think a cool ocean breeze would be

nice while strolling on the deck? Well, yeah. But I don't get out that much. And the skeletons don't seem to complain."

"Well, I wouldn't want to take us on."

Slinus smiled.

"Who are we fighting, anyway? Aren't they all pretty much dead?"

Slinus was lost in thought for a moment. "I think everyone should have a final form, personally. Something... something like part-huge monster, part-confusingly religious icon, like a great angel of death or something like that. Sort of sickening and beautiful simultaneously. And dripping in strategic areas maybe, with weird goo, or maybe raw power. I don't know. It should have lots of concealed blades too, hidden somewhere, knotted in organic viscera."

"Sounds really disgusting."

"I've seen everything worth watching of course. But it's been ages."

"I think I saw a few episodes of Cowboy Bebop a few years ago," Gil offered. "It was alright."

"Yes, that was good. It's been decades since I've seen it."

The estimation seemed fishy to him. "Really?"

"Yes."

"How old are you, anyway?"

"I seem to recall tales about a young man. I believe his name was Bebop, or Cowboy Bebop. Or maybe it was a nickname. And there was some sort of wayward broad. A bitch on the run with nothing to lose."

"That doesn't sound right at all."

"Yeah, you're probably right," Slinus conceded.

"I would have thought that one grows out of these kinds of nerdy fascinations after living for centuries. Like, gathering wisdom with advancing years, or such."

“Oh for God’s sake, I’m not centuries-old. Who do you think I am? Thundleshick?” Slinus had trouble containing the laughter brewing during the delivery of the remark. A fit of chuckling followed.

Gil made a face. He wasn’t sure why it was so funny. “Where are we going?”

“We are going to see Allen Pycroft.”

“Oh...”

“He’s never all that cooperative over the phone. It’s time I pay him a visit. He will have some intelligence for us,” explained Slinus as the two of them ducked into a small airplane.

“Will it be cooler there?”

“Considerably.”

“As you can see, mate, there’s not a heck of a lot to see on this tour. And I do apologize for the general disrepair of our surroundings. I have been meaning to spruce the place up again for some time.”

“It’s fine, Russet,” Grant reassured. “Really, you don’t need to take responsibility for everything all the time.”

“Be that as it may! Behold, this is the main attraction. Working television, computer, and many other attractions to titillate. Why, just over here, look. Warriors at your command, fighting for your cause. Each shrunken and made one with great iron staves of agility. They spar and vie for one and only one orb of conquest and take no pleasure in anything but sweet victo...”

“Easy, man. It’s just a foosball table. Laying it on a little thick?”

Russet felt himself reddening. “Yes, maybe. I guess one develops a fondness for the place after some bit. It only becomes natural I suppose to embellish upon its grandeur for a newcomer.”

“That reminds me,” Beatrix broke in, like a perfect stranger interrupting a private conversation on the street. “Where’s Carmen been?”

Grant turned to her. “Who?” Russet made a limp shrug, and returned to his spirited tour of the room.

Beatrix slunk over to the desk quietly. She felt invisible, as if the victim of a magic spell a thousand times more potent than one of her evasive illusions. She sat in the computer chair and swiveled as the two boys whittled away the time with chatter, Russet’s tireless mouth bearing most of the load.

“I do wish you could have been here and experienced our adventures with us. We’ve been through so much, and it would have been all the richer for your presence. And oh, if Wizardy could be here too. He’d without question have some madcap scheme for us all to hatch. The conniving rascal! Did I by chance mention the time old Herb had me for whatever reason summon a dragon? A dragon of all...”

“Russet!” Beatrix was on her feet again. Her patience for his scatterbrained emissions was spent. Especially for listening as he described the memories she’d thought were special to just the two of them, now related as merely tolerable diversions when weighed against the vacuum of Grant’s absence. And if she had to listen to another “I do wish” this, or an “old Herb” that, she was going to flip out like a ninja in a swarm of bees.

“Yes, Bea?” was Russet’s tempered reply.

She paused, fuming at him. “Have you taken your medication yet?”

His silent, unchanging expression said no.

“She’s right, Russet. You’ve gotta take it. You know that.”

Russet went into a stroll, theatrically prefacing what were likely going to be some terrific excuses.

“I know, I know. I really will. I mean, I had meant to, honestly.”

“But you got distracted, right? You were feeling great, so what’s the point? Is that it?” he said with a rehearsed kind of patience which somehow seemed more subtly scolding than any direct rebuke.

Russet examined the prescription bottle with ambivalence. “Well... yes! I feel terrific! I’ve done so much better here. Since I got here, I mean. I really think it’s done wonders for me, and the new friends I’ve met, they’ve been great. Bea, here. Beatrix has helped me so much! If only you knew! I really think I can lay off the pills for at least a little while. Just for a bit!”

“My ass, I’ve helped.” Beatrix stomped over to Russet and snatched the bottle from his hand. She opened it and rattled a pill from the container. Russet nervously held out his hand, offering to take it.

Beatrix held up the pill, viewing it closely. She brought her foot down hard on Russet’s shoe. Russet yelled briefly, but was soon muffled by Beatrix’s hand. She popped the pill in his gaping mouth like he was some tragic clown puppet’s moaning head in a carnival stand, and she was greedy for prizes. With the other hand, she flicked his throat with a glowing ring finger, causing him to swallow through a startlingly effective spell most useful to veterinarians.

She turned and stormed out of the rec. room, suddenly finding herself in agreement with Russet in wishing Herbert were there. He probably would have gotten a kick out of that.

The large bag of kibble may have at one point been a ruthlessly pragmatic and underwhelming prize for a completed camp quest. Carmen plunged the metal scoop into the frayed opening of the bag, and resurfaced with a heap of spilling dog food. She deposited it noisily into a bowl on the floor.

[Do not feed me dog food anymore. Give me a burrito. Or let me starve.]

“Shh!” Carmen hissed with a slight jerk of the head.

[I’ll take a bite of your neck too, all the same. You are a stupid girl and I hate you.]

“Shhh, shhshhshh. Stupid!—Lunch time doggy. It’s lunch time for the doggy!” she sang.

Pycroft, in his considerable duration of imprisonment, still had not figured out the workings of his captor’s mind. It had long since been apparent his psychic commands would never go heeded. That much was clear. What he didn’t know was whether the girl simply refused to obey them, or had trouble understanding them, or in the tangle of her unusual synapses, was mistaking them for her own troubled thoughts. More tricky to diagnose still was whether his increasingly rancorous ultimatums were competing against, or chaffing with, some serious mental illness indigenous to the landscape. It didn’t help the matter one bit that he was such a dreadful psychic mastermind in the first place.

Gray, jagged irises fixed on her through the bars of the cage as a canine paw unceremoniously tipped the bowl of kibble on to the floor. A pale, bald head ducked down and began to crunch.

“Good doggy! It’s a very good doggy for not spitting at me today! That deserves a treat.” She pulled a long peacock feather from her belt, and with a flourish, manufactured a hard, curled piece of faux-bacon. Pycroft eyed the morsel with disdain.

[You will puncture a vein with the pointed tip of your terrible avian plumage. Do you hear? You will do as I say.] Pycroft mentally voiced the fruitless edicts over a mouthful of gravelly food. His heart wasn’t in it.

{Are you there?} The lucid voice rang in his head. He choked a little.

[Yes. When were you planning on helping me to escape?]

{Sympathy for your situation is not scarce. You are the victim of prioritization. Currently I suffer my own incarceration. you realize this.}

[You were never going to help me. I hate you. You are worse than this dumb girl.]

Pycroft pressed his face on a thick bar, his sickly skin wrinkling against it. His cage was one of many in rows along a dim, damp hallway. It looked like a sort of kennel, which may at one point have sheltered any number of fanciful beasts. The kennel was empty, but for one beast. It might have been considered fanciful from one perspective, but from all other perspectives, it was just sad.

{Of course if you wanted to escape, you could have done so easily by severing one of your limbs, or even biting off one of your toes.}

[But that would hurt. Also, I hate you.]

{Then you will have to wait.}

The trap door opened into a cloud of mold spores. Herbert crawled out of the hole in the floor, resting his hands and knees on a thick netting of vines and creepers. The plants were everywhere,

embedded in the wooden floor and furniture, covering up the windows, and caked against the walls. Walls, which ran smoothly, uninterrupted around the perimeter of the room. Was the room a circle?

Herbert stood up. Whatever this room was, it looked like it had been left unattended for centuries. There wasn't much to see in the faint light poking through the vines on the windows. The windows, beneath their vinery, seemed rather grand to him, large and stately. In fact, the more he took in the surroundings, whatever lay beneath the growth seemed to allude to a sense of grandeur. Something that held a certain authoritative elegance when viewed in its prime. There was a large desk. There were flags behind the desk, spotted with mold. Were they American flags? Those colors didn't run, Herbert thought, but they did apparently rot under the right conditions. There were paintings on the wall. Through their weathered appearance, he could make the portraits out to be...

He realized the room wasn't a circle. It was an oval. And the letters on the sign in the juncture below, to his relief, were not meant to be his initials at all. This was the Whitehouse.

He positioned his eye in front of a gap in the vines on the window. The glass was too dirty to see through, or to confirm his hope against hope that this somehow meant he'd returned to his country. Why there would be a poorly maintained replica of the Whitehouse somewhere in the U.S., he didn't know. But the notion of such a thing occupying this magical dimension was even less explicable to him.

The room seemed to have no power. He looked along the walls, hoping for a way to illuminate the room. There was a switch. Next to the switch, resting in the corner of the oval office, was something strange.

Herbert stood by the switch with his hand poised to flip it, but pausing first to examine the large object. It was a box of grimy, vine-tangled glass, similar to a phone booth, but with no apparent way in or out. Herbert could see something inside. Something dark and motionless, somewhat like a human figure. Herbert put his hand on his gun.

Above the object was another smaller box. It also was made of glass, but had electrical components to it. A cable, presumably for power, ran out its back, along the wall and into the mount for the switch.

Herbert shrugged and flipped the switch.

He squinted against the surprisingly bright overhead lights. Hundreds of insects came to life as they all at once scuttled for darker sanctuary in the vines. There was a soft beeping noise, which sounded as if it ticked the seconds. This was confirmed when Herbert saw the smaller box above, which had lit up like a digital clock, and was now counting down. 05:59:56... 05:59:55... 05:59:54...

Herbert cautiously engaged the larger glass box, wiping a streak of scum from the surface. There was a figure inside. It was a statue. It was smooth and featureless, like a kind of mannequin made of dark stone. There was a circular hollow in its chest, where the heart would be.

Dry vines snapped under Herbert's feet as he wandered to the desk. He made a vacant assessment of the ancient office supplies and documents, then turned to look at the clock again. He dwelled solemnly on whatever event was supposed to occur in six hours. Luckily, he thought as a Twinkie-sized cockroach crawled over his shoe, the temptation to hang around that long probably wouldn't be insurmountable.

Allen Pycroft's breath took form in the cold air in front of his wet black nose. He concentrated over a small potted plant as his soft, pink human hands made dexterous pruning motions about it with a little pair of scissors.

Counselor Slinus' tone was conversational. "How do you get that thing to grow in here?"

"Since you won't permit me to use magic, I decided that what little I could muster ought to be put to use."

"It's quite lovely. A banzai of some sort?"

"Not that I expect you to appreciate incantations meant to promote the well being of living things."

Pycroft's words were surprisingly clear and well-formed considering they emerged from a canine mouth. People always tended to take in stride the notion of talking dogs, even though the floppy, broad-snouted lips and big teeth hardly seemed conducive to human elocution. The elegant canine snout was affixed to a handsome gray-furred canine head, which in turn was attached to a

canine's upper torso. The only human aspects of him, aside from his elocution, were his hands, and everything from the waist down, which was covered by a nice pair of pants.

The pants sat on a frosty chair, and the hands busied themselves over a table, which was white with frost. They were the only pieces of furniture in the sizeable walk-in freezer. Next to the counselor, Gil stood shivering.

"What a ridiculous thing to say. It's basically my chief concern. What do you think all my work is about?"

{Promoting the well being of yourself alone is not quite what I meant.}

"Stay out of my head, Fido." Slinus pointed his handheld computer at Pycroft with his thumb poised over a touchscreen button. Pycroft raised his hand calmly, and with the other hand felt the collar around his neck, as if to visibly register the threat. He turned his yellow eyes back to the plant.

"And since we've wandered into the subject of obedience, don't you have something for us? We did come all this way, after all."

"Yes," Pycroft responded.

"Well? What of your other half? Isn't he at Crossnest?"

"Yes. He has also confirmed that the youngsters you seek are there as well."

"Oh. Why hasn't he done anything about it yet?"

"It appears he has been imprisoned in the kennel for some time."

Slinus suppressed a snort. As he punched rapid commands into his device, he made an effort to sound short-tempered again through his bemusement. "I don't know why I'm surprised. Jesus Christ, can't you people tell me these things sooner?"

Gilbert rubbed his arms for warmth, transfixed by the prisoner. Most of Marlevort's minions tended to be wretched freaks of nature, and altogether unpleasant company. But for whatever reason, Gil found in himself a great deal of pity for Mr. Pycroft. He asked softly to the counselor, "Why isn't he allowed to use magic?"

{Because he fears me.}

The voice entered his head, like a stray echo of unknown origin in a room of complex acoustical mechanics. He looked at Slinus, who seemed not to have heard it.

“There,” Slinus said. “I remotely opened all of the cages in Crossnest. He should be able to make some progress now. Next time you talk to him, tell him to find the Slipknot and get out of there. And failing that, at least capture those kids. Seriously, it is absolutely ridiculous it’s gone on this long. It would have saved us both a lot of trouble if you had told me all this sooner. Your minor acts of rebellion are petulant and tiresome.”

“Do you really think my correspondent will be able to accomplish the task? Even you would have to agree that my abilities are more suitable.”

Slinus widened his smile, exaggerating the lines on his face, which were unusually severe for a young man’s complexion. “Who knows, maybe he’ll get lucky and have his head cut off.”

As the counselor and his cohort turned to leave, Gil looked back at the prisoner. His glance met with a potent pair of animal eyes, deadly still in what they transmitted silently. Gil nodded in sleepy accord.

“At least a part of me will be free from a cage,” Pycroft quipped.

“Hey, that’s the spirit!” Slinus activated the electrified collar once for good measure before exiting through the heavy refrigerator door.

The documents on the oval office desk looked older than the constitution itself. Some were loose notes penned in chicken scratch. Others looked like more formal memorandums, vaguely pertaining to military operations, none from which Herbert derived much meaning. There were also doodles here and there on the curled stationery. They looked like the renditions of an aspiring cartoonist. They weren’t very good.

There wasn't much in the drawers, but the one item of interest was a real find. It was a colonial flintlock pistol, and looked reasonably authentic. It had a wooden grip, a brass-colored barrel, and was generously trimmed with ornate silver metalwork. He held it firmly, aimed it with mock resolve, closed the eye hidden behind the patch (as if it served any purpose), and squeezed the trigger. There was an impotent "click".

Herbert flipped the pistol by the loop around his finger, and tucked it into the waist strap of his holster. If he was going to steal anything from the government building, it might as well be something of ostensible value.

He leaned back in the cracked leather chair, blinking his bad eye a few more times. He thought about what Thundleshick had said, and the vial he'd given him. Could he really trust the deceitful sorcerer? Still, what motive could he have for giving him a bogus remedy? It made him all the more curious. And if it really did work, he thought it would be nice not to have the damnable strap squeezing his head all the time, or for that matter, to be able to just once take a shot in a game of basketball that did not miss the hoop by at least six feet. The gym class nickname "Wizardy Airball" was sufferable for only so long.

He pulled the anonymous manuscript from his pocket and dropped it on the desk. From the same pocket, he removed the vial and uncapped it. He raised the eye patch to press against his forehead, leaned back, and tapped a drop of the liquid into his blinking eye.

The fierce burning was instantaneous and overpowering. He might as well have been pouring hot sauce into the orifice. He shouted and dropped the vial.

After moments of eye-rubbing and obscenities directed at a wily old campmaster, he cracked his eye open. He saw nothing from it. The magician had bested him again.

He looked down at the vial he'd dropped. Some of the liquid had splashed onto the cover of the manuscript. There was a curious change where the drops met the blacked-out title.

One

He tentatively placed his finger against the moisture and smeared it about the rest of the hidden letters.

Wizardy Herbert

One

The bowl of kibble was overturned. The tracks left by four wet paws ran a trail on the corridor floors until they were dry and no longer visible.

Carmen had followed the tracks back to the kennel, and regarded with dismay the unlocked, empty cage. She dropped the toy she had brought for her pet. It squeaked as it bounced.

Herbert stared at the title for a moment in an eye-stinging daze. As the liquid evaporated, the letters again faded to black.

He picked up the book, and the vial which he recapped, regarding them both cautiously. His mind turned to all the other words in the book which were blacked out, and then it turned to the bit of liquid remaining in the vial.

He left the vial standing on the desk. He watched it suspiciously for a moment.

He sat heavily back into the chair, which reclined with a rusty squeak. And then an ominous mechanical clicking noise.

And then a BOOM.

The chair had automatically secured him to it with restraints, and blasted off through the ceiling of the oval office.

As the smoke of freshly burned rocket fuel cleared from the now-silent room, the faint beeping could be heard, by no one in particular.

05:36:23... 05:36:22... 05:36:21...

[Rucksack.]

“Huh?”

[You. Rucksack.]

This was only making Russet’s headache worse. He didn’t know if it was a side effect of the medication, but he always began feeling this way when he took it. It may have been akin to reducing altitude in a plane too suddenly, and the sensation from the differential in pressure all at once. At least the pills could be said to trigger a “responsible” nosedive, one that was not punctuated with an orange fireball and blackened metal filling a crater in some vacant rural expanse.

“My name is Russet. Stop talking to me, ok?”

[Get something for me. I command you.]

“No.”

[Yes. I command it. You will retrieve the Modulus Splitnotch.]

“You mean the Mobius Slipknot?”

[Whatever. Get it.]

“No way. Shut up.”

[You have to. I command it.]

“Get it yourself.”

[I don't know where it is. You do. Get it for me.]

“I do not! Moron.”

[Anyone who is affected by its power can know where it is. Trust your instincts and find it.]

“So you know that much about this thing, yet you don't know its name?”

[Yes. Now find it, Ruck... Russ... sack.]

Russet was about to continue the pointless dialogue, but in spite of himself examined his own mindscape for whatever it was he could allegedly detect. Maybe it was the reduced turbulence afforded by the medication, but there was something there. Something faint, but nagging. And there was directionality to it. The direction, not surprisingly, pointed to Beatrix's room.

He found his way there and entered, and engaged in a practice which seemed new to him. It was a kind of sniffing with his mind. He gravitated towards a vent high on the wall. He dragged a chair over to it. But he didn't stand on it. Something wasn't right.

He thought for a moment, then dragged the chair a few feet to the left, and stood on it. He waved his hand in front of a blank region of the concrete wall. Then knocked on it. The knock did not sound like concrete, but metal. The patch of blank wall dissolved to reveal a second vent, concealed by a simple illusion. He opened the vent and removed the locket.

[Very good. You are detestable, but have been a useful pawn. Now bring it to me.]

Russet examined the locket, turning it over in his hands. He slipped it into his pocket, hidden away behind his cape. “No way.”

[You will give it to me. This is my command. do you understand?]

“You have got to be one of the crappiest psychic masterminds of all time.”

[When I find you I am going to bite you in the face.]

“Pff.”

High above a range of spiky, snowcapped mountains, Herbert sat in his rocket chair with the same expression one might have after recently deflating a whoopee cushion without the use of one's hands.

The Whitehouse, archaic-looking, though otherwise identical to the genuine article, nestled among the rocky peaks. He swiveled his head to get a sense of the majestic panorama, hopeful for the sliver of a chance that these might be the Rocky Mountains. That hope became slimmer when he noticed an object near the forested horizon, small and distant, spinning in place. It was the holographic beacon.

Beneath his hand, Herbert noticed a small control panel had revealed itself on the chair's armrest. He used it to navigate the noisy piece of furniture towards Fort Crossnest.

[Be reasonable. What use could you have with the object, Rustic?]

“Russet. I'm going to hold on to it and keep it safe. For Beatrix.”

[The other male is after it too. Your friend, Granite.]

“Well, if Grant needs it, then I guess I'm protecting for him too.” He thought about his friend, and the sense of fondness that was present when he entered his mind. He found that feeling tempered while on his meds, blunted by this form of uncomfortable sobriety. Was it truly such a deep friendship, or just a kind of loyalty to his older brother-figure? Grant had always tirelessly looked out for him. But then, hadn't that also been what Beatrix had done ever since he met her? In the sterile conditions of his mind, he found he could better analyze these feelings, as if in a laboratory. Yet conclusions were no more forthcoming.

[You can't protect it for both.]

“Watch me! Or better yet, go screw yourself.”

[Which side are you on?]

Russet paused, then muttered to himself, “That's what I'd like to know.”

He stood by the bedside table. Under the doll, he was surprised to find a number of cartoon sketches, among which was a nice rendering of himself. He smiled briefly. He felt confused. There was a knot in his stomach when he thought of Beatrix and her kindness. Guilt? He was not depressed, but felt like he should be. He knew there would be no elation to be found in anything, either. Not any time soon. This thought somehow depressed him on a more fundamental level than any palpable depression. He wished he hadn't taken his medication.

He picked up the doll. For some reason, the thought of the great Campmaster Thundleshick and his infinite wisdom entered his mind. Was there anything this magnificent man couldn't do? In an act of spontaneous curiosity, he twisted it. He vanished. The unsupported doll fell to the floor.

In a third-floor room, there was a pair of queen beds covered in rumpled, untucked sheets. There was a boy lounging in each bed. The two of them lazily absorbed the sales pitches from loud infomercials.

"I don't understand what's so amazing about this blender. If anything, it seems less useful than the average blender."

"What are you talking about? It's the Magic Bullet!" Russet endorsed enthusiastically. "It probably has all sorts of horsepower. Did you even see how fast they made that chicken salad??"

Grant considered the extraordinary boast. "Why the heck would you use a blender to make chicken salad, anyway? Besides, the compartment seems unusually small. Like if they're making salsa or something, when they call for tomatoes or onions, it's always a cherry tomato, or a pearl onion. So they can fit them the stupid thing."

"I fail to see the problem with that."

Grant wrinkled his nose at what he regarded as a needlessly phallic appliance. He looked at Russet, who was rapt in the program, and decided not to voice that particular grievance. Grant picked up the remote and changed the channel to a live broadcast of the 2000 Summer Olympics women's gymnastics competition.

The boys listened to the sounds of feminine athletic exertion and the slapping of gym mats with chalked extremities. At the sight of a snug leotard, bunched in strategic points about a muscular frame, Grant raised his eyebrows and said to his friend, “Nothing wrong with that now, eh, buddy?”

Russet folded his arms with stylized impatience. Grant smirked at the ten year-old boy, who in his estimation was probably not quite mature enough to appreciate such spectacles. Then again, only several years his superior, Grant barely was either. In any case, he thought those girls were all a bit freakishly muscular, and made for targets of admiration in the same way a workhorse pulling a plow was to an equestrian.

“Could we please switch it to HSN now? This is boring.”

Grant handed over the remote. Russet hopped eagerly through the channels, passing by in the blink of an eye some form of animated entertainment.

“Hey, was that Cowboy Bebop?” Grant wondered.

“Dunno! Maybe.”

“Was it one we’ve seen?”

“I think we’ve seen enough of what you want to watch for a while.” Russet settled on footage of a slowly rotating object so gaudy, it could only have been obtained by mugging a gypsy, a pimp, or most likely, some cross-pollination of the two specimens.

“Sweet Jesus, only six hours left for the Epiphany Collection! My God, could that price be slashed any lower?”

It was always hard for Grant to tell if Russet enjoyed watching and commenting on the Home Shopping Network ironically.

Grant was descending the other side of a heavy sigh at the prospect of another gauntlet of televised sales pitches when he glanced at Russet’s prescription bottle on the bedside table.

“Looks like you’re empty.”

“Oh. Right.” Russet didn’t remove his gaze from the shimmering bargain jewelry.

Grant waited for the obligatory pause to subside. He continued, raising his voice over a particularly aggressive endorsement from satisfied consumer, Deborah in Pensacola, Florida. “You should go refill the prescription now.”

Russet turned, his expression flattened out. “I wonder why you insist on using that word? There is no prescription. Or doctor. There’s just you.”

Grant stared back, holding up his end of the well-rehearsed game of chicken. Russet went on. “It’s always been just you. I wonder how you even know this is the right medication for me.”

“Just go.”

Beatrix wandered down the corridor with the shell-shocked look of a bombing survivor. She’d been to her room to retrieve the locket, hoping Grant might provide some insight into the artifact. It was gone.

At an intersection, she nearly collided with Carmen, who wore a similarly spooked look.

“Hi,” Carmen said. Her greeting was not the usual assault of nervous energy. “Is everything alright?”

“Hi. I... I think I lost something.”

“Yeah, me too.” Though they’d both found accord on this issue, Carmen seemed less than forthcoming with high-five offers.

“I should probably go see Grant and Russet about this.”

Carmen nodded. “I should probably go find my pet.”

“... Pet?”

Russet trotted downstairs to the sprawling empty hotel lobby. His shoes squeaked on the floor, echoing through the ghostly space. His whole world—all that he could remember, at least—was one of empty rooms.

He walked by the shelves supporting handy tourism pamphlets on historic colonial attractions, and pushed through one of the heavy front doors, meeting the howling ocean wind. He made his way down the valet driveway and turned, walking alongside the fragment of the city park. The empty, rusted parked cars were commonplace to him, invisible. He turned at the corner to face rows of storefronts and apartment buildings, obscured by salty mist with greater distance. He entered the pharmacy.

He pressed on hand on the counter and threw his legs over it, leaving a handprint in the dust. The shelves were amply stocked with hundreds of forms of medication, most of which were useless to the only two people who occupied any building in a block and a half radius. Russet unscrewed the lid to the larger store of Divalproex, and refilled his container. He at times contemplated bringing the whole thing up with him. But this way, it at least allowed for that possibility of running out, even if it only briefly escaped his friend's diligent watch.

He left the store and walked down the street to the asphalt edge, an abrupt termination of the road. The ocean stretched uninterrupted to the horizon. Its gentle waves made sloshing noises on the base of the urban platform, about five yards below his feet. It was five yards of savage concrete and uprooted rebar, harboring knots of barnacles and pockets of green, scummy growth. He sat down, his legs swinging over the edge, and unfocused his eyes at his orange bottle towards the water below.

“Hey. What's up?”

Russet turned around, surprised to hear Grant's voice. He looked back at the water. “Do you think we'll ever leave this place?”

Grant had never heard him ask that. In fact, any time Grant would bring it up, Russet tended to change the subject. “Why do you want to know now?”

“I don't know. I just think it might be fun to be able to meet other people. Couldn't we take a boat? Or fly?”

“I’d like nothing more than to leave too. But I’ve never been sure exactly where we are. Or how far we are from land. We could be in the middle of the Pacific Ocean for all we know. If that’s the case, taking a boat would probably result in getting lost for weeks at sea, and probably dying out there.”

“Oh...”

“Flying could take days too, and I just don’t have the magic capital for it. I’ve never been good with flying spells. Maybe if I gave myself big wings like a dragon...” Grant thought about it for a second, as if the idea held the slightest morsel of promise. He shook his head. “I’m sure you could pull it off, if you weren’t on your meds. But how long would it last before you crashed? Uh, literally, I guess? Do you want to take that risk for both of us?”

“I guess not.”

“Besides, I don’t know why, but magic just isn’t quite as potent here on Earth.”

Russet turned and made a funny face at him. “As opposed to where?”

“Oh. Never mind.”

“Is this really all there is? If there’s so much more to the world, why can’t I get to see it? To be able to visit the places I’ve seen on TV. To be able to buy some of the merchandise. It’s like...” He paused. “It’s like I’m missing out on a future I can’t have, and a past I can’t remember. All the while I’m stuck in a present in which I can only function on these damned horse tranquilizers. Why can’t I remember anything other than living here alone with you? About my parents, or where I grew up, or how we even got stuck here? Or...” Russet stopped. Most disturbing of all to him was, when he tried to think about it, he couldn’t remember anything prior to that day. And for some reason, he didn’t want to. He couldn’t even bring himself to ask.

Grant broke in, as if reading his mind. “Some things aren’t worth remembering fully. Better to enjoy the moment.”

They paused. It was quiet. Not even seagulls. There were never seagulls. This told Grant more than anything how far from land they probably were.

Russet was standing up. “Maybe it won’t always be like this. Maybe some day I’ll get better completely, and I’ll be able to use all the magic I want. Then I can take us both anywhere.”

“I hope so.” Grant rested his hand on Russet’s shoulder. “One way or another, I promise we’ll get off of this stupid island, if you can call it that. It will be soon.”

“Splendid. I’d love to meet other people.”

Grant tussled his friend’s hair, ruining hours of work spent in front of a bathroom mirror. “Hey, since when do we even need anyone else, buddy?”

Russet laughed, and looked into his friend’s reassuring eyes. He trusted him completely, and knew Grant’s promise would be upheld. Though neither could have known it would take another four years to uphold it.

Herbert held the phone up to his ear. “No, nothing yet.” He pushed the hang-up button a few times as if it served any purpose, probably on account of the fact that that’s what they sometimes did in movies.

Grant sat on the floor in front of the odd mailbox-sized machine the phone was hooked into. The front hatch to the clear plastic case was open. He operated on the peculiar mechanical parts inside, which all seemed designed to accommodate the two discs with ‘ 3π ’ labeled between them. After some inscrutable adjustment, he said, “Ok, try again.”

“Hey, I’m getting a tone now. Nice!” Herbert began dialing his home phone number. “I guess you’re pretty good with machines, aren’t you... Grant, was it?”

He nodded. “Uh, yeah. I’ve had to fix a few before.”

Herbert finished dialing authoritatively and continued, “You have to be able to take things into your own hands. You can’t count on all these idiotic miracles or fat old magicians to solve all your problems for you. That’s what I’m learning.”

“Couldn’t agree more, Herbert.”

“It’s nice to finally talk to someone around here who’s not totally out of his gourd. Not like your lunatic friend, Clove. No offense. Or that counselor girl who’s completely batshi—hey...”

Herbert halted his ramble. “Why isn’t this thing ringing yet?” He looked down at the machine which had allegedly been repaired. The two discs were spooling slowly.

“Give it a second.”

Herbert nearly dropped the phone at the surprise of the voice behind him. The tone was less than relaxed. “Herbert. You’re back!” Beatrix didn’t look exactly pleased to see him, and Carmen didn’t look like she exactly... saw him. She was spacing out, biting a nail.

Herbert was about to say something, but detected activity on the phone which required his attention. He held up a finger to the girls. “Hang on, can’t talk now. Oh. Yeah, Carmen, I’ve got a bone to pick with you about the quest. Oh, and you too, Beatrix. You’re not off the hook either. We need to have a little talk.”

Beatrix sank very slightly in contrition from the rebuke she knew she probably deserved. Carmen’s reaction was somewhat different. “I forgot all about it! My gosh, the quest! How did it go? What bounty did you receive?!”

On another occasion this would have been a good story to tell through a volley of ad hominem and reddened facial expressions, an occasion to which Herbert would have risen with aplomb. He was on the phone though, so a pithy summation would have to do. “He gave me some rolls of toilet paper.”

“Ooooooh. That is awesome! You know, good TP is hard to come by around here. Good job, Junior Camper Herbert! High-fi—” Herbert shushed her and listened.

It was the same kind of sound he’d heard over the phone before. It was a low-pitched sound gradually becoming louder, higher in pitch. The noise reached its peak, then began sliding down again, as if over a lazy hill of sound. This happened again, as Herbert concentrated. Then again. They were happening faster, at a higher pitch, until the entire hills of sound were short, rhythmic, increasingly frequent “bips”.

biiiiip biiip biiip biip bip bip bip bip bip-bip-bip-bip-bi-bi-bi-bi-
bbbbbbrrrrrrriiiiiing.

Herbert waited.

riiing.

“It’s... ringing. Finally.”

Beatrix sidled over to Grant. She glanced around, as if participating in a theatrical brand of espionage. Samantha and Simon were in the rec. room, over by the couch amusing themselves with the box of magical trinkets. They waved to her. The soup can was there too. It appeared to be in the middle of a moronic face-off with the slumbering Vend-O-Badge machine.

She whispered to Grant, “I can’t find it. The Slipknot.”

He whispered back. “What? What do you mean?”

“It’s gone. I lost it.”

“Well, where did you last see it?”

Carmen had sidled up as well, ready to deal her own persuasion of dire intrigue. “Guys, I think we have bigger things to worry about. He’s... loose.”

riiing.

Someone picked up on the other end. “Hello?”

Herbert jumped at the unmistakable sound of his father’s voice. “Hey, quiet guys! Hello? Dad?” He waited for a response which did not come. “Hello?? Dad, are you there??”

“You’re going to have to wait a little while. For the disc to finish spooling,” Grant said.

“And why is that, exactly?”

Russet found himself amidst a small mob of smelly, agitated primates. The way they gathered around him in this dank castle parlor, he surmised they’d all been preoccupied with the doll shortly before he arrived, possibly evaluating its comestible properties. His sudden appearance was a rude and frightening occurrence, as most unexpected things are to savage, brainless apes.

With a look of disgust, he made a snapping motion with his wand, effecting one of the few spells his current condition would afford. There was a loud firecracker noise and a bright spark from the tip of his wand. The apes went into shrieking flight for cover.

It had been several minutes and Herbert was still waiting for his dad to answer. The last thing he'd heard from his father was, "Oh, hey, champ. Yeah, I'm here. I can hear you. Can you hear me alright? Honestly I'm surprised to hear from you so soon!" In fact, he'd heard it several times already, since Grant had showed him how to replay the audio from the last transmission.

It was becoming difficult to focus on why these peculiar constraints even existed. Herbert found it hard to monitor the phone for another response from his dad, carry on a conversation with Grant about obscure telecommunications phenomena, and filter out the distractions in the room all at once. Lentil was now emitting yapping noises like a small dog, directed at the badge machine. The orphan kids, to Herbert's lament, had discovered and wound up the Singe Vilain, and now sounded as if they were auditioning for an edgy comedy series on HBO.

Between fits of obscene language, Simon tootled away inharmoniously on a flute, causing a swarm of cockroaches to march in well-disciplined phalanx. He remarked on his handiwork. "Whoa, &β#\$\$© cool!"

"Simon, give me a $\sum @\%&$ turn with the &β#\$\$© magic flute." He capitulated and gave his sister the instrument.

Herbert held his head, as if to contain the throbbing agent inside trying to escape. "Ok. Can you explain this clearly? What does this weird magical phone machine do?"

"Actually, it's not magical at all," Grant replied. "It's a simple magnetic tape device for recording sound. There is a delay in the conversation because it needs time to spool the audio signal from Earth, and then compress it down before playing it back. Or I guess more accurately, it just plays it back at a higher speed."

"What?"

“Similarly, it needs to record your end of the conversation, and then play it back over the receiver in slow-motion.”

“Why would it need to do that?” Herbert looked as if he was humoring the vivid spiel of a lunatic searching for converts to his new religion. One that conservatively involved aliens, Pokemon trading cards, and the ghost of Colonel Sanders.

The discs reversed direction, and sped up. Herbert’s father spoke over the phone. “Yes, Herb. Your mother made some dinner and now we’re settling in for the evening here. How was the bus ride to the camp? It was a long day of travel, so I’d guess you’re tired, huh?”

“What? What do you mean? That was days ago. What... what day do you think it is it?” Herbert looked at Grant, then said into the phone, “Hang on dad,” though it was pretty clear by now he didn’t really need to buy any time from his father’s end of the conversation. The discs had reversed direction and slowed down.

Herbert held up his hand, making a “do I really need to ask?” gesture at Grant. “Uh...” Grant hemmed. “Right. The phone has to work this way because of the time differential between the two worlds. Time moves slower on Earth than it does here. By a factor of 3π , to be precise.”

“... Oh. Well 3π , no $\Delta! \% \$ \textcircled{R}$. How could I not $\& \beta \# \$ \textcircled{C}$ know that.” The Singe Vilain had begun whir its way across the room on sputtering plastic legs, carrying with it its sphere of influence. The little army of cockroaches followed it like the grand marshal in a kind of pocket-sized pestilence/obscenity themed parade.

“Go monkey! $\$ * \textcircled{C} \# @$ go! Ha, ha!” Simon exhilarated.

“Look at the little $\& \beta \# \$ \textcircled{C}$ troops!” Samantha said between spirited toots on the charmed instrument. “They are so $\$! \# \textcircled{C}$ cute!”

Herbert put down the phone and calmly strolled across the room. He raised his foot, and brought it down on the toy monkey. The roaches broke rank and scuttled about the debris of cheap Chinese plastic bits. The orphans frowned.

“Anyway,” Grant said, “It’s like this. For every minute that passes on Earth, a little less than ten pass in this realm. Similarly, for every year that passes there, almost ten years go by here. Think of it like two rivers, one fast, the other slow. We’re on the fast river.”

Herbert turned to Carmen. “I’m not sure why I’m asking you this, but does this sound right?” She nodded. Herbert shook his head. “Why didn’t anyone tell me this??”

Beatrix’s face seemed to share his concern. She said to Grant, “Yeah, I’m kind of wondering when you were going to get around to mentioning this too.”

“I guess I thought you knew already. Or had figured it out. I don’t know. I’ve had a lot on my mind, looking for... Russet.”

The discs reversed direction and sped up. Herbert held the phone to his ear. His father spoke. “It’s the third, isn’t it? (Dear, what’s the date? Isn’t it the third?) Yeah, June third, your first day of summer camp. So Herb, I imagine by now you’re privy to the big surprise. I hope you’re not too crushed about not having to do all those accounting drills.” By William’s tone, Herbert could tell he was rather amused with himself. “Well, tell you what. When you get back, I’ll make it up to you. We can sit down as a family and we can all get a head start on the taxes for the next fiscal year. You’re on spreadsheet duties all the way, champ. That’s a promise. But in the meantime, maybe you can do your old man a favor and try to have some fun. I hear that Thundleshick guy has a few things up his sleeve for—”

“Dad!” Herbert tried in vain to interrupt the audio recording of his dad’s monologue. “Dad! Enough with the accounting stuff, da— Dad! I’m trying to tell you some—Oh, jesus.”

He held the phone in front of his face, grimacing at it with frustration. Not being able to get to his father was nothing new. Chalking up the miscommunication to a pronounced multi-dimensional time schism barely occurred to him. Anyone well acquainted with his family relationships might not have had the thought either.

Herbert scrunched against the door in the back seat of the car, trying to ignore his family. They were on their way to Florida for a winter vacation, and from the periphery of his awareness, his parents and brother might have been attempting to sing together. He couldn’t be sure though, as

he'd done his best to filter out the intolerable behavior by focusing on the strange book he'd found recently.

"_____, where do you hope the Allotment Socks shall send you?" _____ asked

"HMMMMMM I don't know" _____ was so confused by this new place and all of these new friends and new adventures "I hope they send me to the one which values friendship above all else!" _____ said, he sounded brave and heroic.

"HA!!!" _____ scoffed arrogantly. "As if you have what it takes." He was brash and haughty and nobody liked him.

"Don't listen to him _____ his arragance will be his downfall."

The reading experience for Herbert was the cerebral equivalent of biting into a lemon. He wasn't sure which was more difficult to endure—the manuscript, or his family's relentless good cheer.

"Hey, Herb, we could use some backup," William said from the driver's seat. "What are you reading there?"

"I think it's one of his Valera books," Seymour said. "Did you know he's obsessed with a girl's book, dad?"

"It's not Vera." Herbert said. "It's something I found in Louis' old room."

"Oh, yeah." Donna smiled at him from the front passenger seat. "I think it's wonderful that you're taking an interest in your brother's work. What do you think of it?"

"It's... um..." Herbert fumbled for a diplomatic word. "Enthusiastic. So what happened to him, anyway?"

Seymour leapt to change the subject as if putting out a grease fire in the kitchen. "Hey! What should we sing next! My vote is for Camptown Races!"

His father gave a mock-salute into the rearview mirror and began counting “a one, a two...” to jumpstart the old-timey melody. Seymour relaxed back into the leather seat and basked his parents’ good cheer. He whispered towards his brother, “Let’s not do anything to bring them down. They’ve been so happy lately.” He paused, putting a dash of something into his expression which made him seem slightly maniacal. “And it’s all thanks to you, Herbert.”

Herbert looked faintly nauseated. The remark confused and irritated him. Before he could ask for a clarification, Seymour had turned to contribute his boisterous vocals and suspect harmonics at the lyric, “All the doo-dah day!”

Herbert redoubled upon the poor fiction in his lap. He had nothing in common with his current travel mates, and was dumbfounded to think he shared any genes with them at all.

From what he could decipher about the book, through the copious CIA-style omission of certain names and items, it was about children. The children in the book tended to be adopted orphans, and though they were all harrowingly one-dimensional, cliché-spouting nitwits, at least they were free from the bondage of family lunacy. And for this, Herbert envied them with all his heart.

The phone was back on its hook. He hadn’t made much progress with his father, and before hanging up in frustration with the faltering mode of communication, he issued the statement, “Ok, look. Can’t talk now. Summer camp is magical deathtrap from hell. Thundleshick lied and picked my pockets. Weird time vortex. Send help if possible. Will talk later. Bye.”

The room was silent. Herbert tapped the top of the recording device’s plastic case as he thought about what to do. But something wasn’t quite right in the rec. room. Everyone felt it, but couldn’t place it. Herbert spaced out into the corner of the room. Then he saw what it was. There were now two Vend-O-Badge machines. One of them had a broad, jagged metal grin, and a pair of eyes just above it, spaced far apart from each other.

It was Lentil. He stood next to the other machine, smiling quietly, and looking quite pleased with himself. Herbert ogled the pair with a distant look in his eye utterly unique to those who behold unspeakable stupidity.

He decided the stupid event was not worth commenting on. And in any case, he just realized he had something more important to address. He was mad at Beatrix.

“Anyway,” he said sharply. “Beatrix, what gives?”

“Huh?”

“Don’t you have some explaining to do? I think you know what I’m talking about.”

“Oh, um...” She was momentarily chagrined, but then found her own wellspring of righteous indignation. “I could ask you the same thing! That was a pretty mean trick, opening the doll while I was gone. Do you realize you almost got all of us killed?” She overemphasized the word to wring the literal meaning from it.

“Well, sorry. I just wasn’t sure if I could trust you. What, are you stalking me or something? What do you want from me?”

“I wanted to tell you...” She trailed off. Her handle on the situation was unraveling.

“Tell me what? Where did you get that info about me?” Herbert was hiking up his volume with each inquiry. Grant and Carmen traded askance looks of discomfort.

“It was hard to come by. I finally got it from a place that had extensive archives on kids with sketchy documentation.”

“Sketchy documentation? What the hell does that mean?”

“I was going to tell you everything, Herbert. I really was.”

“Tell me what? What are you talking about?”

“Well, for starters...” Beatrix took a breath, and blew a strand of hair from her face. “You’re adopted, Herbert.”

Herbert’s face drew from a great pool of emotive possibilities, but came up empty.

“\$*©#@.”

The others looked around, wondering if the Singe Vilain had been reassembled and wound up.

It had not.

Are you sure you want to do this? It'll probably be dangerous. Not to mention a lot of hard work."

"Yeah, J." 'J.' was how Beatrix referred to her older roommate, Jamal.

"It's that important to you? Guess it must be. It's all you seem to talk about, finding this kid." Jamal did not take his eyes off the notepad he was writing in.

"So where is it?"

He paused his pen-work, and looked up at her from his slouched position against the wall in their attic room of the North Jersey Orphanasium. It was a franchise on the rise, with branches sprouting up all over the tri-state region. They were being filled to capacity at an alarming rate, largely thanks to marketing brass's ground-breaking Refer-an-Urchin® Bonus Points program.

"Nearby. Why don'tcha write this down."

Beatrix stood outside the bleak warehouse on a raw winter afternoon. She uncrumpled a sheet of loose-leaf paper containing Jamal's directions, on the back of which she'd earlier scrawled a few notes in haste.

Wizardy(SP?) Herbert

summer camp?

...

Tristin Sheath Sheeth

A high pitched voice made her jump and recrumple the note back into her pocket all at once. She recognized the faces right away, and gave them a bright smile. “Hi, guys. Long time no see!”

“Beatrix! Yay! Hi!” Simon beamed.

“What have you been up to lately? Are you still, um... living on the streets?” She wasn’t sure what the best way to phrase that question was. Luckily, she’d found conversing with simple-minded orphans wasn’t exactly a diplomatic minefield.

“Yes. But it has been ok,” Samantha said. “We have fun adventures sometimes. Did you find a home yet?”

“I... sort of. I guess you guys are here for the same thing as me, then?”

“The word is that this is a warm place to stay with things to eat. And maybe, if we are lucky, a place to be adopted by new parents. If you don’t mind doing some work first. That is what the other orphans are saying.”

“I guess we’ll find out. I suppose this place must have information on all sorts of kids like us, wouldn’t you say?” Beatrix rhetorically posed.

Simon nodded vigorously, though it could just as easily been in response to the question, “Do you think puppies should be given the right to vote?”

“I’m so happy to see you, Beatrix. It has been such a long time!”

“Yeah! We haven’t seen you much since...” Simon thought about it. “That really weird and sad day.”

“Simon!” his sister hissed. “Inxnay on the eirdway... um... dayday.”

“Wasn’t it on Christmas? A bunch of Christmassesses ago?”

“Shh!”

Beatrix laughed. “Shall we go inside?”

On the other side of a chain link fence, a man in a trench coat watched them from a distance. The trench coat reached the ground, concealing his feet. He had a gray, prickly moustache. His lips curled upward at the children as they departed. He twitched his proud, substantial nose.

The Rubicund Wayfare rocked gently in the dim light of Level 37. Nemoira was tying a knot somewhere, likely in keeping with the onerous maintenance regimen for the ship’s preposterous plethora of bright sails.

She paused midway through a knot so complex, it could only be executed magically. (One of the very few tasks actually warranting a magical merit badge, which ironically, was not rewarded by one.)

“I know you are there.”

[What?]

“I can feel you. Poking around in my head.”

[Silence, boat woman. (chomp chomp) I command it. (chomp chomp)]

“I can hear you chewing too. Really, must you make chewing noises in your mind as you eat?”

Elsewhere in a dark corner of Fort Crossnest, Pycroft sat up from his meal, startled, as if being spied upon. He snorted, wiped the blood from his lips, and delved back into the masticated snoogerfitch carcass.

[You should mind your own business. (chomp) Why don’t you go back to doing uninteresting things with rope on the Rubberband Wafer?]

“The Rubicund... never mind. I don’t see why I should correct you.”

[You are ugly. And you are dumb.]

“And you are up to no good. I’m going to find you and stop you.”

[I command you to shut up forever.]

She said nothing. This response made Pycroft nervous.

It was another quiet afternoon in the attic. The only sound was that of pens on paper. It was as if the two writing implements were conversing with each other in a hushed, scribbly tongue.

Beatrix interrupted the conversation with a mildly exasperated sigh. Jamal stopped writing. “Something wrong?”

“I just can’t seem to draw anything good today. I should get out with the sketchpad more often.”

“Know what you mean. I’d get out myself. It’s cold out there, though.”

“I wonder if any art schools would let me in with work like this. Of course, it’s not enough just to get in. I’d need a scholarship.”

“Can I see?”

“I don’t want to distract you. Aren’t you pushing a deadline?”

“Right. As if people are camping out in lines around the block to read it. Lemme see.”

“Well, I want to read it. I don’t suppose you’d let me sneak a look before it’s done?”

“Not a chance,” Jamal said, taking the sketchpad. He brushed a few dreadlocks over his shoulder, settling in to evaluate the art. He made the face of one who’d just received a terrible insult. “You’re insane. These are all awesome, as usual. What’s really buggin’ you there?”

She shrugged.

“You still looking for that guy? Wizard-what’s-his-name? You haven’t really mentioned it for a while. I’m starting to worry.”

“Sort of. I know his name, and that’s about it. I just can’t find him. He’s not listed anywhere.”

A Xeroxed sheet of paper slipped out of the pad as he flipped through it. He squinted at the photo of Herbert. “This is him?”

She nodded.

Jamal’s look of puzzlement did not fade. It cemented into one of concern. “I’m pretty sure I know this guy. Or met him, some time ago.”

“What? Really?” Beatrix hurried to his vantage, as if his recognition could somehow rub off on her, like a form of contagion.

“Yeah. The eye patch kid. I knew his brother, years ago. At least I thought he was his brother. I wasn’t actually sure if they were related. He was an odd kid.”

“Do you know where he lives?”

“I know where his brother lives. Or at least used to. I haven’t heard from him in ages. Louis Eggwood. Another odd kid, sort of an aspiring writer, you could say. Really... enthusiastic.”

“Eggwood?”

“Yeah. This says this guy’s last name is Herbert. Maybe that’s why you couldn’t find him.”

“Must be.” She looked at Jamal. She didn’t need to ask. Her look said it all.

“Alright, let’s go. I’ve already missed two deadlines. What’s one more.”

Herbert leaned forward, groping for a way to summarize, almost as if cognizant of his duty to brief any tardy invisible listeners. “So this guy named Sheeth basically said you should be looking for me? And that I’m the key to everything you want to know? Was he more specific?”

“No,” she replied. “I don’t think he was sure if he’d be able to meet me here at all. He might have been in some sort of trouble. I honestly don’t know why he wanted to help me.”

Grant crossed his leg in a compellingly casual manner. “Do you have any idea who this Sheeth fellow is?” ‘Fellow’ was a compellingly casual word.

“No. Someone from here, I’d guess. We were cut off before I could find out more.”

“What, so this was a phone call?” Herbert asked.

“Uh... sort of.”

“I don’t want to alarm you, but have you considered the possibility that this guy just wants the Slipknot?” Grant said. “And as long as we’re on the subject, we probably ought to be looking for it before it falls into the wrong hands.”

Somewhere in Herbert’s mind, he knew Grant was right. The portentous warnings of the puffy shirt episode, the mysterious window into what was possibly his future self’s demise—it all added up to something disturbing, a call to action for a reluctant hero. But Herbert wasn’t thinking about any of that. He was casting a wistful look at Beatrix.

“So, you’ve really been looking for me all this time?”

She replied with a demure nod.

“You should have said something.”

Herbert’s reprimand was disrupted by something akin to *déjà vu*. Elsewhere in the room, the two orphans giggled as Lentil hopped around on peg and coaster feet, spitting out badges. He blurred his vision in Simon’s direction. There was something familiar about this.

The omnipresent din of the suburban Newark-area shopping mall seemed to help Jamal focus on his writing. He was glued to his pad, mostly managing to tune out the ridiculous clandestine spy games of the others sitting at the food court table. Beatrix craned her neck to see around a large potted plant, getting a view of the Office Depot’s entrance. Samantha and Simon mimicked her effort, fiercely striving to earn the sidekick badges awarded to them on good faith.

“See him in there?” she asked.

“I stopped watching,” Jamal replied, not lifting his pen. “The thrill of observing someone shop for office supplies was too much for me to handle. I’m afraid if he buys some printer ink cartridges I might pass out.”

“Well, you followed him all the way here with us. Aren’t you a little curious to know about him?”

“I’m not the one with the weird pseudo-crush on this kid. If you really want to go out on a date with him, why don’t you just go ask him?”

“You’re such an ass, J.”

“Maybe you could fashion a bouquet out of manila envelopes and Post-It notes.”

“Beatrix, there he is!” Samantha blurted, ecstatic to provide critical intel. “It is the one-eyed boy!”

“I see him. Thanks, Samantha.” She watched the boy, who was examining a shopping list. He picked up a clipboard from a bin, and gave it a bored inspection for a price tag.

“Why does he wear an eye patch?” Simon wondered. “Is he a pirate?”

“Haven’t you ever read any spy novels?” Jamal replied. “In the world of espionage, you’re bound to run into rogues like him. They frequently wear eye patches, tattoos, or even prosthetic limbs. I bet he reeks of bourbon, and perhaps the sea.”

“He is a rogue?” Samantha said with a look of wonder.

“Will you say hi to the rogue boy, Beatrix?” Simon asked.

“I don’t think I’m ready to talk to him yet. He’s supposed to know something about my sister. But I don’t know anything about him, or if he was involved with her death. I don’t know if he knows who I am, or what.”

“Do you know who you are?” Jamal said while dotting the end of a paragraph and turning the page. Beatrix wasn’t listening.

“Simon, why don’t you go talk to him?”

“Me?????” Simon’s mouth looked like it was preparing to catch an egg.

“Yeah. I’m sure he wouldn’t know you. Maybe you can try to get some information. Especially about the summer camp. Simon? Wait...”

Simon was already sprinting toward the store as if they’d just announced a drastic sale on pie filling, and he was a famished boy made of dough.

Russet bumped into a teetering heap of garbage, causing it to bend like a willow yielding to a stiff breeze. It toppled, releasing every bit of its pent-up potential for noisy commotion on the stone floor. Russet spat a curse into the darkness.

He was sure this must be Thundleshick’s castle. Except by some mishap, he’d been transported to this musty dump of a spiderhole rather than his prestigious royal chamber. If he’d been thinking more clearly, it would have occurred to him that wise old magicians weren’t actually kings, and didn’t sit on a throne. And if he could see more clearly, he might have noticed the wise old magician himself smiling at him through a small window in the wall.

Russet found an open bottle of scotch on a messy table. He lifted it to his nose and flinched at the fumes.

“I’d had designs on a drink myself,” the melodious voice spoke. “The soft palette’s been mighty dry today.”

“Aah!!” Russet was startled.

Thundleshick remained motionless, beaming at him through the window. He seemed serene, at peace, just as Russet pictured wise old magicians to be. Only less hygienic.

“Thundleshick? Wow. I hope you’ll pardon my intrusion, sir, but...”

“Have patience, good boy. I’ll entertain your concerns in a moment, once I stand up from my throne.”

“Wait... sorcerers have thrones?”

The question was answered with a flushing noise, and the sound of swirling water.

Herbert knew he was being watched by the young boy standing approximately eighteen inches from him and looking right at him, but chose not to acknowledge it. He simply went about his casual shopping, considering whether the pocket calculator was cheap enough to put into his basket.

Simon was holding something he hadn't looked at yet. He made his best effort to initiate unsuspecting banter. "Hi, um, hey! Do you know anything about these..." He looked at the item he was holding. "Office deep pot brand... recky leed... leether-etty... um. This thing here?" He asked, regarding the Office Depot® Brand Recycled Leatherette Twin-Pocket Portfolios, Teal Pack of 10. Simon had only begun to learn to read recently. He was a sharp boy, and Beatrix was a decent tutor, but some of Office Depot's retail products were a mouthful by anyone's standard.

Herbert looked down at the boy, and after a moment, dealt him a smirk. "Hey, kid. Are you stocking up for Accounting Camp too?"

"What's a Counting Camp?"

"Hmm. Guess you're not as big a sucker as me then." Herbert reached for a red-brimmed visor from a bin, marked at a discount. "What do you think. Should I get one of these, just in case?"

"Yes!"

"What the hell are these things for, anyway. What do they even have to do with accounting? Are we going to be crunching numbers on the beach?"

"I have never been to the beach before."

"Yeah, I'm sure you haven't kid."

"Do you like the beach? Is it fun? Also, can you really 'crunch' numbers??"

"Hey, kid, what do you want from me?"

Simon's resolve instantly crumbled. He was sure the jig was up. He looked back at his food court HQ for visual assistance. Beatrix quickly covered her face, ducked down, and ran away. Jamal looked up from his work.

"Do you know those people?" Herbert asked. "Why's the black guy with the dreads looking at me?"

Beatrix was already out of view. But not taking any chances, she ran all the way to the restroom corridor and turned the corner. She'd hardly had a moment to reflect on her silly overreaction when she nearly bumped into a tall man in a trench coat. With his moustache and silvery hair, he looked dignified. With his coat that was so long, it covered his feet completely, he looked creepy and somewhat deranged.

"Ah, little girl! I smelled that you would be here soon."

"Excuse me?"

"My name is Burt Hastings, and your name is Beatrix Tipplepot, is it not? Yes, it is. It is a pleasure to meet you."

"Uh... yeah..." Out of kneejerk formality, she offered a handshake, but quickly regretted it. Caught in the act, she had no choice but to leave it there, a proposition which seemed to momentarily stymie Hastings. He considered the hand, approaching it like a riddle to overcome, like a dog with a towel over its head. Beatrix noticed his hands were firmly stuffed into his coat pockets, unmoving. On closer inspection, she saw that the sleeves were actually sewn into the pockets.

Hastings finally stooped down, bringing his rosy cheek to her hand. He smiled, and nuzzled against it affectionately. It appeared that in his mind, this was a serviceable substitute for the gesture. Beatrix recoiled in revulsion.

A startled Hastings hissed through his nose, but regrouped, keeping his head at her face-level. "Young lady, if you come with me, I will show you a land of magic and wonder and..." Beatrix was already winding up for a punch.

Her ring-fingered fist planted squarely on his nose. It gushed with blood. He gasped, hobbled backwards a bit, and vanished into vaporous smoke. His trench coat flattened on the ground, and a yellow piece of paper followed it, floating downward. She picked it up.

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“Hello? Hello? Are you there, Mr. Marlevort? Confound this technology.”

After a moment, the voice in Hastings’ ear spoke. “I’m here, Burt. Do I really have to explain about the time differential each time we speak?”

“Yes, that’s right. The time whatsit. Anyway, how are you, sir?” There was a pause.
“Hello? Sir?”

“Oh, Jesus.”

“Ah, there you are. Anyway, I have located the youngsters. The boy, who I’m sure as you know was recently persuaded into a journey by Mr. Thundlesmell. Or, that is, Thundshick. And now, the young lady as well.” Hastings again mistook the ensuing pause for displeasure from his boss. He frowned beneath his moustache. “... Mr. Marle—”

“Still here. Nice work, Burt. And it only took you what, several decades? I’m busy, so I’m not going to wait for your reply to this remark. I’ll trust they’ll be here shortly. Of course, the others will need to be rounded up as well. I’ll have Terence work on it.”

“Very good sir. And may you have a pleasurable evening.”

Hastings twitched his nose.

“... Sir?”

Grant entered the room and froze. Although the suite was dense with furnishings and esoteric knickknacks beyond most people’s ability to keep track of, Grant recognized something was different right away.

On the highest floor of the hotel was a room referred to as “The Cloudspindle Suite”, according to the guestbook Grant had found in the lobby. The book had last been updated around the same time which Grant surmised the hotel ceased to function, and which he also presumed the building spontaneously found itself in the middle of the ocean for reasons he couldn’t begin to fathom.

He enjoyed the solitude of the suite, at least the relative solitude compared to sharing an entire desolated hotel with one other boy. As far as Russet knew, this room was still locked, or “magically sealed”, a property most will agree makes a door more definitively unopenable. Grant enjoyed more than just the quiet time, though. It presented an opportunity to piece together a puzzle about the room’s former resident. The dust-covered globes, the arcane tomes, the specimens of unusual dried flora; they stirred visions of a well-traveled man of sparkling intellect, and judging by the charmed items lying about, of some magical acumen.

Today he would not contemplate the man who was probably named Cloudspindle, though. His eyes were fixed on a new development on the desktop. It was the bright red Russian doll. Someone had taken it from him and placed it there.

The charred remains of the knobbed device remained on the desk, as it had been when he last saw it, including its cracked tubes and burnt wiring. Soot covered much of the desk's surface, and a trail of small tracks lead from the soot to cross over a fresh white sheet of paper. They were small footprints, and quite numerous, in a scuttling pattern as a crustacean might leave behind. On the paper was a note, written with a handsome flourish.

Come to the camp at your leisure. The girl will be there. I know you are looking for her.

T. Rothschild

Beneath Mr. Rothschild's signature sat the red doll. Grant picked it up, regarding it with wonder. And then, with a sense of profound excitement. Could it really be that after all these years, the doll finally worked again? It seemed whoever possessed its counterpart had finally closed it, and furthermore, used it to come here and leave this note. It was the only explanation he could think of.

He had a strong impulse to try it right now for fear that the window of opportunity might pass quickly. But he dared not use it until he was ready. It was time to let Russet know they were going on a trip.

"Look, there." Beatrix was pointing to the open vent in her dorm room. Positioned underneath it was a chair. "Whoever took my locket found that vent, which I guarded with an illusion."

Herbert offered his take on it. "Well, I haven't seen Russet around at all. Maybe he took it."

"It's hard to believe he would," Beatrix said. "That doesn't sound like him."

“What does this thing do, anyway? Why’s it so important?”

Grant was at the bedside table, looking at the doll. “If Nemoira was right, it has some effect on the memory. I’d be able to get a better idea if I got a look at it.” He put the doll down. “Anyway, I think Beatrix is right. I don’t think Russet would have stolen it.”

Herbert eyed the doll. Something occurred to him. “Wasn’t that doll a different color when I left it here?” He picked it up and weighed it with his hand, as if he was a pawn broker assessing its value. “Hey, this thing should lead right back to Thundleshick. That jackass stole it from me. I’d almost forgotten, I wanted to go back there and yell at him some more.”

Without hesitation, Herbert twisted the doll. There was no result.

“Why do those stupid things never work when you need them to?” Beatrix said.

“Tell me about it…” Grant muttered.

“I’m going to keep looking for it.” Beatrix moved toward the exit. “Maybe Carmen found it.”

As she exited, Simon ducked behind a turn in the corridor, hoping not to be seen. He was curious to know what all the concern was over. Concern evidently important enough to exclude younger children from. This was always the most fascinating kind of concern.

“You’re wasting your time!” Herbert yelled after her. But she was already down the hall. “It was Russet! Trust me. That kid’s got problems. He took it out of the vent, then probably escaped using the doll. Now he’s probably wandering through that disgusting castle with the doll open, so we can’t follow him.”

“I really think you’ve got Russet all wrong, Herbert. Sure, he’s got his problems, but he’s a great guy.” Grant was earnestly trying to clarify. It seemed to Herbert that Grant took this issue to heart more than anything else he’d heard him talk about, so he decided to stifle his sarcastic retort this once. “In spite of how surly he can seem, he’d really do just about anything to help someone out. You’ve just got to give him a chance.”

Herbert shrugged as he lifted the doll to his nose. “Why does this thing smell like my dad’s nasty liquor?”

The two scotch-filled halves of the blue doll clinked together for another toast. Russet threw back his third shot with little worry over any result that might follow mixing alcohol with powerful antidepressants, and without a thought given to his singular prior experience with booze, a spectacle that would come to be known as “The Mini-Fridge Incident”.

Thundleshick coughed as he blustered out some more liquor-buoyed mirth. “Son! This swells my heart to learn of your grand times had. The purpose of my camp is to capture the romance of boyhood, just as you’ve described. It’s the reason I lift this old bag of meat out of bed and dress it in a robe. I am sorry to admit, on lonelier occasions I seldom summon energy for the latter.”

Russet was too drunk to thank God that today was not such an occasion. He slurred his way through another obsequious remark. “Anyway, I jus wanned to espress my... deep appreciation for what you are doing for chilren. It’s... it’s so beautiful, really. So tha’s all I wanted to say.”

Thundleshick smiled, waiting patiently. After a moment, Russet reached for the severely depleted scotch supply.

“Are you sure that’s all that is on your mind, boy?”

Russet’s eyes darted beneath lazy lids. Thundleshick went on with a tone of compassion. “Concealing a heavy heart is much like stowing an expensive chandelier beneath your smock, suspecting none the wiser.” He neglected to mention he’d once attempted this, leading to a series of events which made it presently difficult to set foot in the state of Maryland.

“Oh. I’m that tra’sparent, am I?” Russet laughed to himself. “I guess I have my lonely occasions as well.”

“Go on.”

“It’s my friend. He’s jus this... incredible guy.” His loose body language seemed to convey how remarkable Grant was more than his slurred speech was able to. “So smart and... though’ful and... I dunno. I don’t know how I really feel sometimes. I’m not sure how he feels. I think if he knew the things I thought about him sometimes, it would scare him. Hell, it scares me!”

“Naturally, boy. Naturally.”

“And now... And NOW.” Russet became animated in a way specific to the inebriated. “Isso complicated. With this girl. I like this girl...”

Thundleshick nodded sagely.

“For the record,” Grant said to Herbert as they strolled generally toward the rec. room, for lack of a better destination. “I think you’ve been right not to totally trust Beatrix. Seems like you’ve got a good head on your shoulders.”

“Yeah? Why?”

“The Slipknot isn’t safe with her. I know she thinks she owns it and has to protect it for some reason. But she can’t. Her motives still seem unclear to me. There are a lot of very nasty individuals trying to get it. And if it’s as powerful as it’s said to be, the result could be disastrous.”

“Nasty individuals? You mean Marlevort, or whatever his name is?”

“Yes.” Grant looked surprised. “I didn’t know you were aware of him.”

“I’ve started to figure a few things out. I didn’t really want to, but ...”

“You’re lucky to have had as few encounters with Fort Slurpenook’s drones as you’ve had.”

Slurpenook. Herbert wondered why that word sounded so familiar. He reassured Grant. “She seems nice, and all that. I can’t account for her weird fascination with me. But I’m only trusting her, or anyone for that matter, as much as I need to. I’m looking out for myself here.”

They listened to their own footsteps echo through the dim corridor for a moment. Herbert looked at the doll in his hand, which he’d taken from Beatrix’s room. He put it in his pocket. Herbert again assured, perhaps more to himself than anyone, “I’m really just trying to get home.”

“I’m sure.”

“But...”

“But what?”

“I hate to say it, but I’ve got reason to think I’m going to be here for a while longer. Like, maybe a lot longer.”

“What do you mean?”

“Hey, do you know if time travel exists? Like, is it real, or is it impossible?”

“Time travel? I don’t know. Why?”

“I think there’s something you should probably see. Actually, Beatrix should probably take a look too. I mean, if that’s alright with you.”

Grant paused, considering. “Fine. But I think we’re in agreement here, yes? If either of us finds the Slipknot, we should probably keep it from her this time.”

Perhaps it was their engrossing discussion, or an orphan’s natural ability to sneak around unseen. Either way, Simon was shadowing them unnoticed by either. With each corner he snuck around and piece of debris he ducked behind, he caught another snippet of the mild conspiracy being hatched against his friend. Not merely friend, but one he considered a second older sister.

He didn’t look happy.

Grant entered the hotel room, pushing into the customary blaze of the Home Shopping Network aired at near-maximum volume. Russet was chuckling at something, perhaps the stupidity of a recent caller.

He noticed Grant’s smile, which appeared to him likely to precede a funny remark. He lowered the volume, and spotted the object in his hand. Some sort of red doll.

“Hey, buddy. What’s that?”

“Pack your bags, Russet. Looks like we’re leaving.”

Grant noticed the eyes of his friend, for whom emotion would never have to make a long journey to surface. They were already filling with tears of joy.

The empty scotch bottle rested on its side, as if the recent draining of its fluid had compromised its equilibrium. Russet snapped together the two booze-tinged halves of the doll, and put it in his pocket.

“I guess why I’m really here...”

His remark broke the silence, causing Thundleshick to snort out of his drunken doze.

“I don’ know how to put this.”

Thundleshick’s eyes offered a grandfatherly twinkle. “Tell me, boy. Speak your mind.”

“I was hoping... you know, what with you an your limless wistom, do you by any chance know of...”

“Yes?”

“Do you have... a ‘cure’?”

“A cure, boy?”

“... for... ‘it’?”

“It? What, boy? If you’ve a stubborn rash of some kind, a blight of the skin...”

“No. These feelings I have. They feel so wrong. I’m tortured by them and don’t know what to do.”

“Ah.” Thundleshick produced a stern look behind the tangled, fibrous crisis on his face. It was the demeanor of one charged with forming a grave diagnosis. “You know, my elder brother struggled with this very challenge. Attraction to flesh of one’s kind, it’s a troubling demon.”

“I was jus hoping you might have, like, a magical cure for it. Jus make it go away.”

The old magician stroked his beard, as one might do to ameliorate a high-strung shaggy dog. “I will see what I can do.”

JERRY

I... I can't wear this puffy shirt on TV! I mean, look at it! It looks ridiculous!

KRAMER

Well, you gotta wear it now! All those stores are stocking it based on the condition that you're gonna wear this on the TV show! The factory in New Jersey is already making them!

JERRY

They're making these?

KRAMER

Yes, yes. This pirate trend that she's come up with, Jerry. This is gonna be the new look for the 90's. You're gonna be the first pirate!

JERRY

But I don't want to be a pirate!

Herbert stood up and turned off the portentous sitcom. Beatrix sat on the couch, still casting a vacant expression at the screen while fidgeting with her ring. Next to her, Grant looked as if he'd seen a ghost, and during the encounter, the ghost had taken the opportunity to share with him compelling photographic evidence of the Loch Ness Monster.

“There you have it,” Herbert punctuated. “Beatrix, what you mentioned a little while ago reminded me of the tape. I guess for reasons that should be obvious to you now. I'd been meaning to show you for a while.”

“What I mentioned... you mean about my sister?”

“Yeah. Right. ‘Sister’. Anyway, I just wanted to get your take on this thing. The whole ‘future selves’ thing.”

“Didn’t you say time travel doesn’t exist?” Beatrix asked. “I thought it was one of those weird rules.”

“Yeah, well, that’s what I want to know. What do you make of all this, Grant?”

Grant remained motionless. He then shook his head with a kind of fervent shell-shocked refusal, much like Jerry would upon being offered a meal prepared under questionable sanitary conditions.

“Huh? What do you mean? What kind of answer is that?” Herbert was understandably confused.

“I don’t like it at all.”

“Come on. How can you not like the Puffy Shirt episode?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know, man. It was a joke.”

Beatrix’s quiet rumination subsided. She spoke softly. “Herbert, you seem to be taking this very casually. Doesn’t it bother you?”

“It’s freaky. I’ll give it that. I admit I felt kind of sick when I first saw it. But now I’m not sure what to think. I guess the bottom line is, I have no idea what it is we just watched. At this point, I don’t see why it should bother me.”

“Because,” she concentrated, and said with a greater sense of imperative than he could recall seeing from her, “if those people are us, unless we do something about it, we are going to die.”

Her face again met the blank TV screen. Her thoughts turned to her sister, of what little she recalled. It was becoming clearer to her by the moment. She’d had it all wrong.

There was a dull rumble. Dust unsettled from above. Somewhere in Fort Crossnest, there was an explosion.

Christmas Day of 1998, though perhaps the most important day of Beatrix's life, was one she couldn't remember very well. She was nine years old, though she couldn't remember her ninth birthday. She couldn't remember Christmas Eve, for that matter. And she could not remember how she came to be in the passenger seat of this speeding car.

Simple forms in her field of vision seemed cold to her. Alien, hostile. The gray dashboard. The grimy mat beneath her shoes which she did not recognize as hers. The inscrutable surge of lines and shadow outside the passenger window. A similar surge in the opposite direction, lensing through the side mirror. Everything made her feel uncomfortable. It was all subtly loathsome through unfamiliarity.

Someone coughed. Someone next to her.

It was an older girl, perhaps in her late teens. She was driving the car. And she was speaking. Was she speaking to Beatrix? It seemed so. She was in the middle of telling her something to which Beatrix had tuned out, only now to tune in again. Something that sounded urgent.

She had a terrible hacking cough. It swept her short black hair across her pale face. She swept it to the side, away from her eyes, which looked sunken, surrounded by darker yellowing circles.

The fit of coughing waned. "I'm sorry, Beatrix. I'm sorry to have to tell you this, to throw so much at you all at once. I've been where you are myself, once. I just have so little time. It's important you try as hard as you can to remember what I've said. Do you understand?"

Beatrix turned to the left with a calm motion.

"Who are you?"

The car slowed. It almost seemed like a physical expression of the girl's mind slowing, faltering in the marathon it had been running for a long time. Her features relaxed. She knew then

that she'd burdened the young girl in her delicate condition with too much, too fast. She had to simplify. And trust. This was not going to be in her hands much longer.

"I..." She managed a smile. "I'm your sister."

Beatrix nodded.

"Do you remember any of what I just said, Beatrix?"

"Yes. You're my sister."

"Good. I'm going to tell you some things. Not many things, but they are important. Can you try to focus on them?"

"Yes. I think so."

Her sister coughed again.

"Are you ok?"

"I'm very sick. But I'll be fine. Thank you."

"Where are we going?"

"I'm taking you somewhere safe to hide." Without taking her hand off the wheel, she slid the ring from her finger and gave it to Beatrix. She then brought the ribbon for her locket over her head and handed it to her as well. "Take these. Wear them. Protect them. Don't let anyone have them, especially that locket."

Beatrix slipped the locket's ribbon over her head. She examined the ring before putting it on. It had a large pink stone. There appeared to be a scratched-out engraving on the interior of the silver loop. As she watched it, it stood now in her awareness as the most familiar thing she'd yet seen. It made her feel more alert. Just a bit more human.

"Later, my hope is you will reunite with two other kids, two boys, both your age. One of these boys will have an eye patch. You'll know him when you see him."

"An eye patch?"

“It is important that you find them. From there, you’ll begin to understand things better. Why you are here. Why this is so important. But now, just hide. Stay safe.”

“The car had been regaining speed as she spoke. Her steering was becoming more erratic. She was sweating. She glanced at a sweaty hand, on which something was written and beginning to smudge. She muttered to herself angrily, repeating words Beatrix couldn’t make out. She began to address Beatrix again through an outburst of coughing.

“You need—” Cough. “You need to—” Cough, cough. “You—” Cou—

Her eyes were wide, bloodshot. Her last words were spoken with a chilling, monotonous voice.

SUPREMACY TO THE HEIR, BEARER OF THE ARDORSMYTE TINE.

She collapsed to the side, letting go of the wheel. Beatrix instinctively grabbed it. She guided the car up on to the curb, through a chain link fence and into an empty lot. The fence’s meshing bunched beneath the car noisily, slowing it. She put the car in neutral, pulled the brake, and soon it came to a stop.

She was quickly around to the driver’s side. She dragged her sister from the car. There was no pulse. Her skin was pale and yellow.

Beatrix touched her own face to discover it was wet. She was crying. She wasn’t even sure why. The memories were slipping. She struggled to hold on. Keep locket safe. Boy with eye patch. Hide.

She noticed the writing on her sister’s hand.

“Is she ok?”

Beatrix turned to see two young kids standing in the empty lot. A girl and a boy, no older than six and three respectively.

“She’s dead.”

The girl looked heartbroken at this news. “Oh no. I’m sorry. By the way, I’m Samantha and this is my brother Simon. I want to help you.”

“Thanks,” Beatrix said with a little sob. She lifted the limp arm and read the sweat-smudged marks. They were numbers.

14.151

“Who is she?”

“She was my older sister.”

Simon’s lower lip began quivering at the very notion of harm befalling older sisters in general.

Beatrix reread the numbers. She had a feeling that if she remembered anything from today, it should be this. She repeated them in her mind, again and again. 14.151... 14.151...

A few short police siren blips, sort of like hiccups, broke her recitation. In front of the lot, a squad car came to a stop with its lights whirling. She knew she’d have to answer questions soon. She knew she’d be taken somewhere else. She just had to focus on remembering. It would slip through her fingers if she let it.

Locket. Boy with eye patch. 14.151. Locket. Eye patch. 14.151.

“Stop! You are very, very bad! Go back to your cage this instant!” Carmen stormed down the corridor in her heavy boots and eclectically patterned attire. She carved a trail through her own clouds of thin, dispersing smoke from magical assaults—warning shots—slung moments ago from her peacock quill. She brought back the feather, as if about to cast a fishing line from it, and lashed the glowing tip against her fleeing pet’s rump.

[You disgust me, Carbon Purpleskinner. I will never return to your chamber of torments.]

“It’s Pearlskipper! Bad dog! Bag dog!”

[I command you to stop whipping me with the quill of a colorful pheasant. I—OW—command it!]

Pycroft’s mess of scrambling paws skittered around a corner. His claws dug into the floor, bringing him to a halt. Standing in his path was a girl holding a telescope. She was tapping it patiently into an open palm.

“I told you I’d find you.”

The lens came about to point at Pycroft’s creased, perspiring brow. The luminous shockwave knocked him a dozen yards down the hall, just past the rec. room’s door.

Herbert exited the room. “What the hell is going on out here?”

His eye followed the midair trail of smoke to the wretched form struggling to its feet. Or paws, he noticed. Though he observed an abundance of pink, bruised human flesh dominating the torso, little about the creature he would classify as human. From the waist down, it had the hind quarters of a canine. Its upper body was human enough, with the head of an agitated, ornery, and battered bald man. Its wrists ended not with hands, but dog paws.

Pycroft sniffed. He leered malevolently at Herbert. [I don’t need your pity, ugly kid. At least I can see from both eyes, Windsor Tea Hurt Bird.]

“What?”

[If I did not have to run away, I would kill you.]

Herbert drew his gun and aimed it at Pycroft’s head.

[Er...]

The lines in Pycroft’s face deepened. He bared his gray, rotting teeth. His yellow eyes flickered with a swelling, bestial energy. He growled.

Herbert lowered the gun slowly and shot him in the leg.

“AUGH.”

Beatrix stepped out of the rec. room. “Herbert, what’s...” She stopped at the sight of the wounded mutant. Pycroft’s glance connected with hers. With a terse sniff, he wrapped his wiry arm around her waist and threw her over his back. He made off in the direction opposite the two counselors, colliding with Herbert, knocking him to the floor. The pistol slid down the hall. Pycroft, securing Beatrix with a free arm, left a trail of blood behind a frantic three-legged hobble.

Nemoira and Carmen quickly took up pursuit. Herbert picked himself up and followed. Grant now stood in the corridor, trying to figure out what had just happened. Even Lentil, in his hulking Vend-O-Badge form, had poked out to inspect the commotion. They listened to Beatrix’s receding pleas for help.

“It looks to be a damsel in need of rescue is what it looks like,” Lentil said. With that, he began a thunderous march on peg and coaster feet down the hall. Grant ran after him, but couldn’t squeeze around the wide vending machine’s frame, which plodded steadily, no faster than an old woman with a shopping cart.

“Excuse me. Hey. Could you please get out of the way?” Grant had his sword drawn, prepared to aid the damsel in question. There was little daylight between the walls and either side of the brainless former soup can.

“This way! Adventure awaits is what is waiting for us.”

“Please... just... MOVE!” Grant pounded on the back of the machine. There was a squeaky metallic grinding. Lentil came to a dead stop. He was firmly lodged between the walls at a narrowing in the corridor, with little space above.

“Oh, come on!” Grant pounded again on the rear of the machine. He heard pounding on the glass on the front of the machine. It was Herbert.

“Hey, get this damn thing out of the way. I left my gun back there. You hear me, Lentil? Move it!”

Grant backed up, already looking for a different route through the maze-like bunker. He took off in another direction.

Simon snuck around a corner, still shadowing him. He kicked something. He looked down, spotting the handgun by his shoe.

“So when this is through,” Russet nervously grasped for assurance. “I won’t have these feelings and urges anymore, right?”

“On that I stake my good word.” Thundleshick Rummaged through a drawer. His deliberateness helped soothe Russet’s concern. He appeared to know just the thing for it, as if he’d treated other boys to this “cure” in recent memory.

“Ah! Here, my young friend.” Thundleshick gave him a piece of chalk. “Now, draw a door with it. On that wall right there.”

Russet looked at the white implement. “You mean sort of like they did in the movie *Beetlejuice*?”

“Perhaps!” If he’d seen the film, it was decades ago, a recollection long since obscured by an unaccountable stream of female athletics footage.

Russet drew the door. “And the knob!” Thundleshick reminded him. “Don’t forget the knob!”

“So I presume this doorway shall take me to another realm? Like, a... a lan of the dead, or something?” Russet asked, still battling the haze of inebriation.

“But of course! Not of the dead, mind you, but a realm of rugged masculinity and conventionally-adjusted libidinous impetus!”

Russet was about to ask what “conventionally-adjusted libidinous impetus” actually meant, but his question was stifled by an outrageously smelly burlap sack placed over his head.

“I can’t see...” Russet swooned from the awesome, overpowering fervor of the stench, but kept his balance. “Is this how it’s supposed to go?”

“Yes, yes. Now point yourself at that door. Like this.” He modified his posture for him by the shoulders. “Now, boy, fill your mind with manly thoughts. Visions of burly clout. A roaring

motorcycle. Professional wrestlers clutching each other's muscles for dominance. A friendly lady fitted with a swimsuit. Oh, yes, yes."

"Um, ok."

"Now, through the door with you!"

Russet drew a breath. His feet felt welded to the floor. He knew the strength was in him to run. It was in his faith. His faith to let go and trust God, to set everything right. Soon it would be over.

He ran as fast as he could toward the chalk door. There was the sound of bone against brick. Russet bounced backwards and dropped to the floor unconscious.

The fat old Campmaster stooped over the boy and proceeded to pick his pockets.

The distant noises of skirmish taunted Grant, flitting this way and that through the perplexing channels of Crossnest. It was like identifying the source of mocking laughter in a funhouse, designed to deliver your money's worth in aggravation. He followed the trail of blood, and the scrambling footprints smeared within it.

There was a sound behind him. A small person crouched out of sight too late.

"Simon? Is that you?"

Simon emerged sheepishly.

The Beatrix-saddled Pycroft was backed into a dead end. Carmen feather-whipped her pet senselessly, unmindful of any collateral lashings to the hostage. Beatrix flinched with each strike.

"Bad! Bad! Bad! Put down Junior Camper Beatrix at once! No treat! No treat!"

[I'd prefer to subsist on my own stool. Get out of my way!]

Through the fog of Carmen's relentless masochism, Beatrix saw something approaching from down the hall. It was lentil, who'd managed to dislodge himself.

"Hey!" she shouted. "You! Lentil, is that your name? Please help!"

Lentil was beside himself with delight, and added to the gusto of his clomping approach. It sounded like a dumpster fitted with low riding hydraulics.

"I'll even answer one of your riddles. I'll answer two if you can get her to stop whipping me!"

After a moment, Lentil produced with his lyrical voice something in keeping with his new theme.

"A glittering cache a lad's valor inherits"

"Collects 'pon a sash the boy boasts with aplomb."

"They litter the stash of a youth seeking merit..."

Lentil stopped. He was lodged between the walls again. Beatrix slapped her forehead.

Pycroft took the opportunity to bowl over Carmen and run. He leapt over the badge machine, thinking himself scot-free of the harpy and her damnable feather. Nemoira, however, was waiting for him on the other side.

He eyed her extended telescope, and swallowed. A blade of stable pyrotechnics grew from the lens. She lopped his head off.

Beatrix, along with the head and torso leaking from the fresh incision, fell to the floor.

But she was not eager to spend any time lounging down there with the body parts, as both began to twitch. Fresh organic matter bubbled from the planes of decapitation.

"Hey, I've been wondering where you went. You didn't see where the others went, did you?"

Simon shook his head slowly.

“What’s the matter? If you’re scared about all this noise, don’t worry about it. I’m going to take care of the troublemakers. Stick with me and you’ll be safe,” Grant said with the most confident big-brotherly tone in his arsenal.

Simon was silent. He frowned.

“Why don’t you help me look for them? You’re one of my sidekicks, remember?”

Simon bobbed his head and looked off to the side. Grant was puzzled by the uncharacteristic melancholy from a boy who would get excited if he received a series of bee stings in the shape of a funny face.

“Hey... what’s that behind your back?”

Simon suddenly sounded angry. “You’re going to take it from her, aren’t you!”

“Huh?”

“From Beatrix! You’re going to take her... the thing! Her thing! I know you are. I heard you say it!”

“Oh. Simon, you don’t understand. That thing is really powerful and dangerous. I have to...”

“No! It’s hers! Beatrix is my friend!”

Behind him, Simon squeezed the pistol’s grip, which seemed oversized in both of his small hands. He let go for a moment with one hand, wiped sweat from his palm on Donatello, posing amidst the fading Ninja Turtles on the front of his shirt, and quickly returned it to the grip.

Pycroft’s headless body staggered to its canine feet. Something was sprouting from its neck hole, something at which Nemoira made a face suitable for greeting ancient and unidentifiable leftovers in a warm fridge. It was a gooey, boney structure with teeth. It clenched shut, elongating into canine jaws. The rest of the head followed, flushing itself out with a coat of soft gray fur and pointy ears.

The abject severed head was busy with its own transmutation on the floor. Great knots of knitting bone and mending musculature flailed about from its neck. Soon the head rose, supported by its new body, the opposite of its wolf-headed counterpart. It had a pair of human legs, a canine upper torso, and human hands which it strategically placed in front of a part of its male human anatomy.

The two composite doppelgangers did not appear to enjoy each other's sudden company. Sniffs were issued.

[So you're here. If you had come to free me from that kennel, this might have been avoided.]

{ You still don't seem to understand the nature of our relationship. It really isn't that hard to grasp. }

[You should have let me out of the ugly girl jail.]

{ If you believe that experience was unpleasant, you should try being imprisoned within your revolting genetic material as non-sentient mutational potential. }

[I am taking the girl. The other ugly one. You have no claim on her.]

{ You'd probably better let me handle it. }

[You will take her over my dead body. Which conveniently now belongs to you.]

Pycroft's new head lifted one of its sagging dog lips, revealing a large white tooth. His mouth opened. A furious tongue of flame consumed his bald counterpart and caused surrounding metal fixtures to wilt from the heat. What remained was something black and twitching, like a scorched roast beef hooked up to high voltage.

Beatrix was tiptoeing away. Pycroft's eyes, deep yellow and black marbles, rolled to follow her.

Before a scream could escape her mouth, she was draped over his back again, blistering deep into the fort at quadruple-speed.

Herbert, turning the corner, was again knocked to his feet, relegated to the role of the bystander in the high-speed chase, a class stocked by the melon vendors of the world, and street

merchants prone to handling chickens. “Hey! Enough with the shoving already!” He muttered to himself, “I gotta go get my gun...”

Carmen gave Nemoira a purposeful look. She swirled her feather about in graceful motions, like a long banner waved by a Chinese dancer. “Counselors unite! By the Zenith of Mercury and the sprite’s quickened pulse! Bring to our soles swiftness, the celerity of a nude Grecian!”

The feather’s enchantment and the (likely superfluous) incantation produced sharp new footwear for Carmen and Nemoira, into which their boots fit snugly. Sneakers, vividly colored and energetically patterned. The girls matched Pycroft’s speed in his direction, grinning along the way.

While Carmen zoomed down the hall, Nemoira stopped. She paused to help Herbert up.

Herbert gawked at the girl in her funny pirate clothes and silly hat. He was particularly struck, for no reason he could explain, by the glass vial filled with dirt she wore around her neck. She watched him for a moment. Her silent appraisal felt intense to him.

“Hey. Um... have we met before?”

She said nothing, turned and ran.

The floor trembled beneath Grant’s feet. Somewhere below, the fort was being torn apart. They needed his help. More importantly, he couldn’t let them take her. But standing in his path was a young boy holding a gun.

“Simon, where did you get that?” On reflection, he didn’t care where he got it so much as where and under what circumstances he would put it down.

Simon was still. The berretta was suspended by a limp, noodly arm, pointed at the floor. The look in his eyes had a sort of immovable quality, somewhat robotic. It, perhaps more than the sight of the powerful weapon itself, held Grant in his tracks.

“Sorry, Mister Grant. You shouldn’t take it from her. I can’t let you.”

“Simon. Take it easy now.” He raised his hand as if to lower it on Simon’s shoulder. He quickly pulled it away. Simon’s perimeter bled into a crimson aura.

“Mister rogue horsey-crab was right. You are a liar.” He lifted the gun, aiming it at Grant. As soon as it became steady, this seemed to ignite thrashing tendrils of fire around Simon’s arm, and then wrapping about his body. His eyes, whites and all, pooled into wells of livid red. His voice changed in tenor. “I see who you really are.”

“In a swift reflexive motion, Grant grabbed the boy’s wrist and redirected the gun. His arm was hot, and surprisingly difficult to move. “Put it down, Simon. Can you hear me?” He struggled with the boy, whose possessing conflagration only intensified.

“Put it down!!!”

BANG.

A roaring boulder of fire flew by Grant’s ear and howled down the corridor. Grant flinched to his side. When he relaxed one of his eyelids to look, all at once, the fire was gone. It became sucked into Simon’s body, as if snuffed out in a vacuum. Simon’s face was still, his mouth open a bit.

Grant looked at the boy’s shirt. A trickle of red dripped from a hole Leonardo’s sneering face. Stuck in the hole, Grant found, was his sword, piercing clean-through the other side of the shirt.

Grant drew a short breath and quickly removed it the blade. Simon dropped the gun and fell.

“Oh God.”

He heard something. Like a suppressed whine. He turned around and spotted Simon’s mortified sister. He stood with his stained sword, rigid, unable to say anything. She fled in the other direction.

He looked down again. Simon wasn’t breathing.

“... oh God...”

The peacock quill yielded to the great momentum of the hot missile, then deflected it with a cracking noise. The seemingly alert projectile arched through the lofty volume of Level 37, and came about towards Nemoira. She stood at the ready on the docking platform, striking a batter's stance. She knocked the sphere towards her ship, on which Pycroft stood. He ducked. A mast splintered behind him, dragging an entire circus tent's worth of bright sails into the water. Nemoira brought a gloved hand to her mouth at the blunder. The vessel, her pride and joy, seemed as much a hostage to Pycroft as the girl slung over his shoulder.

{ I don't actually want to harm you youngsters. }

"Well you sure could have fooled me! Put me down!" Beatrix's ring crackled with blue forks of electric current. She planted her fist in his furry neck and shocked him. He growled and snapped at her hand. He wondered how she knew precisely what would bother him most. Perhaps he was too good a telepath. Or perhaps it was just that he too closely resembled a badly misbehaving dog.

{ You don't even have it, do you? }

"Have what?" Though she knew what he meant. She found there was less room for misunderstanding when the conversation took place entirely on the stage of her own mind.

{ This is good. It's better you not know where it is. It will keep him searching. }

"Then why are you kidnapping me?"

{ It can't be said I failed to do what was asked of me. }

Carmen was swirling her feather over her head. "Nymphs of Olympus, hear my plea!" Vicious winds twisted in the chamber, causing the water to prickle with foaming white crests. The ship slowly turned within the dawning whirlpool.

Nemoira bit her lip at the sight. She gently halted Carmen's whiling motion with the kindly patience of a caregiver in a psychiatric ward. "Perhaps we should not bother those nymphs just now?"

It was too late though. Wind dragged across the raging water. Both girls crouched, holding fast to the platform. The boat turned faster.

Pycroft aimed his open jaw at the high ceiling. A missile punched a hole through to daylight. Large slabs of concrete tumbled down, splashing into the water. The waves crashed against the ship, and swept the girls off the dock into the turbulent stew.

With the momentary distraction, Beatrix reacted quickly. She held up her ring and focused. The hole vanished, replaced with the appearance of smooth concrete. The hole reappeared several yards away. The deception was her last hope.

Pycroft's powerful haunches expelled him from the deck toward the ceiling. He was not aiming for the phantom hole, however. He grinned as he sailed through the illusory concrete veneer, and took to the sky.

{ A valiant try. }

“Darn.”

Nemoira surfaced in time to watch the Rubicund Wayfare's final moments above water. She looked skyward at the hole, though it may have doubled as an excuse to curse the heavens for her misfortune. She swam to rescue her flailing, feather-toting ally from drowning.

Grant stepped on to the precipice above the dock in time to witness the mayhem subside. Herbert stepped in behind him, fastening the M9 into its holster.

“Looks like we're too late. What happened? Is Beatrix gone?”

Grant didn't reply.

“Hey,” Herbert lowered his voice. “Sorry to have to tell you this. We took a casualty back there.”

Grant turned. Herbert didn't notice in the lighting how white he was. Or that he was shaking slightly.

“They got the kid. The boy. What was his name?” Herbert touched his forehead trying to recall. “Anyway, he's gone. Poor kid.”

Grant nodded.

“You ok?”

Russet sat upright like he was a steel trap just sprung. He was soaking wet, and marinating in chilly sludge. All around him, fog crept low to the water. It was a swamp. In the distance, the silhouette of Thundleshick’s castle quietly shifted its shape.

He felt his pocket. The doll was gone. Had he misplaced it? He couldn’t remember.

His head hurt.

With a sudden panic, he felt beneath the back of his vest, under his cape. He was relieved. The locket was still there.

He couldn’t recall how he got here. Thundleshick... where did he go? Did they really drink that much? There was something about...

The cure. Had it been...?

The weak sun behind the overcast sky became blocked out by something. Russet was enveloped in a tall shadow.

“Master Thundleshick?”

Russet turned to find it was something only slightly less hell-bent on the misfortune of children, and considerably less frightening. It was a ten-foot tall, black-boned, green-entrained skeleton.

The skeleton held its abdominal cavity and began to rhythmically convulse. A dribble of green phlegm stretched from its mouth. Even someone without expertise in diagnosing skeleton discomfort would probably be able to tell you the monster was feeling a bit under the weather. It doubled over the soggy boy.

Russet drooped. “Oh...”

Part V

On an autumn afternoon, a flash of light flooded the bedroom, followed by a crack of thunder followed. Louis Eggwood, one many would describe as “enthusiastic”, especially when otherwise at a loss for words, rarely kept a heavy mood. Today though had been unusually trying.

He lugged his storm-soaked frame across the room and sank into the bed. It was an imposing frame for a fourteen year old boy, and had always been, even more so than his younger brother who wasn't exactly shortchanged. He smothered his face in his meaty hands and listened to the raindrops hammer at the glass.

It seemed a kind of prayer, his head bowed in supplication to the hobgoblins of self-doubt. It released them from a confining realm as if something of occult tradition, like a shaman rapping a sick man's chest with a painted feathery pipe. They responded to the invitation with their typical boons, vesting him with thoughts of futility. What was the use? Why did he continue to pour his creativity, his heart, into an empty sieve? He'd deluded himself into believing he could produce anything of worth. He was surrounded by those who ignored him at worst and humored him at best, and even on reflection he wasn't sure if he'd placed those in the right order.

His shallow gaze found his bookshelf collection, and then an old Rutherford Trick pinup. Volume 10, Smirk of the Feckless Vagabond. Trick was a handsome rascal, clever to the point of vice with a wit more savage than his magic assaults. Louis would give anything to “sport” with him for treasure, as Trick referred to the activity. To be at his impetuous command, to be held in captivity by those fiery, intelligent eyes...

He stopped himself. The thoughts only brought him loneliness.

These authors were masters. With a deft hand they invigorated the objects of his fascination—magic, youthful adventure, camaraderie. He felt like a feeble parasite to their craft, their accomplishments, or at best benign, something limp and vestigial on an otherwise evolutionarily acute specimen. The feelings of inadequacy particularly circled in the shadow of his close friend, who'd already found his work in print. How he admired that work. At least he thought he was a friend. It was something else he didn't want to think about right now.

No one could possibly understand what he was feeling now. And no one, it seemed, could mend the breach in his confidence, his natural good humor which buoyed every moment of his life until today. No one, he thought to himself with a note of dry humor, but those of his own creation. Those who lived in his mind. Those who knew him best because they were of him.

The somber rumination was just the sort to nourish a craving for a sign, for something awesome to happen that would forever change his life. It was ironically the same sort to cloud his perception enough to miss that very sign when it presented itself, as it did just now on his desk. He hadn't noticed it when he walked in, and now, as he looked up, was too surprised by it to recognize it as such.

His manuscript, volume one, rested there opened. He hadn't touched it or any of the other six volumes in some time. Had Seymour been in his room?

He loomed over the exposed pages. He wouldn't let a breath escape. He cautiously appraised the words, once weary with his own familiarity, but now different somehow. Something wasn't right.

One particular passage caught him, and he methodically dragged his focus across the letters, and that was the moment everything changed. The paper became warm. His bedroom again became brighter, but not due to the lightning outside.

In the flickering light and muggy haze of the Oval Office, if anyone were around to listen, few things could be heard. The flapping of moths. The hostile clicking of cockroaches, frustrated over the cessation of the comforting darkness, once decades undisturbed. And the soft beeping of a digital timer.

02:00:01... 02:00:00... 01:59:59...

There was nothing to see in the hole punctured from beneath through the mud and tangled tree roots. Level 37 was too far below and too dark. Grant traced upward the imaginary path through the sky on which the flying mutant had made off with Beatrix.

“You know what this means, right? We’re going to have to go save her,” Herbert said.

Grant looked at him quickly, and again at the sky. He didn’t seem ecstatic with the idea. Herbert may as well have invoked their duties as young Samaritan volunteers in the geriatric colonic ward. Herbert watched the young man of whom he knew little, and had little plans to ask. He seemed tired, and in some way he couldn’t describe, maybe more tired than anyone he’d ever seen.

“It’ll be dangerous. Slurpenook is well defended.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“Plus, we still have no idea where the Slipknot is. I’m sure Beatrix didn’t have it. We still need to find it.”

“Right. Well,” Herbert assumed the role of a practical tactician. “I still say Russet took it. And who the hell knows where that fruitcake is. So either I’m right, in which case it’s likely he’s keeping it out of the hands of Marlevort for a while, even if he doesn’t actually know what he’s doing. Or, it’s just plain lost, in which case it’s just as lost to Marlevort too. Either way, there’s nothing we can do about it right now.”

“Russet... damn you,” Grant cursed to himself quietly.

“What I do know is Beatrix was just captured by a weird shape-shifting asshole. Beatrix is our friend, and she needs our help. That feels like a good enough reason to me. Anyway, that is what this summer camp is all about, right? Friendship?”

Grant gave him an askance look. “Didn’t you just want to go home?”

Herbert let out some air, exhaust fumes from lingering exasperation, and paused.

“I’m not going anywhere for now. It’s pretty obvious. Thundleshick is completely useless. No one can help me. A little while ago I left another message with my dad, but that’s about it. That’s all I can do. The only thing to do now is to make the best of things, and look out for each other.”

“You’re right.” Grant said, and appeared mentally to flip forward to Herbert’s page of resolve. “But this really isn’t going to be as easy as you think. Marlevort’s fleet is stationed in a sea of...” He stopped. “I know this sounds stupid.”

“Don’t worry. I’m used to it by now. What is it, lava or something?”

“Yes, actually.”

“Ok. Makes sense. I mean, they are all really evil, aren’t they?”

“We could sail there on a ship equipped for that kind of travel. I’d guess the sailor girl’s boat could do it, but she’s busy getting it above water and repairing it. It’ll be a good while before it’s seaworthy, I’d say.”

“Couldn’t we fly somehow? We might be able to use that office chair I flew here, but I think it’s probably almost out of fuel. Not to mention we probably wouldn’t both fit on it. Our surprise attack would probably look pretty retarded with you on my lap...”

“Chair? What?”

“Forget it.”

“Actually...” Grant said, suddenly more alert. “I may have an idea.”

The brig was like an iron sauna, broiling in the bowels of the carrier formerly named the U.S.S. Forrestal (and since renamed something more fittingly haunting and in keeping with its captain’s preferences). Beatrix was sure it had to be at least 130° Fahrenheit in the small prison into which she’d been dumped unceremoniously. Her clothes pined for one of Russet’s laundering spells as they became increasingly snug from sweat.

She passed the time studying her ring and contemplating its power. It appeared, through magical means at least, that escape was nonviable. She even struggled with the simple task of cooling the room down a bit. Grant seemed to have no trouble wielding a variety of “elemental” invocations, including frosty attacks. She wondered why she had trouble with it. She thought about the events surrounding her capture. The moments of distress and anger brought from within her a

certain type of energy. As if all the electrons in and around her raced like a kind of breath, a particular life force bent to a primordial will in her. She lilted her hand to and fro, watching the little blue orbs sizzle, dance and pop. Magic sure was a fickle mistress, she thought.

The door opened. A black, bony claw dropped a boy in the room like a sack of potatoes. Appropriately enough, the boy's name could appear on such a sack without alerting even the most curmudgeonly grocer's suspicion.

"Russet."

Grant adjusted the knobs on Zoe's walkie-talkie as he and Herbert crossed the tarmac. The volume on the gadget decreased slightly. The antics piping through the speaker were a little much, and it had been a long day.

"I didn't really follow much of that. Who's talking through the radio? And what was going on in there with that crazy old lady?"

"I can still hear you, young man!" Zoe said through the speaker.

"Oh. Sorry."

Grant disabled the device briefly. "Yeah. It can be pretty confusing at first. Let's just see what's in this hangar."

"Now you will want to take a few more paces and take a left," Zoe's voice crackled. "You mean right, Ms. Z. They must go right. What? Oh, my sweet lord. No, Ferris. It is to the left. Are you sure?"

Herbert looked back at the cabin they came from. Through the window was the little robotic doll named Dott, who he found a bit creepy with her large camera lens eyes. She was indeed gesturing to her left.

"Yes, I am sure. I am directing them from our vantage point, from which the turn is a left. I know you love to run that wonderful mouth of yours all the time, but it would help if just this once the only voice you allowed from it was mine. Do you understand, silly boy? Yes, roger that Ms. Z."

“Hey, is that it over there?” Herbert asked. “I see another one of those robots. It’s waving at us, and standing in front of a hangar-looking thing. Why don’t we just go there.”

“Yes, that is me. I am waving at you now. Hi, it is nice to see you. Oh, good, then. Go right in. The boys have taken great care to restore Banditsknife, and I think it marvelous that she should be put to noble use.”

VociFerris was similar in design and identical in size to his sister. As Grant had already imagined, he lacked the big perpetually focusing lenses, but had an active mouth, somewhat like a ventriloquist’s doll.

“Welcome, I am pleased to have your company. This way.

His manners are splendid, aren’t they? That is, when he is not being too clever. Why, thank you, Zoe. I work very hard at my mannerssssSSSCREEE—(click.)”

Grant turned off the walkie-talkie to end the feedback noise from the other one, which hung around Ferris’ neck.

Inside the great space of the hangar the dust suspended in the air was sliced by bright, slanted columns of light from rusted holes in a porous ceiling. Waiting for them was the robot’s brother sitting on the floor quietly.

“This is Graham. He does not say anything, but he is really smart.” Graham perked up as his sensitive hearing detected his name. Unlike Ferris or Dott, he lacked even a trace of a mouth. His eyes were simple, like Ferris’, but what really commanded the admiration of a new acquaintance was his pair of ears, two sizable satellite dishes. His little hands busied themselves with adept motions of sign language.

“Hee-hee-hee! Pardon my brother. His sense of humor is sort of weird.”

“That’s fine. I couldn’t understand him,” Herbert replied. “So where’s the plane... the Hoboknife?”

Zoe broke in through Ferris’ mouth, a heavily taxed employee working double-overtime for two demanding bosses. “What was that? Ferris, what did my ears say? Never mind, Ms. Z. I have everything under control.”

Graham was already leading them to the aircraft, and it was soon visible before traversing much of the sprawling hangar floor. It was the lone gleaming wonder amidst a graveyard of rusting scrap.

“Whoa. An F-16?” Herbert held his advance, regarding the jet with a sort of inward obeisance. He could be exposed to a kaleidoscopic buffet of stunning magical wonders dredged from the most enchanted crevices of the cosmos, and greet them with a blunt yawn. It was not merely boredom. It was a fertile shell of malaise which, with tender care and steady incubation, would only hatch contempt. Weaponry however, great machines of war, their details, contours, schematics, measured analysis of destructive capacity, they would have his stubborn spirit arrested with the all the protest of a monk rapt in righteous peace.

Banditsknife struck Herbert as something of fable. Something not assembled, but chiseled from something unknown, born of living ore. The Fighting Falcon jet still wore some old parts, exhibiting traces of a once humbler existence. It now stood refurbished, lovingly maintained, and plated in lucid silver absorbing the hot spears of sun into liquid-like reflection. Herbert thought for a moment of his gun, plated judiciously in silver, and the latent ferocity it concealed. But considered more palpably, that is was meant for him—it spoke to him in a silent animal tongue. And he was being spoken to again.

“It’s nice,” Grant said. “It should get us there. We won’t be subtle about it, exactly, but it’ll work. So can one of you guys fly it for us?”

Graham and Ferris looked at each other with a flurry of signs and whispers. “Ah... I do not think it would be right if we left our mother alone here. She needs us very much.” Graham was nodding vigorously in support of the claim. “What? Now don’t be ridiculous. You boys are excellent pilots, and it is time to put aside our selfish ends to help these young men, particularly if it means finally delivering justice to that repugnant counselor.”

The little robots slouched expressively. “Ms. Z, you are right. But I am a little scared.”

“I think I can fly it,” Herbert stepped in. He reached to feel the belly of the plane. “I’m not sure how, but I think I can.”

Grant studied him. He knew it sounded silly to let a suburban boy with no flight training or even a driver's license attempt it. But for some reason, he knew Herbert would back it up. "Alright. Let's get her in the air."

The Secretary stole a nervous look at his watch and walked a little faster down the carpeted hall. With the other hand he inspected his immaculate haircut, assuring that no strands had fallen out of place, which of course they had not.

Caspar Weinberger had been called to the Oval Office at the urgent request of the President. Could this be it? The Secretary of Defense wondered to himself, slightly audibly, was this the big one? He swallowed. It could only be the Russians. He heard it in his Commander's voice. They had to be attacking.

He picked up his pace. His composure lapsed into a restrained, gracefully-aging white man's jog.

Banditsknife zipped and corkscrewed agile patterns through the thin, high air at Mach 3. Atomized in its supersonic wake were puffy clouds, pink in the wash of a setting sun. Grant tensed every face muscle he was aware of and then some, as if concentration alone was holding himself together under the g-force brunt of yet another one of Herbert's reckless and flagrantly unnecessary barrel rolls.

"Maybe you should take it easy on those controls, since I guess in the most strictly technical sense, you've never, ever flown a plane before. Like, ever." Dizziness seemed to activate Grant's sarcasm center of the brain.

"Hey, relax. Try to enjoy the ride. Anyway, this thing practically flies itself. I mean, I'm flying it, but it's more like loose suggestion than direct control. Like it's got a mind of its own. Kind of like riding a mythical mount, like a gryphon. Only cooler."

"A gryphon, you say?"

"Like the sorority girls did one time. In... you know what, never mind."

“I wouldn’t have pegged you for someone who’s into that kind of literature.”

“Well, no, but I mean... they ride gryphons around in pretty much all those books, don’t they? Or at least some kind of hideous beast like that long shaggy puppet-dog in *The Never Ending Story*. They’ve always got all this, like... enchanted wisdom.” Herbert spat the contemptible phrase.

Grant couldn’t offer a rebuttal on the volatile subject if he wanted to. His stomach was left about a thousand feet over his head. Herbert pulled up, leveling off to a view of sharp, toothy snow-capped mountains to the north. Not far beyond them were marshlands, presided over by Thundleshick’s castle. Titling the jet to the east, he found the forest concealing Fort Crossnest. He looked above, but the spinning holographic icon was nowhere to be found.

“Hey, what happened to the beacon?”

“Huh? What beacon?” Grant asked, stroking his stomach tenderly as if he’d just found out he was a mother-to-be.

“I guess maybe the computer got shut off with all the commotion.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask,” Grant switched subjects. “What’s with the gun?”

“Nothing’s with it. It’s just some magical berretta I found. Or it’s supposed to be magic. The only thing I can make it do is shoot bullets, stupid me. I’m pretty sure my future self left it for me to—”

“No, no,” he stopped him. “I mean the other one in your belt. The one that looks like an antique.”

“Oh, that. I thought it looked cool, so I took it. It’s not loaded, and as far as I know it’s not magic either. Of course I’m not exactly a reliable source on that. For all I know the damn thing is so magic it would make a unicorn weep. Oh, yeah, I also found it in this bizarre old replica of the Whitehouse, if you can believe that.”

“Hmm. Yeah, actually I can believe that.”

Herbert yanked the jet to a ninety degree tilt and whipped it south, dipping low to the ground. He encouraged the burners just a bit, and the aircraft kicked forward, the seat padding

slapping the backs of their heads. The jet put even further distance between itself and the howl of its outrageous velocity. The landscape seared beneath them, an incomprehensible slideshow of rushing trees. The trees gave way to increasingly barren land, and then to ancient crumbling structures. It was all uniformly coated in a gently undulating surface, warmly colored by the reflected light, and glittering. The glittering was a frenetic dance of redirected light caused by their quick movement in the jet, as they caught the sun-spiked angles of countless tiny crystals.

“What is all this?”

“It was Fort Funnelbunk.”

Herbert tried to get a better look at the strange sand carpeting the landscape. “And what is that stuff?”

“Sugar.”

Both were a little dazed, and not much had been exchanged other than the basics of how they got there. Though maybe there was a greater impediment to words besides the oppressive heat and the rigors of capture. In any case, Russet broke the silence.

“What’s the matter, Beatrix? Aside from the obvious, of course.” He gestured to their enclosure, an oven in which one might not too badly undercook a chicken.

“I lost it.”

He didn’t need to ask. He brought the locket from beneath his cape and dangled it in front of her.

She smiled, suddenly feeling silly for being the least bit surprised. And then, she was happy.

The desert of ancient sugar had soon frittered away into the dusty land situating airport from which they took off, and then frittered again into real desert. Grant recognized it as the arid stretch just south of Jivversport he trudged across days ago. Before scorching over the city and across its

northern bay, Herbert hooked a left over plain lands and then beyond to a northwestern forest. Sprouting from the middle of the forest was a structure which could be seen for miles. It was a very thin metal tower reaching several thousand feet above. Circling around its pinnacle was a wide metal ring the diameter of a major sports arena. Locals referred to it simply as The Mast, though this was not a term Grant bothered with as he satisfied Herbert's curiosity.

"A silo?" Herbert repeated.

"Yeah. Though technically the silo part is underground. The tower is a shaft, serving other purposes, like creating the dimensional opening. There used to be a lot more of them a long time ago, I believe."

"An opening??" Herbert jumped on that point. "So you mean it opens to another dimension, like Earth? Hell, why don't we fire it up and fly through there?"

"Trust me. You do not want that thing to be 'fired up' by any means."

"Oh, right. The missiles. These would be the magic nukes, then?"

"Right."

He flew closer to the tower and swung around it. Aside from the improbability of the great floating ring platform which looked quite precarious, there was nothing fanciful about the construction. It easily looked like something that could have been commissioned by the federal government. Herbert was quite engaged by the thought of this unspeakable weaponry, of this military might veiled to the public. He'd been so busy trying to get home, he never paused to consider that this land guarded a rich and mostly inscrutable history, or that it harbored depth beyond superficial boyhood antics and absurd magical escapades. Stuff that was for other kids, not him. He never fueled speculation that legitimate, responsible agencies of the world might have invested this realm with their serious affairs. Still, he wondered why even the serious affairs found ways of being so downright silly.

It was cut and dried. Magic just ruined everything.

He guided the jet south of The Mast, skirting along the coast until coming upon a bleak, dilapidated marina, pointed out by Grant as the Slurpenook mainland docking site. He jerked a hard

right over the ocean into the setting sun. Below, the blue water soon became black, hardened-looking, and then blossoming pools of red and orange here and there. The incandescent pools became more abundant as the ocean gave way to molten rock.

“I don’t quite get it. What exactly does a magic nuclear weapon do?”

“Pretty much what an ordinary one does. Though in some cases more destructive. And other cases, less, I suppose. They can wipe out a city, or even a small nation. But... magically.”

“You don’t say!”

“Unfortunately, yeah. It’s true.”

“I sort of gathered that. I mean, how does it differ from a normal bomb? You know, one that blows stuff up with atoms. And science.”

“Well, rather than wiping things out with a big fireball from a chain reaction, the blast does magical stuff. Like turn everything into sugar. Or butter. Or gingerbread. Stuff like that.”

“So in other words, the full gamut of things found in a bakery? The versatility is breathtaking.”

“No. Or... anything. Come on, Herbert, cut me a break. It could be toadstools, or feathers, or bat wings... You know how magic goes.”

“Yeah, I hear ya.” Herbert slowed the jet as he nursed a train of thought which rankled him by the moment. “So why did they even bother making the nukes magical anyway? How stupid is that? The result is the same. They both destroy stuff. Why bother with the ridiculous charade?”

“I don’t know, Herbert. I’d just consider it a rule of thumb. Sort of like a government. If it can spend money on something, it will. Just like if whatever powers that be can make something needlessly magic, they will. I mean, why bother having an ordinary doorknocker shaped like a lion’s head, when that lion can talk to you! It’s exciting. It’s fun. It’s whimsical, I guess. It all abides by its own internally consistent logic.”

“Ha! Yeah, right on, man! All that stuff is such bullshit. Who cares about talking lions??”

“Anyway, maybe the thought of being turned into butter strikes more fear into the heart of the enemy. I know I wouldn’t want to be turned into butter. Also, a magical bomb can be engineered for a lot of different purposes. Even non-lethal ones, theoretically. You could make one where everyone in the blast radius would... I don’t know. Magically grow a mustache.”

“I don’t suppose there are mustache bombs buried in that silo?”

“I sincerely doubt it.”

Herbert picked up the dark rectangular forms littered on the fiery horizon. It was a horizon now burning equally from both ends, in sky and in sea. He gently tilted the plane, beginning a wide, tentative circle around the combat zone before heading in.

“So what actually happened? I’m still not clear on this. When was the war?”

Grant didn’t mind going on, since it seemed to keep Herbert’s flying less erratic. “Most of it took place in the 1980’s, by Earth time.”

“Huh. It all seems like such ancient history. All this went down before I was born.”

“In a way, it is, when you consider the time scale of this realm. It was almost two hundred years ago. Then, as my understanding of the history goes, something terrible happened. Some kind of disaster that caught both sides off guard. It left the armies decimated and the land in ruins. It seems it never fully recovered.”

Secretary Weinberger sat in front of the President’s desk, rigid with nerves, but patient. He listened to the gentle scratchings of a pen on a sheet of Whitehouse stationery. The pen put the finishing flourish on a crude cartoon horse, its third such creation on the page.

“What do you think, Cap?” asked President Reagan.

“They’re beautiful, sir,” Caspar said with genuine admiration. “But I have to confess, sir, I was under the impression that there was something urgent to discuss.”

Reagan calmly rested the pen on his desk and brought his hand to his chin. The atmosphere of the storied elliptical room seemed to change along with the man's mood, as if in deference. "It's the war. I've been dwelling on ways to end this awful conflict all afternoon."

"It's troubled me as well, sir. Candidly, sir, recent Soviet activity has me more than a little spooked."

"Well, now, Cap, no reason to take their mischief to heart. The Russians will do as they'll do. I'm thinking of the big picture. You'll recall Star Wars?" he said with a coy turn in his lip, addressed to the very man he'd charged with implementing the bold vision.

"Of course. Damned stroke of genius, Mr. President. Infallible bulwark against annihilation. Only in America!"

"Well, yes. Thank you, Cap. But I'll have to confess. I was never so much interested in its efficacy as I was in the power of its statement."

"Statement, sir?"

"Oh, it's no secret, old friend. I cut my teeth in Hollywood. I've always been a great proponent of the magic of image. Of illusion. That's where real tactical power lies. It's been my fond hope since I was a young man to breathe some magic into this stubborn dry soil. This obtuse rock, our home, planet Earth."

Cap's mouth hung open just a bit, as if it was about to dispense a ticket. He was starting to think he'd need a cigarette soon.

"That's why I went into film, Cap. And that too is why I became president. To bring magic into the world. And with it to defend all that is good, as much as nature permits within its limits. Because, friend, of course we both know there's no such thing as real magic."

Dear God, Cap thought. Did the President just wink at him? He cleared his throat. "Sir, if you don't mind my saying, at times I've thought your economic policies are pure magic."

Reagan produced a humble smile. "Well, thank you. You know, the two subjects are far more closely related than you might suspect. But I digress.

“I’ve been accused of many things, and one charge I don’t protest is being a dreamer. I’ve tended to this dream for years. I remember like yesterday working with Mr. Lucas to put a face on the idea. To christen it with fantastic and frightening displays of military might, only cinematic though they be. But this statement, Cap. Its power was such that by the time our whisperings of the Federal Star Wars program reached Russian ears, by George we had their attention. Who among their paranoid ranks could divine the fact from the fiction?”

Caspar’s forehead complained with wrinkles. “It would explain why one of our operatives was interrogated for the details of the Death Star’s construction. We actually thought it might be some sort of espionage-oriented April Fool’s jape.”

Reagan shifted in his chair somewhat uncomfortably, squeaking the leather. Cap cocked an eyebrow. “Wait... sir, they were fictional films, weren’t they?” The President merely emanated his typical charismatic glow in response. His Defense Secretary’s perspiration was a little more noticeable.

“Well, now, don’t be silly. Of course not, Cap.” Cap exhaled. “But that’s not here nor there. Though it’s been a fine campaign if I say so myself, it’s essentially run its course. This Space Race has pushed outward the frontier, and both we and our enemy have staked our claims. But all symbolism aside, I fear henceforth there will be little return to the enterprise. As a nation we must forge on.”

“What do you have in mind, sir?”

“Well, I’ve been dwelling on a new frontier to claim. Though in truth, not new at all. Ancient, timeless, steeped in legend hidden to history’s recollection. One over which the Russians have scarce foothold yet, and will be quick to seek once prompted. And now that by God’s good grace you-know-who has been subdued, it will be open season. If we can beat them out there, they’ll surely start to destabilize. It’ll be the beginning of the end, Cap.”

Cap leaned forward. “Sir... who is you-know-who?”

“Best to let sleeping dogs lay, friend.” Reagan swiveled his chair and eased open a drawer. He bathed in the sentimentality of the items his hand caressed. Several frayed, weathered badges. A

copper telescope and a compass. An assortment of Indian arrowheads. And an antique flintlock pistol.

“Today I was thinking. Recent events drew out bittersweet memories. I was reminded of something from my youth. I never told anyone in the administration of course. But at this critical juncture in history, now’s the time. Time to revisit it.”

“Revisit what, Mr. President?”

“Summer camp.”

Caspar allowed for a stoic half-minute to pass while he pondered the exact nature of his duty as the President’s immediate counsel. He finally spoke with a leaden tone. “Shall I get Mr. Lucas on the phone?”

“No, thanks, Cap. That’ll do. We need to begin recruiting. Recruiting young.”

His Secretary was incredulous. “Mr. President... I hardly know what to say. I’m afraid this is about to eclipse my field of expertise by some margin.”

“Well, rest your worries, Cap. Leave everything to me.”

Cap looked as if his chest were fit to burst with pride and admiration. “Sir, may I just applaud your astonishing bravery and leadership. We’d all be lost without it. God bless America.”

“Anyway, you can probably gather what happened after that,” Grant said, growing accustomed to raising his voice over the jet engine. “The Russian government couldn’t take the losses, and in the chaos of the aftermath, it collapsed. The U.S. held on and won the cold war. That would have been around a hundred and fifty years ago. Marlevort came on to the scene later, but his domination really threw a wrench into the reconstruction process.”

“What I’m wondering is,” Herbert said while calibrating a dial whose purpose was utterly mysterious to him. “Was it always a summer camp? Even during the war? I mean, was this magical war between global superpowers just a glorified series of capture the flag tournaments and s’more making competitions?”

“Who knows for sure. The way I understand it, by some time-honored tradition of the realm, it’s always sort of existed as a structured entity for childhood activity, whether the emphasis was on recreation, combat or what have you. I’m sure it’s taken many forms over the centuries. Marlevort distorted it all into something of his own design, for reasons probably beyond his control, I suppose.”

“Huh?”

Grant was silent. He looked off to the side, out of the cockpit glass and through the sulfur haze, where the ghostly fleet simmered in red. Herbert didn’t follow up on the point, though. He’d found something else lodged in his craw. “Another thing. Does this place have a name? Most magical realms have funny names. I’ve never heard anyone mention it.”

“The realm? I don’t think so. Look at it this way. Does our universe have a name? We just call it ‘the universe’, because it doesn’t occur to us that there are others. Our planet has a name. So does this one. Lots of names, probably, depending on who you ask and who’s still alive to call it that. I’ve always known it by its governmental classification, and a lot of locals seem comfortable with it too. Pretty dry stuff.”

Grant felt his head press into his neck as Herbert pulled up. “Ok, looks like we’re coming up on ‘em. Get yourself ready. I’ll approach from above.”

Banditsknife pointed straight up, punching through the plateau of volcanic smog into the clear twilight sky.

“I hope you’ll forgive my snooping. I had to take it, Bea. I had to keep it safe for you because someone was after it. Someone quite unfriendly.”

“I know, Russet. Thank you.”

He scooted back on their cot against the wall. He was still considerably hung over, and his face openly spoke to the condition. “Whatever else may be true, at least it’s with its rightful owner.”

She held the artifact, tilting it, catching light in its etchings. She’d guarded it for years, but now beheld it as something strange. Had she ever really looked at it? Truly been with it, feeling for

its meaning and the power inside it? Whatever its purpose, that had only been of peripheral relevance to her life. It seemed to her in retrospect more emblematic of her secrecy. Her fear. Every worry she'd ever had. It had become part of herself, and it was a part she didn't like anymore.

"I want you to keep it."

"You do?"

"Keep it safe, Russet. I trust you."

He took it with a little smile. "I'll do my best. Though I wonder what it'll matter if we can't get out of here."

Beatrix was hesitant to ask. His posture regarding their captivity seemed enough to suggest he wasn't up to using magic. He did look off his game, perhaps due to the medication. It was as if he read her thoughts. "Nope. No 'majyyks'. Sorry." A sarcastic dabble of his hand punctuated 'majyyks'. He ran the hand through his sweaty hair. "The friggin' booze isn't helping things much."

She had thought she smelled something on his breath. "So, um... how have you been feeling? Did your medication help?"

"Eh. The pills do their thing. You know, I'm sort of humming a long."

"I'm sorry I forced you to take them. That was stupid. I was..." she trailed off.

"You were right to be upset with me. I was behaving like a total jackass. I've just been so hopelessly confused."

"Confused about what?"

"About everything. My whole life. About myself, and why I'm always so miserable. You probably think it sounds quaint, but honestly I feel like a horrible sinner."

"A sinner? How so?"

His features clouded over with his troubled thoughts. His pupils twitched under narrowed lids. He said nothing.

Beatrix found herself alert, and rested her own emotion. Something was in Russet that ought to come out. Just maybe she could just listen, provide the space for it. Anchored in her clarity, she spoke. “Remember my dream? A few nights ago?”

“Yeah.”

“It already feels like a long time ago.”

“I know.”

“Well, anyway, wasn’t it you who said the only real sin is not knowing who you are?”

“Oh, God, I was so full of shit!”

She stifled a laugh at the outburst. She didn’t mean to find it funny. Why was it so easy to see through the absurdity of someone else’s problems? Was it patronizing to think so? Perhaps it became easier when she found a bit of distance from her own. In any case, her mild release of levity seemed to put the smallest crack in his shell. His mouth broadened slowly.

“You know, the silly thing about this is…” he said, pausing, his tone softened. “I was always so fond of you from the start. I never mentioned this to you, but I cannot remember ever actually meeting a girl before. I was so excited, and I thought you were so pretty and interesting and fun. It’s so completely insane that I made you feel sad and rejected. I’m really sorry. Honestly, from the first moment I saw you, all I really wanted to do was to kiss you.”

He looked down with the meek bow of confessor’s remorse. She ducked down a bit to catch his eyes, and for the moment, their glances met, stabilized in each other. She drew closer. Her pink lips separated, and hovered near his. They closed against them softly, joined by the slick of lip balm, the taste of sweat, and the hint of scotch.

Shortly, she pulled back. He didn’t move. Her smirk became a smile. She asked playfully, “Hey, what kind of lip balm is that? Strawberry?”

“I think I’m gay.”

She blinked twice. And then again.

“©#@%.”

Russet looked around the cell to see if she had brought along the Singe Vilain. She had not.

The walls shook. Somewhere, heavy artillery was being fired.

In Bel-Air, California, on June 5, 2004, All was quiet in the Reagan family home. Nancy sat by her husband's bed and sensed a stirring.

She stroked his hand to let him know she was there, even if he wasn't fully aware of it. Though his mind was locked away from her, imprisoned by the disease, she always knew her beloved husband's spirit was strong. And from it, she drew strength too.

There was a whisper from the bed. "Mommy..."

"Ronnie?"

She could hardly believe what she saw. He looked at her warmly, his eyes alert and lucid. He was her old Ronnie again for the first time in years.

Spinning beneath Herbert's corkscrew nosedive was the heat-scorched naval fleet, comprised of aging vessels once the pride of American and Russian forces alike. Anti-aircraft fire thundered from many flashing sources, rising into the dusk sky, finding no intersection with Banditsknife's nimble evasive path.

"Let's see what she can do." Herbert's raised voice instructed Grant from the front. "You ready back there?"

"Yeah. I think so." Grant looked at the controls in front of him. Though they weren't controls so much as they were stationary handles made of silver. They were mounted to a silver panel, central to many silver wires and filaments spreading through the craft like a nervous system. He wrapped his palms and fingers around them gently.

"And hey. No butter bombs, ok? Let's keep it simple. Just straight up, honest to God ass-kicking magic."

“Roger that,” Grant said as if he’d taken that order from superior officers on a routine basis. The metal parts he held glowed. It was pulling energy from within him and multiplying it. He was dealing with a serious weapon, his raised eyebrow seemed to note.

Herbert didn’t wait for the small cruiser to pass through any crosshairs. There weren’t even any crosshairs to be found. He had a feeling he wouldn’t have to aim. He pulled the trigger.

The modified gun barrels fulminated with violent bursts of light, an almost continuous, jagged serpent of white daggers. The swath lashed across several boats which were about as helpless as bathtub toys. They were explosively punctured. They spat lava upward through fresh holes and eased beneath the red.

Several nearby ships took to the air, as if great wasps spurred to flight by threat to the hive. Dripping from the underbellies was bright molten rock, gritty from a cooling and darkening cracked surface.

“Oh, awesome. The boats can fly. Hey, Grant, tell me, what the hell is the point of a flying boat? Why can’t they just stay put?”

“I’m trying to concentrate.”

As Herbert flew by, he noticed the decks were manned by a netherworldly crew, an assortment of the demonic, the skeletal, and the captive, a group comprised of understandably frightened Junior Campers.

Meanwhile, from the deck of the carrier a string of aircraft deployed efficiently into the sky. If Herbert were forced to guess at the appearance of the piloting parties, he’d probably have envisioned a smaller skeleton fitted with goggles of some sort, worn to protect the eyeballs it didn’t have. This would have been a pretty good guess.

He held her hand. His grip was weak, trembling slightly.

“You can’t go, Ronnie. It’s been so long since we could talk like this.” A tear escaped her blink.

“I have to go, Mommy. It’s time again for me to defend lives and preserve freedom.”

“What do you mean? What lives, Ronnie? Where will you go?”

“It’s ok, Nancy. It’s ok.”

“Can’t you just stay? Just a little while longer?”

The former President relaxed his face, forgiving a bit the creases of his longevity. “Well, it’s my duty. I’ve taken an oath. And I know in my heart man is good, that what is right will always eventually triumph and that there is purpose and worth to each and every life.” His gaze drifted up, just over her head, and into the distance. “I love you, Nancy.”

His eyes stood still. They remained open. But she knew he was gone.

00:30:25... 00:30:24... 00:30:23...

The swarm of jets was like a living, roaring showcase from one of Herbert’s military aviation books. He named each one with a sort of quiet ritualistic respect before gunning it down.

There was the stylish Russian-made MiG-31 Foxhound. And now it was glittering sheets of scrap metal fluttering through the hot air currents. And there, the American F-20 Tigershark, terror of the open blue. Though it performed in a marginally less terrifying manner once its wings were made to resemble cheese graters. The MiG-29 Fulcrum, a jewel of the Soviet air force. Moments later, Herbert wondered retrospectively if perhaps it had been filled with an unusually combustible type of fuel. He looked off to the side and flipped a mock salute to an F-18 Hornet spiraling below, whose function had been reduced to that of a multi-million dollar lawn dart.

He eased off the trigger, momentarily pensive as he barrel rolled under the hull of a lumbering airborne battle cruiser. “I hope I’m not shooting down too many of these miserable kids.”

“I somehow get the feeling you’re the only kid around here who can fly a plane,” Grant reassured.

“How’s it going back there?”

“Good. I think I’m getting a better feel for it.”

“Ok. Keep the wicked magic coming!” Herbert couldn’t believe the words from his mouth. He would have stopped to wonder if he was under the influence of another sort of toy monkey, but it was unlikely there existed a charm with such frightening power.

Grant closed his eyes. Banditsknife brightened, then spent itself on Herbert’s trigger. A missile hissed from the wing, ambling almost lazily, towards a battleship mingling with evening clouds.

The missile’s form hiccupped, in a way, and became ten missiles. Those missiles in a blink became one hundred. The U.S.S. Ghost in the Shell took the brunt of the volley and began its slow, smoldering descent like an ailing dirigible.

Two more missiles left the jet and spun downward to a patch of lava buoying a cluster of ships. The missiles vanished in the red soup. Following moments of loaded silence, the surface of the lava sunk to a concave shape a thousand feet in diameter. The ships drifted down the valley not long before a depth charge-like eruption pierced the center, claiming the ships in a furious orange-yellow consumption.

“Wow. Nice. Might be overdoing it a bit, though,” Herbert suggested.

“Right. Sorry. Try it again.”

The jet spat another three missiles at the fleet nearby the carrier. Again, the lava swallowed them, but now it rapidly blackened, cooling and perspiring steam. Ice crystals sprouted and spread, immobilizing ships. Others were pushed upward by large faceted peaks of ice, and vanishing into the geysering steam bath. The ice slowly grew around the carrier before ceasing its radial advance.

Herbert swooped low to the bed of ice, honing in on the carrier. He got a better look at its hull, which had been repainted to read “U.S.S. Neon Evangelion” in a less than official naval font.

“God, this guy’s just a huge dork, isn’t he?”

The dork in question had emerged from below. He strolled along the deck clicking a black staff on the runway with each step. In his other hand, a silver Zapper was drawn, swaying at his side.

00:00:02... 00:00:01... 00:00:00...

The small box above the booth-like glass chamber beeped several times and exhaled long-sealed pressure. Insects scurried away in protest.

The underside of the box opened, dropping a small red figure the size of a maturing fetus. It was featureless, without feet, hands or a face, and smooth, a consistency like clay.

It landed on the head of the similarly featureless statue in the chamber below. It clambered on to the shoulders, and then in front of the circular hole in the statue's chest. It melted into a formless blob and entered the hole, sealing it flush.

Herbert's finger twitched by the trigger. "That's him? That's the guy?"

"Yes. But I wouldn't fire at him yet. Not head-on like this. I think we need a better plan."

"What are you talking about? This is the plan. We're here in a plane shooting stuff. I'm taking him out."

"I don't think you understand how dangerous he is," Grant said, his voice drowned out by the roar of the very volley of missiles he hoped to dissuade. "I'm not sure why I'm even bothering," he muttered. No one ever understood how dangerous anyone was, it seemed.

Slinus raised his staff and quickly the incoming missiles changed shape. It was a spindlier, bonier shape, with considerably more flailing motions than their previous blunt forms had sported.

Behind him, Gilbert cleared his throat. "Why are you always turning things into skeletons? I guess they're pretty cool and scary or whatever. But doesn't it ever get old?"

No one seemed more surprised at the sudden presence of airborne skeletons than the skeletons themselves. They reached their target and shattered against an invisible force field.

“I do what the Tine wills. It’s a fickle stick. Speaking of...” He pitched the staff to his subordinate. “Hold it for me a minute, won’t you, Gil?”

Gilbert bobbled it awkwardly, then held it at a distance from himself. “Do I have to? The thing kind of creeps me out.”

“Yeah, me too. But I can’t damned-well leave it on the floor, can I?” Slinus said while kneeling and taking aim with his Zapper at the renegade F-16. Herbert making a wide circle for another pass at the carrier. “Also, you might want to brace yourself.”

The high-powered laser salvo ignited the air like ground zero of a major fireworks display. The great heft of the Evangelion slowly tipped to its side against the mounting recoil. Banditsknife flitted this way and that with the spry maneuvers of a housefly. The torrential spray proved too much though and clipped a wing. Smoke streaked from the gash.

“This was such a bad idea,” Grant bemoaned.

“Hold on,” Herbert said, fighting with the controls. “I think I can keep it in the air.”

The Evangelion gently tipped back to its upright position, relieved from subsiding gunfire. Slinus appraised his target. He squinted beneath his large, unfashionable frames, exaggerating the harsh lines sunken into an otherwise youthful face. “Gil. Raise the Tine, ok?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“The staff. Hold it in the air. And then wave it around a little, I guess. And try to look a little menacing, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“You want me to cast a spell? With this thing? I’m not your flipping familiar, Slinus. I wouldn’t even know where to begin.”

“Just hold it up. It’ll know what to do.”

“I hate my life,” Gil muttered while stirring the air with the grim artifact in an almost facetious manner.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

From the surrounding uncooled portions of the sea, dozens of magma globules rose. Each became hotter, brighter, faster and more fluid. They all revolved about Herbert’s axis, getting faster and faster. They each sharpened and smoothed their forms into burning fighter jets. They’d soon prove to be quicker, less destructible, and far more copious than any Herbert had just shot down.

Worry took over his face. Even for a slow study like Herbert, the experience was long overdue; he was finally in over his head.

The Eggwood household’s television set was tuned into the round-the-clock coverage of President Reagan’s passing on Fox News. William hunched in observance, pitching in his quota to the solemn national consciousness of today’s armchair mourners. He lifted his glass from a spot on the coffee table recently vacated by a ceramic frog of dubious resale value.

“Guess you’ll be ‘trickling down’ from heaven now, eh, buddy?” This struck William as stinging political rebuke, in spite of how little it actually made sense. “I wonder what your boys up there will think of the Iran Contra thing.” William’s accountant would never find himself swamped in stubs for donations to the Republican National Committee.

He raised his glass in front of a wry smile. “All water under the bridge, Ron. I’m sorry to see you go.”

“Will!” Donna yelled from the kitchen. “There’s another message from Herbert here. Are you sure he’s alright?”

“Yeah, he’s having a blast!” he replied, impervious to the question’s merit.

“It doesn’t sound like it.”

“You know how he is. Man, what I wouldn’t give to be in his shoes. Lucky son of a gun.”

Sean Hannity’s grief-shaken voice filled the conversational gap. “... courage, strength, conviction, leadership... it just goes on and on, what comes to mind about this man. This... this noble, compassionate American. A great patriot. A beautiful man. He stood up to the scourge of

communism, the blight of tyranny, the disease of liberalism. He gave us everything. Can we ever thank him enough? No, I don't think so, Alan. What we owe this man... this... patriot. This true gentleman. A class act. A legend. What we... words can't... Alan, I just..."

Sean struggled to keep his composure. He broke down and wilted into Alan Colmes' arms, sobbing into his tie. Alan pursed his lips, briefly darting an eye at the camera, and gingerly stroked Sean's soft gunmetal hair.

The casket passed down the street below through the hallowed silence. Men saluted. Rifles clapped. But the casket was empty.

"Herbert, it's a lost cause. We can't shoot any of these things down, let alone all of them," Grant said of the self-repairing, gelatinous fighter jets.

"Hang on." Herbert grappled with the controls as if trying to subdue a live cobra. "I can save the plane. If I can just avoid fire long enough to land..."

Banditsknife left strands of smoke from its various projectile-punched injuries. The multi-threaded trail extruded from its moving source, twisting and curling like a ribbon falling through a livid swarm of wasps.

The rear of the cockpit broke open with Grant's sudden ejection. The noise shocked Herbert. "Hey! Come on, man!"

He dragged the jet out of the fray toward the dark mass in the sea he guessed was a craggy cropping of land. As he drew closer and leveled out, he could see more clearly it was a small black island on which sprouted crude, stout buildings, possibly old barracks.

Herbert swept a low arc to the lava, angled the nose up, skipped once on the surface and dredged a rocky gash in the soil from the shore inland. He unbuckled and spilled out of the smoking cockpit, plopping in exhaustion to a seat nearby.

He shook his head at the parachute in the distance, floating to the deck of the Evangelion. The fiery fighter jets were gradually returning to the lava. He wasn't sure whether to spite his copilot's cowardice or admire his practicality, but the thought was displaced by an odd presence in

his mind. His eye wandered to the barracks. Was it coming from there? It was a chilly feeling, and vaguely animalistic. The thought of a frost-covered table entered his mind. Pink, frostbitten hands. The keen smell of old frozen meat residue. A plant?

“Wizardy Herbert.”

He looked up. Slinus stood over him. The Zapper was drawn to steady aim between his eyebrows.

Herbert’s expression suspended itself in a sweaty grimace. He appraised the counselor, the dark nemesis of his future self. His attire was ridiculous, yet vaguely sinister somehow. The black shorts, the black sash festooned with merit badges—they were the gaudy emblems of military decoration in this realm, it seemed. The long black hair was a dashing complement to his motif when gauged within the scope of some gothic nerd’s self-indulgent reverie. The thin framed aviator-style glasses would have rocked the fashion scene at a computer engineer’s convention in the 1980’s. His face looked scarred, stretched and textured, evidence of heavy and long-healed deformation. His eyes were motionless, matte-black, without spark. Behind them Herbert envisioned a boundless void, expanding and impossible to disturb. Like a growing, implacable illness, bleeding through its medium as ink dripping on tissue paper. Herbert’s death wouldn’t touch it. It wouldn’t even pause to notice.

“Marlevort.”

“So this was their plan to stop me. And it took a meager half-century to come to fruition. It’s kind of sad when you think about it.”

“What are you trying to do? Why do you want the Slipknot?” Herbert baited him with curiosity as his hand crept toward his gun. A voice took his mind’s stage.

{Don’t.} It was a feeling from the barracks again. His eye flirted with that direction again briefly and paused his hand.

Slinus didn’t budge. His reply was flat. “I’m not going to tell you. I’m just going to kill you.”

{Get away while you can. I’m taking care of this.}

Slinus' finger hugged the plastic trigger. The sound of a spring depressing made a toyish "pop" inside the Zapper. In one motion Herbert took the doll from his pocket and turned it. The zap passed through the phantom of Herbert's vanishing mass and melted a stone.

Slinus reholstered neutrally, unmoved, as if he'd narrowly missed the opportunity for nothing more than a tantalizing spam promotion. He turned to his side and sneered. The parachute had landed on the deck of his ship.

On New Year's day following the Christmas of 1998, the ink on the adoption papers had barely dried. Herbert couldn't remember his former life, nor was he cognizant of the thought that one existed. He drifted through the well-kept domestic spaces of the second floor seeking a quiet moment to himself, an aim he'd pursue not infrequently in years to come.

He entered his older brother's room, the brother on which his sparse recollection had nothing to offer. Seymour, though, had culled a place in his awareness as a brother through several days prior of casual interaction; simply existing in proximity as a new brother was enough to convince Herbert's passive sponge of the reality, and the same went for his new parents. But no one had spoken of his missing older brother, so for Herbert, he effectively didn't exist. Yet here, Louis' room, kept the way it had been for months, spoke the contrary.

The bedroom's walls and furnishings boasted the telltale articles, the reclusive fascinations of—barring less flattering terms—a hobbyist. Pinups of severe-looking wizards (sic) battling through pose power alone great foaming crests of the sea lashing against his elements-ravaged perch. Or less direly, dropping a wistful gaze into a glowing orb which either imprisoned his most vile nemesis, or exhibited stubborn residue from a price tag which he couldn't seem to scrape off completely with his fingernail. The bookshelves packed themselves tight with similar fare, and action figures stood atop guarding the library, soldiers so fearsome-looking, you almost wouldn't suspect their one weakness was in easily being shattered on some patio pavement.

The desk held its own sort of mess, speaking to various forms of productivity. To the side there was an old Texas Instruments word processor. More central was a motley cabal of semi-painted Warhammer 40,000 models. They were painted so badly and so gaudily, the orcs resembled a band of savage clowns.

Herbert slid the drawer open. There was only one thing in it, and proved to be the only thing in the room that commanded more than a second of his interest (aside from a novel called “Vera Valera and the Secret Sorceress Sorority” once he finally gave the book a chance). For that matter, it would consistently prove to be the only thing in following years that felt meaningful to him. And divining the meaning of something so intrinsically stupid would prove to be the greatest challenge of his life.

He picked up the manuscript with the blacked-out text on the cover.

“Sweet Zombie Jesus...”

He looked at the doorway. It framed the chubby boy who called him his brother. He was pale and worried, which was beginning to strike Herbert as his signature look. Herbert flipped through the pages and said nothing.

“What are you doing in here again, Herbert? After...” He lowered his voice to a croaking whisper. “After you made me help you bury that guy in our yard??”

He was unresponsive. Seymour was incredulous at his new family member. “Are you still acting spaced out? Man, you have no idea what’s going on, do you. You haven’t... you still haven’t seen yet, have you?”

“Seen what?” he said, suddenly more conscious of the blindness in his left eye, and the subtle black field which shared fifty percent of his cumulative visual experience.

“The book you’re holding. Do you even know what it is? Honestly, it’s a blessing the other six disappeared. Good riddance.”

Herbert rolled up the book and slipped it in his pocket with nonchalance. He left the room.

“You shouldn’t read that, Herbert. It’s nothing but trouble!”

“Does Grant know you feel that way about him?”

“I doubt it. I mean, how could anyone else know if even I was unsure myself?” Beatrix might have pointed out that in retrospect certain clues could have made it obvious even to those

who were spoon-fed porridge and easily flummoxed by mittens. But she wasn't about to call that kettle black.

“Um... is he...?”

Russet shook his head. He'd liked to have held out optimism, but his friend's jocular attitude towards female gymnastics footage didn't leave much doubt.

Beatrix watched the metal floor. It no longer blurred the air with radiating heat. She allowed the silence to sink into awkwardness unprotested. She noted a felt sense of dejection, though muted. Perhaps it was tempered with clarity. It all sort of made sense now.

“It's really cooled off, hasn't it?” Russet motioned cordially for the change in subject. “Do you think we've sailed out of the lava?”

She shrugged. Russet fidgeted his feet beneath the cot.

“So will you tell him?” she asked.

“Good God, no. I'm not sure how I'm going to look him in the eye again, to tell you the truth.”

There was a squeaky report from a metal latch. The cell door opened. Grant stepped into view. Russet smiled with half his face and treated him to a self-conscious wave.

Louis had used the whole summer of 1996 to write his book, and on this balmy evening on his back patio he was tuning it with the final touches. It would be just a few decisive edits before he'd begin typing the manuscript. It was an editorial process that was, putting it charitably, rather cursory.

His younger brother Seymour joined him at the patio table drawing a diligence pulse from the Olympics games in Atlanta on the portable TV set. His saucer eyes took in every gazelle-like turn of finesse in Kerri Strug's sculpted musculature, and they misted over in dewy admiration on witnessing her selfless gimpy-legged landing.

“Gosh. She's so pretty. Do you think she would go on a date with me and let me hold her hand, Louis?” This was the best approximation of romance his young mind's cipher would yield.

“Dream on, Seymour. She’s like a rich multi-millionaire or something, and you’re just a clueless little kid!” Louis dispensed the brotherly wisdom without leaving his notebook. His rounded frame, heavysset for a twelve year-old, hulked over the writing instruments which seemed small in comparison. He was never much for the female gymnastics part of the competition anyway. Though he was always eager to be reminded when the men’s wrestling matches began.

“There. I think I’m done.” Louis popped a knuckle and deflated in relief from the mounting exertion. He assuaged his weary mind with the thought that it likely wasn’t a typical breed of author that would spend all summer on a project.

“Cool!”

“I’m pretty proud of it. I mean, I don’t think it will sell as many copies as one of the Trick books. Well, not at first, anyway.”

“I love Trick! He always gets the treasure, and it’s great when he does. I bet your book is just as good though. Maybe better! I believe in you.”

“Thanks, little brother. Here, why don’t you find out for yourself?” Louis slid the pad across the glass table, while trying to resist getting too distracted by the sudden onscreen presence of a taught young man doing a backflip.

Seymour eagerly dove into an early excerpt.

The new campers were so amazed on what they saw they couldn’t even believe there eyes. The forrest was full of rope ladders and bridges with a lot of logs tied together and a lot of straw hut looking kind of houses like treehouses. it was kind of like an ewok village but cooler. There were so many wizards it was amazeing. The best wizard of all was the camp master and every one looking at him just new right away he was so old and wise.

The camp was so magical but every one new that day that the greatest magic of all was the power of friend ship.

“It’s...”

Seymour’s speechlessness consumed him. He new (sic) right away his brother had not created something ordinary.

“It’s incredible.”

Beatrix and Russet crept through the lower decks of the carrier while Grant tailed them closely. The sounds of battle subsided, and in spite of their immersion in molten rock, it was now actually chilly. There was little sign of activity aside from now and then a young Slurpenook member/captive cowering behind a bulkhead.

“Why is it so cold in here all of a sudden?” Beatrix whispered into her own cloud of faintly visible breath.

“Probably the ice,” Grant replied, who’d as a matter of practicality had thus far skimmed on a number of details leading to their rescue.

“Huh?” she asked inattentively, peeking around a corner. She tiptoed ahead and down the hall, while Grant fell back and gestured to Russet.

“Hey, buddy,” he said softly. Russet didn’t meet his look and nodded a bit. “You don’t by any chance know if Marlevort got the Slipknot yet, do you? Has anyone found it?”

“It’s safe. I’ve got it right here, actually.” Russet kept his voice down too, following suit.

Grant showed relief. “Great. That’s great news, Russet. But it’s not safe as long as we’re stuck in this ship. Better let me hang on to it, ok?”

Russet hardly thought about it before handing it over. He was getting a pretty good eyeful of everything around him, the walls, their feet, the ceiling—all but his friend’s face.

“Yeah. Here.”

Scribe-Babies!® Creative Writing Summer Workshop (for KiDz!) was an institution humbly situated in the urban gutters of North Jersey. It was a fine way for poor inner city kids and troubled youngsters alike to get away from day-to-day struggles and gauntlet therapy sessions while flexing some imaginative muscle on paper. Jamal had won admittance non-deliberately through an essay which found its way on the right desk, and encouraged by his mother, took the bus from Harlem every Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. It was there he would finalize a project he'd been working on for the better part of a year, and it was there he met a kid who would become his biggest fan in the world who hadn't given birth to him.

Today was the final session, and Louis brimmed with the good news.

"What do you mean? You finished the whole book?" Jamal tentatively accepted the manuscript thrust at him.

"Yeah! And since you're..." There was a bashful pause. "Well, you are like my whole inspiration I wanted you to have the honor of being the first to read it."

"Wow. I'm... I don't even know what to say. Wow." Jamal fanned his face with the breeze of flipping pages. "Usually something like this takes, like... longer."

"I was just so excited and inspired. Once I started, I couldn't stop! I was blown away by what you were doing. You know, at your age and with all the stuff you've been through. So I thought, hey! Why can't I do it too! I don't think it's as good as yours by a mile, but I think it is probably still pretty good! I'd love to know what you think."

Jamal already had it folded open to a passage. Although he'd already been familiarized enough with samples of the work in preceding summer weeks to issue a pithy verdict regardless of what he might find now. It would be the same pithy verdict he'd issue in a moment.

He said with an air of arragance some more things about the summer camp. His arragance would probably be his down fall, thats what a lot of people said about him. "Ha ha you silly fool, don't you know the summer camp is divided in to 4 forts. Their's the one that values freind ship above all else which is fort Crowsnest. which calls upon the power of the mighty crow. And there is fort

Serpenook the fort of the mighty serpent or some times called snakes. They are the best one's and relie on cunning and trechory to...

Jamal's reading hastened to skimming after a point while he concocted a gracious response. He raised his eyebrows high and made long, slow nodding motions to denote the appearance of pleasant surprise.

"Wow... wow, Louis. This is really... enthusiastic."

The pithy verdict filled the large boy with tingles of glee.

"And," Jamal continued, "I guess, if I had to make one little ..." Louis was earnestly receptive, craving the wisdom. But Jamal stopped, deciding to give up once and for all the hope of impressing on him the importance of striving for originality. It was time to let the youngster have his moment.

"Never mind. I think you made your momma proud."

"I knew you'd love it! So hey, how's your work going, man?" Louis accented the question with an awkward fist-to-shoulder expression of brotherhood.

"Oh, you know. Lookin' to get it published, if I can. I'm not holding out a lot of hope, but you never know."

"That's great! I really hope you do. I want everyone to read it."

"Yeah, thanks. We'll see."

Thundleshick's startled hands dropped the tray of freshly-thawed toadloaf on the floor. Sitting there in his path was Herbert, smoking and ash-covered, clutching a recently twisted doll. The nervous sage took a small step back.

"Relax," Herbert said, separating the doll into halves. "I'm not here to shoot you. Don't get me wrong. I'm still pissed off at you. I've just got bigger fish to fry now."

Thundleshick's rigid posture eased, and he quickly seemed more paternally compassionate. He'd gotten really good at promoting that appearance, even if the only form of sympathy he tended to feel was for those heavily burdened by chronic robe-rash.

"I see. Tell me boy. Say... you haven't by chance collected more badges to show me, have you?" He blinked his wide eyes quickly with the playful exuberance of a baby deer in a cartoon.

"No, I sure as hell damn-well haven't."

The Campmaster shrunk slightly.

"It's one of your counselors. Marlevort. You are aware of this guy, right? And what he's up to?"

He dipped his head in stern accord. "Yes, yes. Afraid so."

"Aren't you concerned? I know you love to wallow in all this disgusting moldy trash all day, and rifle through kids' luggage and lord knows what else, but it is your camp, isn't it? Can't you do something?"

Thundleshick caressed his whiskers in a way that looked thoughtful. This was another look he'd mastered to mask feelings of guilt and overwhelming incompetence. "I suppose I should set the record straight, my gumptious young friend. The counselor and I... you see, he is in truth at this ship's helm, while I keep loftier burdens, observing from above. In... you know, in the thingy you sit in above a ship, on which squawking fowl might perch. You might even consider my duties as that of a subordinate."

"What? You mean you're just a crony? You spineless son of a bitch."

"Hmm. Perhaps not a crony inasmuch a fee agent? Free in spirit, irrepressible, like a frolicsome wind, perchance finding its way to fill and billow the ruffledress of a plump-chested dairy maiden?"

Herbert made a face suggesting this semantic revision didn't sit well with him. Thundleshick made a face suggesting his nonexistent collar was getting a little snug.

“Er... yes. That is, it was I who was recruited at his behest. It was many years ago to help the Counselor establish this wondrous camp. And increasingly since, I have enjoyed privileged autonomies for my service.”

“I guess I should have realized that. It’s pretty obvious you do just about dick-all for this camp. He seems to be the one with all the firepower. And ambition, for that matter.”

Thundleshick nodded, finding it hard to object. Though it nearly hit a nerve facing the insinuation that his seven acre fungus atrium was not a darned ambitious undertaking.

“Speaking of which,” Herbert remembered. “That’s what I’ve been meaning to ask. Why is Marlevort so hell-bent on this Mobius Slipknot? What does it actually do?”

Thundleshick perked up with nearly the enthusiasm he typically reserved for the topic of fungus. He scurried to a bookshelf.

The stone fist exited the glass booth to the sound of clinking shards. Small creeping vines dissolved from the statue’s coarse surface. The sleeve became cloth. The hand became flesh.

What was inside stood up.

Thundleshick leafed through the delicate pages of the old book. It was comparable in size to an unabridged dictionary, and filled with runes and dark iconography possibly serving as occult disclaimers. It appeared to Herbert to be solely devoted to the mysterious charm. There was an abundance of diagrams, some he glimpsed exhibiting its completed form, the locket clasping a sort of medallion in its central hollow. In others, the Slipknot appeared to be used in conjunction with open books.

“... in books?” Herbert partially echoed.

“Yes, the device can ensnare an unsuspecting bystander in the pages of a book, albeit with a variety of caveats.” Thundleshick busied his fingers with the pages forward and back in search of

material supporting his narrative. Herbert labored to follow the magician's circumlocution. The book wasn't much clearer to him. Its pages were byzantine and dense.

"Once his essence is caught in the fictional stratum, he entirely dons the identity of the literary entity he assumes."

"Assumes?"

Thundleshick continued scrambling through the brittle pages, flaking off trace amounts of stained yellow confetti from the probably very rare volume. He flipped ahead through a large section of worksheet-like pages complete with exercises. There were illustrated samples demonstrating how to use the locket, even with some in-book drills. There were indented story excerpts with some conspicuously blacked-out blocks of text.

"This thing has worksheet pages?"

Thundleshick answered with a nod. Toward the back, the volume became even more cryptic, with lengthy, fine-printed appendices and what seemed like hundreds of pages of tables jammed with tiny numbers and accounting statistics.

"Are those spreadsheets? What the hell does magic have to do with accounting?"

Thundleshick looked surprised, almost taken aback by the question. "Why, everything, boy!"

"Magic is so retarded," Herbert grumbled to himself. The tutorial was somehow becoming more exhausting than his recent dogfight. "Anyway, go on."

"Very well. Take for instance this case. The device through its hidden intelligence brings you into a book. Let us say the book is Peter Pan, and it brings you into the story's realm as the titular character, Peter Pan himself. Within that dimensional cleft, you will believe you are, indeed truly will be Peter Pan. But your given name will supplant his, naturally. I would be read about as Elwin Pan, and live the tales of this rascal of eternal adolescent vim and woe to pirate kind! Ah to dream. Ah, anyway, and you... you would become... Wiz... err, um... Herb..."

"Herbert Pan? I think I get what you're saying."

“Yes, and upon releasing a character from the book, whether he was once a real person entrapped there, or was always fictional to begin with, the device will dispel him of all prior memories, whether experienced within the fictional plane or otherwise. All that remains is the basic notion of one’s identity, such as a name.”

Herbert was silent. He absorbed the details while ambling through his own mental tangent. He felt as if he was on the cusp of glimpsing some cosmic whole. It was an emerging insinuation of a great puzzle he was for much of his life never aware needed solving. Still, discovering the existence of a critical puzzle was a short-lived gratification. Discovering it had ten thousand pieces and most were still missing had a way of sinking in quickly. Lingering thoughts troubled him.

“And what about time travel?” he asked, steeling himself against further revelation.

“Time travel, boy?”

“Does it exist? Can the Slipknot bend time somehow?”

Thundleshick considered it carefully, as if calculating which block to remove in the late stages in a heated match of Jenga. “It’s a powerful talisman. I would not put many feats beyond its capability. The years spent in the halls of this persnickety palace have taught me that the nature of time is fluid, and it needn’t flow only through familiar veins. It flows just as readily through the canals of thought itself, and certainly, the pages of literature as well—”

Thundleshick’s discourse went on at some length, and Herbert was surprised to find himself arrested by it. He thought the old mage sounded uncharacteristically introspective and thoughtful. Maybe this was a topic on which he truly did have insight, and just maybe there was more depth to the man than he’d credited him with.

His philosophically waxing spiel was broken for Herbert, though, when he felt something moving. It was the doll. Had it accidentally come back together in his pocket, and was now being activated by someone from afar? Herbert gulped and looked down.

There was a fat spotted hand burrowing in his jeans. Thundleshick was picking his pocket again.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake.” Herbert pulled his gun.

Seymour felt his brother's plump, blue-tinted wrist for a pulse. He felt nothing, confirming the worst. He'd never actually taken a pulse before, and he was doing it wrong. But rest assured, Louis was dead.

Seymour dragged on asthmatic gasps as he became acquainted with the feelings of grief and panic. It wouldn't be the last time he'd encounter death, or even very long before it reared its head again. In just a few months, for instance, on a bleak Christmas day, he'd help a confused boy bury a strange man in a cape behind his shed. By then, he'd be well on his way to developing something of a rapport with mortality. It would prove a suitable primer for his own disappearance. Now, though, the flabby middle school student's universe had been effectively rocked.

"Sweet Zombie Jesus..."

Louis' rigid sprawl on his bedroom floor was not the most dignified final freeze-frame. But in the sobriety of afterthought, Seymour might have been grateful he hadn't dropped dead while cosplaying at one of his conventions as some sort of damnable Elf Jedi Mage. His twisted torso warped the Mystery Science Theater 3000 print on his XXXL t-shirt. Beneath his limp, deli meat loaf forearm was trapped a copy of his manuscript, opened to a part in the middle. Seymour gently removed it, pausing briefly, for a moment thinking he heard a noise from behind the life-sized cardboard cutout of Kevin Sorbo as Hercules in the corner of the room, but dismissed it as a fabrication of stress.

He found a passage conspicuous on the page through its peculiar defects.

_____ wielded the _____ _____ and could'nt believe how powerful it was. He said some brash things. "you fools don't even stand a chance against me, my bloodline is pure and now I am unstopple, he said arragantly. But some thing was wrong....."

"Sweet Zombie Jesus... Sweet Zombie Jesus..." Semour descended into delirium, losing any regulation of the idiosyncratic outburst.

He left the room with the book. He had to tell his parents. But they wouldn't be home from work for a while. He couldn't bear the thought of watching them find their dead son on the floor.

It wouldn't be an issue. When he would return, the body would be gone.

"You really need help, you know that? You're mentally ill. Anyway, I don't have the time or patience for your kleptomania today. Give it back."

Thundleshick upset his brow as he considered the silent yet compelling argument the gun was making a short distance from his face. "You wouldn't bring yourself to harm an old man, now?"

Herbert laughed. "Old man? You act like a child. You're probably not even that old. What are you, in your late fifties or something?" He hadn't received the memo that Thundleshick was no fewer than ten thousand years old, we are to believe unwaveringly.

"Also, I'd like to borrow that Slipknot manual, if you don't mind."

Thundleshick hugged it as if it was his pillow and he was being told a scary story at a slumber party. "Oh, I don't think that's a good idea."

"What? Come on, just give it to me, you idiot." Herbert grappled at the old tome with his free hand while the sage put up a pedantic flustered resistance. "Just... let... GO." BANG.

Herbert tore a slab of pages from the book as the two separated from their fracas. He looked up at the hole in Thundleshick's soggy hat. The garment responded to the bullet more like a kind of custard than cloth. Thundleshick held the kind of expression reserved for when a cranky bee lands on your nose.

Herbert shook his head, reaching down for loose pages freed from the book. "God damn wizards..."

Thundleshick whispered something to himself. Herbert barely picked it up. "Sweet Zombie Jesus..."

Herbert squinted his eye. He poked a glance up at him from his stooped position. “What did you say?”

Thundleshick toyed with his beard looking off to the side. Herbert took a closer look at him. He scoured the campmaster’s face, probing behind the grisly, dishwater-gray mane, beneath the slick, tanned leather of his face. The eyes...

“Seymour??”

Terence Rothschild scuttled up the slope of a mountain, vanishing into a shallow snowdrift and then out of it, shaking snow from his equine head and spitting it from his agile, rubbery lips.

He clambered to a dry patch on a rocky plateau and halted in a shadow. The shadow belonged to a well built man in a suit, with an American flag pin on his lapel.

“Oh. It’s you.” Terence sagged.

He was crushed by a well-polished shoe. The shoe twisted, grinding crustacean shell against rock. The man crouched as if to take flight, and disappeared with a boom, signaling the starter shot for several avalanches nearby.

Herbert’s pistol sank to his side. Feelings of hostility and suspicion directed at the scurrilous magician gave way to feelings of pity and compassion for his long-missing older brother. The feelings were short-lived, though. Like a tiny fly which takes to the sky for only moments to mate and deposit its sticky eggs beneath a leaf. Its brood soon would hatch, ushering a swarm of disbelief and irritation directed at the, in truth, non-blood-related overweight kleptomaniacal con artist.

“So you’ve been here this whole time? Since you disappeared?”

He answered with silent contrition.

“I can’t believe I bought into this. My stupid older brother posing as this horrible, nasty... wizard. Yeah, I don’t care if that’s not technically what you are. To me, you’re just an old wizard.”

Thundleshick gave him a judicious nod. He could summon no objection.

Herbert holstered the gun and relaxed on to a stool by the table. He rolled up the slab of paper and batted it into his palm as he thought.

“So what was the whole act about? All this...” he gestured vaguely, trying to surround and contain the gross fraudulence in the abstract with his hands. “You know. The ‘my boy, this’ and ‘my dear lad, that’ and that sort of pompous nonsense? It was all such bullshit. You were never wise.”

Thundleshick harrumphed a stab at justification. “Yes. Er... I’ve done my best to suit the role. I believed I’d finally found something at which I excelled. My only true aim was to perform in a way that might make my mother and father proud.”

“Yeah, well you sure did a number on them! Do you have any idea how sad they were when you vanished? That was two sons missing in, what, like six months?”

Thundleshick withered in chagrin. After a few moments, he drew a heavy breath. “Yes. You are right. Though for many years, I was indisposed.”

Herbert nodded. “Right. Marlevort, I guess?”

His quiet melancholy spoke an affirmative. Herbert had plenty of questions. Now that Thundleshick had aged into relative autonomy and seemed to come and go from the realm as he pleased, Herbert wondered why he wouldn’t have reunited with his family. He didn’t want to push it, though. Enough spoke for itself, and he thought plenty could be explained simply by Seymour’s gradual, savage affliction with twisted old man-itis. Plenty could happen in almost fifty years. And in this realm, plenty always did.

“I guess I was on the money, then. You’re, what, fifty-something now?”

“Fifty-nine today, actually. I was just about to celebrate with a jubilatory helping of toadloaf when you entered. Why, I supposed we might scrape much of it from the floor with a spade or a trowel and still enjoy. I trust it has remained chilly.”

“No thanks, I’ll pass.”

Awkward moments lumbered by.

“So are you going to give me that book, Seymour, or what?”

His brother lit up with an idea. “Ah, but I have something which is even better, my boy... er, Herbert. Sorry. Long lost dear brother!”

“Just Herbert will be fine.”

His hand plunged into his cloak and noisily molested its concealed unspeakables. Herbert perked with interest. The hand reappeared with a fistful of something. That something was quickly hurled into Herbert’s wide-open eye, bursting into a powdery puff.

“Arrgh!”

He blinked his searing eye. Through the blurry filter of tears he gave an embarrassed-looking Thundleshick a poisonous look.

“Er... I believe I withdrew stock from the wrong pouch.”

“Were you supposed to disappear just now? You suck, Seymour.”

“Ah, here it is.”

Herbert received another face-full. He disappeared in the cloud. When the eye-stinging subsided, he found himself standing in a different part of the castle.

Finding the surface of the carrier, Beatrix and Russet crept among the burning wreckage on the deck. Aside from the whipping and popping of flame, it was unsettlingly quiet.

“I think we’re in the clear,” she said softly. “I don’t see Marlevort around. Maybe we can sneak off this thing in a plane. Or a boat, maybe?”

“Agreed,” Russet said. “Though a plane will possibly be too noisy for any proper sneaking, I think. And a boat will have a hell of a time navigating through that ice, though on the bright side it does appear to be melting. But dash it if we don’t give it a try!”

“Shh.” She tried to calm his nervous blithering. “He might hear us.”

“I’m right here.” Slinus stood behind them with his hands in his pockets.

Beatrix made a startled noise. Her expression was the kind used by spectators of the humorously tragic, like an obese person involved in a scooter accident. Russet slouched.

“There are no planes for your daring escape, anyways. You can thank your pal Wizardy Herbert for blowing them all up. The guy is a rescue mission ace.”

She looked around at the aftermath of the incomprehensible pandemonium dealt to the fleet. “Herbert did all this?”

“He’s out of his mind, Bea. I’m telling you!” Russet hissed from the side of his mouth.

Not about to be out-staged in the department of mental illness, Slinus flashed his gunslinger’s quick draw, shifting to the ‘erratic madman’ gear in his psyche’s transmission. “Alright, shut up. Let’s go for a stroll back down to the brig. Not that I have much use for you, since neither of you have what I need.”

Beatrix winked at Russet, believing their conspiracy intact. He cringed.

She put up her fists like a boxer. She felt a little odd striking the pose in preparation for a magical duel, but it seemed like the fallback for one whose weapon was tiny and attached to a finger. She guessed Green Lantern probably did it all the time, not that she knew for sure.

“Hey,” she wondered suddenly. “Where did Grant go?”

Herbert rubbed his watering eye and brushed the insidious powder from his hair. He was having a hard time deciding whether he found Thundleshick’s antics more infuriating now that he knew it was just Seymour all along, or somewhat less so due to being just plain pathetic. He would deliberate on it later, and his older, older brother would just have to sweat out the final verdict authored by the hanging judge.

It was a particularly unstable part of the palace. The long, gloomy hallway stretched and buckled and swayed. Patches of wall became insubstantial, permeable. Buttresses, stairs and such architectural interjections poked into visibility, and pulled back like shy turtles.

He held his portion of the manual pried from the stubborn magician. He opened it and lighted the text in the vacillating glow of a not entirely stationary wall torch. The manual was a steep read, and the technicality of the diagrams was hard to penetrate. One set of illustrations addressed the way the Slipknot itself interfaced with books. Supporting text indicated the locket was able to trap itself into literature the same way it did with people, as Thundleshick described, swapping its own moniker with that of a key item in the fiction. This was pictorially demonstrated through examples such as Prynne's Letter, Poe's Heart, Yorick's Skull, and most contemporarily, Rutherford Trick's talking brass pocket watch he called *Sassafras* (or *Sassy* for short, a brand which the ill-tempered timepiece loathed). Furthermore, if arcane cartoons were to be trusted, when a passage is read depicting a character employing the item in question—Hamlet's soliloquy, for instance—this activates its power, drawing the locket and its fictional operator out of the book.

Herbert stopped, walked several paces to catch up with the torch which had been escorted down the hall by shifting brickwork, and resumed his haphazard study.

But this was not all there was to the story, he thought, as any idiot could have told him who'd had a gander at the tome's thickness. Once sprung from the book, the locket left residuals of its power in the fictional object it possessed. Thus any character using the object later in the tale could still be pulled from the book once that passage was "activated" by a reader, even absent the presence of the Slipknot in the book. These key passages were known as "plot slipknots", mysterious places in the book marked by the charm's subtle whim. Once the locket or character is pulled from a book, their instances in the full text are blacked out, never to be recovered from the story again.

In reading on, he gleaned that there was however a loophole to this rule (sometimes called the slipknot loophole by those who wanted to be deliberately confusing). The charmed potential of unread passages (or unslipped knots) was preserved in duplicated copies of the book. In any copy, triggered plot slipknots would release characteristically dumbfounded duplicates of the characters. Such was the reach of the charm's power in fact, its fiction-animating properties even extended into all subsequent volumes of a book series if the locket was embedded in an earlier volume. The only

thing that was not able to be duplicated through this loophole, as was impressed upon the reader with caveats of lumbering academic gravity, was the Mobius Slipknot itself. It would always ensure itself as one of a kind.

Herbert closed the book fragment. He was understandably overwhelmed, while the content of the manual, in stark contrast, was not overwhelmingly understood. But enough had been absorbed to jog something in him. A picture flashed in his mind, like a critical slide in a presentation blinked to its audience prematurely. But just as soon as it offered its tantalizing promise of revelation, it was gone. Nonetheless, he could see how all the moving parts, ever slowly, might start fitting together. The manuscript. His missing older, older, older brother. The camp. His future self. It was beginning to make sense.

His surroundings had become lost on him in the reading. He was sitting against the stone wall, moist with moss in spite of its ever rolling stone-like nature. The torch had drifted, and finally was swallowed by the wall snuffing out visibility. Gray, muted light from an indeterminable source let him see, barely. He looked down the black undulating throat of the hall into a chilling void. There was a distinct feeling to this castle when dwelt on, felt mostly in the chest. It was a feeling of deep sickness, nearly intolerable. He thought he heard his name whispered.

He traipsed down the hall, hands feeling forward, feet tentative on the slithering bricks. There was something ahead, sitting and slumped. He came closer and kneeled. It was a skeleton. Not the terrifying undead kind, but the sad, non-undead kind, a dried husk once armature to flesh. It was still clothed, in rags, though the XXXL t-shirt it wore had a deteriorating Mystery Science Theater 3000 image on its front. Herbert liked the show and smiled at the recognition. But he didn't know who this was. Just another poor sap, deceased for decades in this lurching sewer.

Something spilled from the skull's eye socket. An oozing black tar, though on hitting the floor, it became more like clay. It formed into a small, featureless figure without hands or feet, about the size of a maturing fetus.

It danced aggressively and erratically, threatening Herbert with quick fake-out lunges. He tried shooing it with the manual. It leapt to his head and clung. Herbert thrashed, yelling things, he wouldn't remember later if there were words or noises. He felt an invasive, powerful sucking in his

right ear. There was momentary deafness to all but ringing. The figure vanished completely into his ear.

He thrashed more wildly, bowing and swatting his head as if he was in a headlock by an invisible pro wrestler. The violation caused him to make strange whining sounds and spasms, though the spectacle was cut short when the floor beneath him twitched and then disappeared, dropping him in the dark.