

THE DUCKS OF DOOM

Chapters 31-60

A WEEKLY SERIAL

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CHAPTER 31: VLOD IRONBEAK'S PROBLEM

Vlod Ironbeak paced the floor in a mood of bitter anguish.

How had it come to this! The irony of it! Everything he had ever dreamed of; all of his plots and schemes depended on a wimpy, air-headed canard of a duck.

WHY, WHY, WHY did Macklin have to be the ONE? Why was that fool the only one who could build a model of the model railroad Lenore had foreseen them in her vision!

And if he failed, who knew what disasters would follow! Things that had been foreseen would cease to exist, and could, therefore, not have been foreseen, which would mean that Lenore could not have existed, because of double negatives.

"Polydoor!" yelled Vlod. "Oh Polydoor!"

It wasn't unusual for the past to change, of course; archaeologists from the Museum of Strange Things meddled with it all the time. But that was different; archaeologists only changed the past to fit the artifacts they discovered.

They were trained professionals.

But an amateur like Macklin could wipe out an entire chunk of reality simply by neglecting to build a special model railroad while he went to work for a bunch of aliens disguised as quacking elephants.

"POLYDOOR!" yelled Vlod. "Fire up Sparkles the Wonder Computer please. I'm going to use the Macrohard Angst database to secure the past."

"You mean Macrohard Riddle, master?" said Polydoor. "The hideously complex software that mangles stored data-- "

"Precisely."

"Isn't that risky, master? Angst is a brand new version of a fiendish operating system, and Riddle has already consigned hundreds of stored facts to oblivion."

"The people at Macrohard have assured me that Angst is very stable and never crashes," said Vlod. "Everyone in the world will soon be using it."

"It'll never happen," quoth the raven.

"Why don't you just delete the aliens, master?" said Polydoor. "It would save time."

"Too risky," said Vlod. "I'd have to scan them in first. They might suspect something."

He sat at the input device in the rec room, beside his latest coffin--the off-road unit with GPS and a sonar device.

Vlod's input device was a medium size organ purchased from a bankrupt church.

He hesitated at the keyboard for a moment, his eyes resting on a picture of Lenore McBeauty.

Then he began playing variations on 'How Much is That Doggie in the Window?'

The actual command, of course, was expressed in Caledonian, an old, but efficient computer language, once used to program Scotland's Mars Shuttle, the Bonnie Haggis.

The organ creaked and shrieked for a time, then it froze and turned blue.

Vlod pounded furiously on the keyboard, but nothing happened.

"I COMMAND YOU IN THE NAME OF MADAME DE STAEL TO BEGIN FUNCTIONING IMMEDIATELY!" he bellowed.

"It'll never happen," quoth the raven.

Vlod gave the raven a dark look. "Get me tech support immediately!" he roared.

Polydoor fumbled out his cell phone, wiped the mould from the mouthpiece, and dialed tech support.

The call was answered immediately by a cheery voice.

Some of you might be wondering about this. Normally tech support doesn't answer quite so fast, and the people who respond aren't always bubbly and positive.

But everyone in tech support knew about Vlod; he'd achieved international celebrity when he'd encountered his first automated telephone answering system and had paid a visit to the company that had perpetrated it.

Shortly afterwards, people calling that company began to complain that talking to its tech support gurus was like talking to the undead.

Now you know why.

Anyway, after that maddening little episode, Vlod hired his own tech support person.

Not just any punter off the street, either.

Vlod hired the genius who had once hacked into the computer system on the Alien Planet and placed an order for five million pizzas with dead-fish topping, llama cheese, and fossilized anchovies.

The people at Pizza Hut were a little perplexed at first, because none of their regular drivers could find the Alien Planet on their maps, so they FedExed the pizzas.

General Fumarole thought it was an invasion, and drew all of his flying saucers into a circle. When he saw the FedEx logo, however, he realized someone was sending him a present, and he got so excited he couldn't speak.

His assistant warlord, Teetot, had to root around in petty cash for forty million dollars.

That was a special discount deal, by the way, with a bit added to cover the cost of shipping.

No one on the Alien Planet had ever seen a pizza before. General Fumarole thought it might be a new kind of rain hat, but when Teetot pointed out the dead fish, he decided it was an inflatable codpiece and he strapped it to one of his attachments.

Anyway, Vlod was so impressed by the hacker's achievements, he immediately made up his mind to hire him.

The hacker's name, by the way, was Randomized Timer, or 'Random' for short.

After a lengthy search, Vlod and Polydoor found Random in a cluttered room on a decommissioned aircraft carrier, near a shipping container filled with spent fuel rods.

Vlod materialized in a pool of shadow near a sound system that was cranking out heavy metal bagpipes.

Polydoor materialized in a slouching way behind Vlod, and they stood watching Random as he peered at a computer monitor and beat time to the music with a dead-fish pizza.

He looked like a jittery fireplug with hair and a beak.

There were empty lime fizzer cans and sushi boxes strewn all over the floor.

Vlod approached the computer, crunching over various food particles and creepy crawlies.

"Don't mind the mess," said Random. "Gas Bar over there is supposed to clean up, but he's lazy."

Gas Bar was a robot sitting in the corner doing his nails and pretending to be an automated answering service.

"You now have two choices," he said to the miserable wretch who had called Random for help. "If you want to speak to a sales person, press '1'. If you want to purchase stock in the company, press '2'. If you have a question for tech support, visit our web page."

Random wheeled his chair around to face Vlod.

"I thought vampires were supposed to wait until someone invited them in," he said.

"I anticipated an invitation," said Vlod. "I have come to make you an offer--"

"Hey dude; I have principles," said Random. "I don't work for a living; I just take what I need."

Vlod smiled and restrained Polydoor with a quick motion.

"Great minds think alike," he said. "My offer, by the way, includes free access to Sparkles the Wonder Computer, the most powerful computer in the world."

"A gift for the hacker who has everything," said Random, growing interested. "So who do you want me to destroy?"

"I would like you to customize Macrohard Riddle so that it does what I want it to do."

"I don't do databases," said Random, disappointed. "Hire a telemarketer."

"Bite him, master!" said Polydoor.

"It's going to be a magic database," said Vlod. "I intend to store my own version of the past, so it unfolds exactly as I wish it to."

"It'll never happen," quoth the raven.

"Cool!" said Random. "Magic is good, especially when my enemies are still using silicon."

"I don't like this, master," said Polydoor. "The Secret Order of Curators at the Museum of Strange Things have a monopoly on changing the past--"

"Fear not, Polydoor. They operate on a grand scale. I shall intervene on a small scale, making surgical strikes, so to speak."

Polydoor shook his head. "When you alter the past, master, one thing always leads to another."

"Pish!" Polydoor. "Calm your crackling nerves."

Then he handed Random a contract and the deed was done.

Gas Bar had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 32: SPIDER FOOD

In no time at all, Randomized Timer finished setting up the database.

Vlod logged on from his organ and waited impatiently for the software to load.

When he pressed the 'options' button, however, there was a crashing sound and the organ turned blue.

Polydoor inwardly gloated and began thinking up suitable punishments for Random.

Vlod smiled sweetly at Random.

"I wonder how much blood a hacker really needs in his veins," he said. "Perhaps you have too much, Random. All that extra work for your heart, pumping and pumping...."

"Hey, no problem!" shouted Random, jumping up and down on Sparkles.

Then he shouted some other things that peeled the paint off the utility coffins stacked up in the meditation room next door.

Vlod, unable to bear the suspense, retreated to the kitchen, where he paced nervously around the oven, watching Polydoor flash-roast something disgusting.

"I'll make a nice blood pudding to calm your nerves, master," said Polydoor, taking pity on him.

"It'll never happen," quoth the raven, hoping Polydoor would throw something squishy at him.

Vlod made a face as Polydoor dropped a writhing, tube-like object into a pot. "Are you sure that's quite dead?" he said.

Polydoor discreetly examined his master.

No doubt about it, Vlod was having a nervous breakdown. Computers made him feel so inadequate!

"I suppose you think I'm losing my edge, Polydoor," said Vlod.

"Not at all, master," sighed Polydoor.

He hated it when Vlod was like this. If people only knew the truth about vampires, how

middle class they were; how pathetically eager they were to justify themselves!

And then there was Custer, the stupid raven!

Polydoor watched the raven suspiciously as it settled on the counter, where it could keep an eye on the unidentified crawling objects in the pudding.

"I suppose you think I'm not the vampire I used to be," said Vlod.

Polydoor sighed wearily.

"I think you're a genius, master. The original plan was excellent. But I think you should bite Random, just to motivate him."

"Perhaps," said Vlod, brightening a little.

The oven buzzed. Polydoor extracted the vulcanized pudding and carried it downstairs to the particle accelerator in the recreation room.

Vlod followed him down, humming to himself.

"Everything will turn out for the best," said Polydoor. "You'll see. Voltaire tells us so."

"I never liked Voltaire; he had horrible taste in hats."

Polydoor set the particle accelerator to 350 degrees and flipped the switch.

The cauldron glowed a cheery green, like the patches on his rotting jacket.

"Behold the Blood Pudding of Infinity," said a voice behind him.

It was coming from the dungeons, where a few incarcerated executives were playing Captain Zap, a board game based on the famous comic-book hero.

They'd turned the lights down low and started a nice fire in the fireplace.

The soft light glimmered on fine, McBowel's crystal and on several bottles of rich, port wine. Roast beef sandwiches stood on a platter on a sideboard.

Water bubbled in the hot pool in the next room.

There were portraits of famous chief financial officers on the pine-paneled walls, and the ceiling featured Michelangelo's depiction of a flock of spam artists descending to a virtual world controlled by their enemies.

The six Captain Zap players smiled at Vlod, showing pearly whites lovingly cared for by on-site dentists and orthodontists.

"You still here?" said Polydoor. "You can go now. Just remember in future to pay your taxes BEFORE you go bankrupt."

"Let them say for awhile," said Vlod, nodding happily. He liked company. It scared away the armadillos. "Dear me; there are quite a lot of you, aren't there!"

"Can't have a world without wrong, master!" said Polydoor. It won't do! Wrong makes right possible."

"I see. Then you believe in the existence of evil as an independent force, co-equal with good, and essential to the proper functioning of the universe?"

Polydoor disentangled the reasoning behind this with growing horror. "You mean Freddy Manichean Heresy, master?" he gasped. "The infamous bipolar heretic from the Fabulous Mists of Antiquity? I hate him! If I ever get my hands on him--"

"No need," said Vlod. "If he shows up here, I shall feed him to Babette."

"Babette?" said Polydoor. "The name doesn't ring a bell...."

"Did someone call," said a gentle voice.

Polydoor turned to see who this wimpy little intruder was; then his mouth fell open.

She was seven feet high. She had eight eyes, eight legs, a mouth like a hedge clipper, a body like a flying saucer, and a head like the turret on a battle tank.

"Hi sweetie!" she said, winking four of her eyes at Polydoor. "I'm so glad to meet the famous Polydoor at last!"

Something was being dragged behind her.

Polydoor risked a glance and saw a dozen large spider-web sacks trailing on a line of spider silk as thick as a ship's hawser. The sacks were nearly transparent, revealing a dozen spam artists trapped within their suffocating embrace.

It was a horrifying sight, even for an acolyte.

On the other hand, that Babette was one hot babe, with bits of rotting things all over her

phosphorescent body, and something squishy and twitchy hanging from her mandibles!

Polydoor could really go for someone like that!

He felt heat rising up into his brain, and he smirked and glistened like a bit of irradiated fungus.

"Don't worry about the spammers," Babette said in a throaty voice. "They deserve everything they're going to get."

"I like the way you think," said Polydoor, growing much warmer now.

Babette giggled.

"Would you like to come into my parlor and see my greatly magnified images of dead parasitical robber flies?" she said.

Polydoor blushed so brightly, a Captain Zap player was blinded by the light and had to go and lie down in the oxygen chamber.

Vlod was pleased.

"We have some time to spare while we wait for tech support," he said. "Possibly a few weeks. I'll leave you two young lovers to bill and coo a bit while I check on Random."

The spammers had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 33: BABETTE IN LOVE

Polydoor was in love. All profound thought had fled from his mind; his entire consciousness had narrowed down to a few simple problems: What do I do NOW? Do I hold her hand? Which hand; she's got eight appendages! What if I make a mistake and grab one that's a dedicated locomotion device?

Should I play the romantic hero, take her in my arms, and kiss her?

What if she doesn't like me?

Polydoor, as you can see, had little experience of love, and none whatsoever of dating.

We've all been there, haven't we, my friends! Not with spiders, perhaps, though possibly with armadillos or llamas.

Anyway, Babette was trying to explain Spider Paradise as she led Polydoor to her parlor.

Babette's house was a nice place shaped like a party hat. It was hidden in a dark cave behind the dungeon, where the Captain Zap players were still deeply engrossed in their game.

The entrance was cunningly disguised as an exercise machine.

"Oh that's good!" said Polydoor admiringly. "No one ever goes near an exercise machine! You're perfectly safe here."

Babette ushered him inside and he exclaimed with delight at the cozy interior.

I won't pester you with needless description. There was a kitchen, of course, with the usual items--fridge, stove, sink, etc.; there was a living room with some walls, a ceiling, and a lot of furniture; there were bedrooms done up in beige wallpaper with a pattern of rubber duckies; there was a bathroom; a rec room; and a basement area where Vittles, Babette's deceased husband had built an enormous model of the Rock Island Line.

There was a picture of Babette's deceased husband on the wall above his train layout; he was wearing his engineer's cap, a blazer and a school tie.

"He died before his time, poor fellow," said Babette, with a tear in her eye. "He told me I was getting fat, so I killed him and ate him."

Just then, there was a noise from the kitchen.

Heathcliff and Scarlet, her two little children, were getting hungry.

She set the table at once, putting out bowls of body parts liquefying in portable digestive acid.

"Food fight!" yelled the kids, grabbing their straws.

Polydoor watched in amazement as they sucked up huge quantities of pottage and blew

out great, yellow-green gobs that sizzled and smoked wherever they landed.

"Now, now, children!" said Babette in a mild voice. "What will Mr. Acolyte think? Behave yourselves, please."

A bit of goop splatted Polydoor's arm, blending in nicely with the mold, and he licked it thoughtfully.

"It's good," he said, winking at the kids. "Tastes like chicken. You're a great cook, Babette!"

Babette blushed and batted her eyes at him.

Polydoor was fascinated by her.

"I hope you don't mind the little ones," she said. "They're so excited. We don't often have company."

"I think they're cute!" said Polydoor, watching them attack their desserts in a frenzy.

It was brain juice, of course, straight from the skull. Spiders just love brain juice.

Babette smiled shyly.

"You're so nice, Polydoor," she said. "I'll bet you have lots of girlfriends! I'll bet they're standing in line to ask you out."

Polydoor blushed shyly and hid behind his hump.

"Not really," he said in a small voice. "I haven't had much time for dating. Being an acolyte is a full-time job."

"I'm sure it is," said Babette. "I don't know how you manage!"

"Well it is very demanding," said Polydoor, feeling sorry for himself now. "People think it's easy, standing around drooling and rubbing your hands."

"That just shows how ignorant most people are!" said Babette.

"There's a lot more to being an acolyte than just basking in the glamour of it all," said Polydoor. "You have to strike a balance between true repulsiveness and dedicated sycophancy."

"I could never manage something like that," said Babette.

She smiled at him while she cleaned up her little ones, cleared the table, washed the dishes, and checked the latest figures on a steel mill she was operating in her spare time.

"It's really hard," said Polydoor, warming to his subject now. "For one thing, I had to teach myself how to build a particle accelerator."

"You're so clever, Polydoor!" said Babette, setting out a bowl of McBowel's mint-flavored spider treats. "I hope Vlod appreciates you."

The little ones gave a joyous cry and dived in, gorging themselves on the treats.

After the meal, Polydoor helped Babette put the kids to bed for a nap.

The little tykes were so excited, they kept jumping up and down on their bed, asking uncle Polydoor to read them a bed-time story.

Technically Polydoor wasn't their uncle; he'd only just met them, but deep down inside, he was a kind-hearted acolyte. He laughed with the little ones and read them a chapter from SCARY STORIES FOR LITTLE SPIDERS.

There were pictures of enormous humans squashing spiders with their special spider-squashing shoes, and humans mashing spiders with rolled-up magazines and newspapers.

It was so spooky, it even sent a tremor of fear up Polydoor's spine.

Fortunately, those humans had all evaporated in the great nuclear flash-fire on Earth, after they'd rotted awhile from plague bacilli, of course.

Anyway, Heathcliff and Scarlet were looking a little pale after the scary story, so Polydoor let them play with his hump for awhile.

By now, the little ones were in love with him, and Babette herself was feeling very tenderly disposed to him.

Soon the children fell asleep.

Polydoor tucked them in, and Babette kissed them goodnight.

Then the two lovebirds crept out to the rec room, where Babette prepared lime fizzers

and set out a dish of chocolate-covered centipedes.

Polydoor was in heaven.

He was in awe of Babette. She had the mother of all humps, starting right behind her head and extending all the way back to her spinnerets.

The two lovebirds stretched out their feet and sat close together on the couch listening to 'How Much is That Doggie in the Window?'-- the good version, with Doris Day.

Polydoor blushed and looked down at his hands.

Babette blushed and looked down at some of her hands.

There was a silence.

Shall I do it now? thought Polydoor. Shall I put my arm around her? What if she gets really mad, pushes my arm away and then bites off my head and eats it?

At last, summoning all of his courage, he reached out behind Babette's glittering body.

He almost screamed when she moved, but it was only to get closer to him so they could cuddle.

Then they smooched for awhile.

Polydoor was so happy, he nearly fainted.

He could hear voices coming to him from another world: the Captain Zap players threatening each other with dismemberment and death, the particle accelerator humming and buzzing.

Then he heard Vlod calling softly: "Yoo-hoo? Polydoor? Are you there? I need you, Polydoor. I need some fawning and sycophancy. I'm not feeling perky and topped up with self-esteem. Where are you, Polydoor?"

Babette had heard it too.

She gave a big sigh, then she said, "Must you go, sweetie?"

"I wish I didn't have to, darling, but duty calls. There's a war on, and we must all do our part."

"Oh Polydoor, you're so brave! I shall hold you in my heart always. I hate the nasty villains threatening our way of life. They'll never prevail against our young warriors!"

"Ummm, I think Vlod and I might be the villains, actually," said Polydoor. "I'm not sure; things aren't very clear."

Babette thought about that for a moment.

Then she said, "Oh well; it doesn't matter, dear heart. Parting is such sweet sorrow! I'll be here, waiting for you when this nasty war is over."

Polydoor felt noble and virtuous, and clean. It was very disturbing.

"Adieu, my love!" he said.

"Adieu, dear heart," said Babette.

Vlod had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 34: POLYDOOR'S QUEST

"Yoo hoo, master!" yelled Polydoor. "I'm coming, master! Get ready for sycophancy and fawning! Here I come!"

According to the time-honored ritual, Vlod was supposed to answer, "Oh, YOU! Enough of this nonsense, Polydoor! Come and polish my fangs."

But Vlod was silent, and that could only mean one thing.

He wasn't there.

Had he found a new acolyte?

Was he pouting?

Had he gone through a special door into the past?

Polydoor stepped carefully over the Captain Zap game, anxious not to disturb the players.

There's a superstition on Tockworld according to which, if you spill a beaker of salt while stepping on a crack and breaking a mirror as you're walking under a ladder after a black cat has darted across your path on Friday the thirteenth, you'll be sorry.

Polydoor emerged from the dungeon and checked the rec room, the particle accelerator, and the werewolfery out in the garden.

Then he spotted him in the rose garden, in the shadow of a ziggurat.

There was a railway track running through this part of Vlod's domain, a siding extending down from the Orient Express main line, which parallels the CP tracks.

The tiny Gothic station loomed ominously out of an atmospheric fog bank. A passenger car waited on a siding, its gas lights glowing through the shifting fog.

Between the two steel rails of the main line, directly in front of the station and the siding, a stake had been implanted.

Tied to the stake was the wriggling figure of Randomized Timer.

"Master, what are you doing?" yelled Polydoor.

At that moment, they could both hear the mournful whistle of the Orient Express, racing towards them after its long journey from Constantinople.

Polydoor was beside himself. "Master, master!" he cried. "If the Orient Express mashes Random, you'll never get your database! The aliens will win!"

"Fear not, Polydoor," said Vlod in a soothing voice. "I shall take over the programming chores."

"YOU, master?"

The raven started to quoth, but Vlod gave it a look and it merely flapped its wings.

"Thhthptthh," it said, enigmatically.

"This may come as a surprise to you," Vlod said, "but I do have a certain urge to write code. How hard can it be? You simply procure a large quantity of fine paper, some good pens, and a suitable desk."

"It'll never--" quoth the raven, catching himself just in time. Then he grinned. "It'll never be matchthed."

Vlod bowed.

"Thank you for your confidence, Cuther. You are a raven of true discernment. I shall acquire a middle manager for your dinner tonight."

Cuther smirked. "Ththth ththth ththth," he quoth.

Polydoor was growing frantic.

"Master, please, if you don't release him, we'll all be taken over by aliens and forced to work in crop circles."

Vlod sighed and shook his head.

"I suppose that's true," he said. "But I am so VEXED at my computer! Besides, I've already invited the traditional peasants with flaming torches."

"Peasants?" said Polydoor, surprised. "In Toronto?"

"They're financial workers, actually. Clerks from the banks and insurance companies. They have to supplement their wages so they can buy food."

Just then, a horde of financial workers arrived and began milling about. You could tell they weren't experienced peasants, because they didn't know what to do with their torches.

"Good heavens, there's a chap tied to a stake," yelled Smith, the first peasant.

"Ignore him," said Vlod. "I've changed my mind; you can all go home now."

"Suits me!" said Johnson, the second peasant. "Let's all go and shop for haggis."

"Haggis is banal," said Smith. "I'd rather do math homework."

"Haggis is NOT banal; it's primal matter left over from the Big Bang. If the ancient Romans had collected haggises, they could have traded them for food and saved their empire."

"Haggises ARE food!" said Smith.

"They are?" said Johnson. "You can eat haggises? I thought they represented something, like a symbol."

"What's so special about that? EVERYTHING represents something! Look at ME, for instance. I represent the riding of North Tewksbury."

A third peasant, by the name of Bunsen, scratched his chin with his pitchfork and said, "All this time I thought haggises were lawn ornaments!"

"Representing a riding isn't like symbolism," said Johnson, drying his wet socks over his flaming torch. "You can't elect a symbol."

"I put haggises all over my lawn," said Bunsen. "No wonder the Scots Greys came to see me! I thought they just wanted to talk about the Battle of Waterloo."

"Of course you can elect a symbol!" said Smith. "Look at Colonel Sanders!"

"Colonel Sanders is not a politician!" said Johnson indignantly. "He's not running for office."

"He isn't?"

"It hurt my feelings, you know," said Bunsen, scratching his back with his pitchfork. "I thought the Scots Greys came to see me because they liked my watercolors of Edinburgh in the rain. Now I know it was just for the haggises."

"I suppose you could say Margaret Thatcher is a symbol," said Johnson.

"They didn't EAT the haggises, you know," said Bunsen. "They just looked longingly at them."

"According to Jung, symbols are inherently ambivalent," said Smith.

"What did Jung know?" said Johnson. "He was a human! Look what humans did to Earth!"

"I suppose the Scots Greys were too polite to ask," said Bunsen. "I should have offered them haggis hors d'oeuvres. It's not as if I was short of them."

"Humans have no one to blame but themselves," said Smith. "They could have escaped in weather balloons, but they chose to hide out in crop circles instead. Look where it got them!"

"The Scots Greys probably thought I was keeping the haggises for Napoleon," said Bunsen. "I'd better phone their HQ."

"Jung should have read Locke on the assassination of ideas leading inevitably to the formation of an educated mind," said Johnson.

"Now there's an academic for you!" said Smith. "All talk and no action. He didn't assassinate a single idea. He collected them! And, as if that wasn't enough, he let them loose on an unsuspecting world. Look at the mess we're in now--pizzas with broccoli topping, value-added taxes...I ask you!"

"He did however, admit to an element of hazard in the association of ideas. Suppose you happened to look at a hippopotamus while your mind was still a tabula rasa, and in the same instant, you discovered a box of Licorice Allsorts on the kitchen table. You'd immediately conclude that if you wanted any more Licorice Allsorts, you'd have to get them from a hippopotamus."

"I wonder if that's why the Scots Greys had so much trouble at Waterloo," said Bunsen. "They thought I, a loyal Scot, was hoarding precious haggis to give to Napoleon. I suppose it wrecked their morale."

"Hazard is different from ambivalence," said Johnson. "Things can be quite precise and still conjoined by hazard. Symbols, however, become tarnished and unavailable for mystic imaginings once they've been fixed to a precise meaning. If you make a little statue of an elf, for instance, then it's no longer mystical; it's a lawn ornament."

"I suppose I could send the Scots Greys chocolate haggises for Llama's Eve," said Bunsen.

"Enough small talk," said Vlod, freeing Random. "It's back to the sinister bank towers for you people, and it's back to Sparkles the Wonder Computer for Random. We have work to do."

"I could offer to supply the Scots Greys haggises on their next outing," said Bunsen.

"We could always invest money in the derivatives market," said Smith. "That would

solve everything."

"What's a derivative?" said Johnson.

"It's a sort of vapor, like steam," said Smith.

"What good is that?"

"Well you can make engines go if you have a lot of steam."

"Don't you need an engine, first?"

"A mere detail. I could lend you one of mine."

"That's very kind of you."

"Mind you, it's been dented. A hippopotamus bashed into it while it was foraging for Licorice Allsorts."

Polydoor had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 35: DEMO'S LEITMOTIV

That night, with Sparkles the Wonder Computer still out of commission, Vlod took to his bed and wrote a letter of complaint to Macrohard.

It was a cold and miserable night.

Downstairs, among old bottles of lime fizzier, something groaned and began dragging a heavy chain across the floor.

A doorknob sneezed in the freezing air.

"And another thing," Vlod wrote, "Why does that stupid Macklin get to be The One? It doesn't make any sense! He's a wimp! He has no brains, no chutzpah. I, Vlod Ironbeak, should be The One. I have brains, I have an acolyte and a quothing raven! I AM THE MAYOR OF TORONTO!"

Just then, something shimmered on the air for a moment in Vlod's chambers. Then a ghostly figure materialized, moaning and wailing outside the gauzy curtains drawn around Vlod's bed.

"Have you seen any pucks?" it moaned.

It was dressed in a Toronto Maple Leaf's goalie costume. It wobbled a little as it approached the bed, supporting itself with a hockey stick and carrying a rubber duckie under its arm.

Vlod didn't even bother looking up.

"What are you doing here, Demo?" he snapped. "You're supposed to be shadowing Macklin, making sure he keeps his nose to the grindstone and finishes the model railroad I ordered.

"I'm tired of being a hockey goalie," complained Demo. "I want my old life back, with Sally Popoff and Spot of the Negev. I've started having nightmares."

Vlod held up his hands. "Please--not here. Other people's dreams put me to sleep."

"Nightmares about a rubber duckie," Demo said.

"That's an easy one; it's a symbol of bathtubs, meaning you haven't washed your outfit since you started wearing it."

"SQUEAK!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"That wasn't me; it was my rubber duckie."

Vlod looked up as Demo flung away the rubber duckie in disgust.

"Rather a small thing to be haunting your nightmares," he said.

"That's not the duckie I dream about," said Demo. "I bought it because I thought it would help me sleep at night. But it doesn't. Last night I woke up with the little beast sitting on my chest, staring at me."

"Were you sleeping in your goalie's outfit?"

"Yes."

"Maybe it was admiring the maple leaf on your sweater."

"It wasn't; it was staring at me. It knew about my nightmare. It was communing with the rubber duckie in my nightmare."

Vlod considered this for a moment, trying to recall the little he knew about hockey. Was there some connection between hockey and madness? Was it possible to go insane simply as a consequence of donning a Toronto Maple Leaf's outfit?

"Other people have nightmares about monsters and wild beasts," said Demo. "I have nightmares about rubber duckies! I ask you!"

"Does it squeak?" said Vlod.

"NO, IT DOESN'T SQUEAK! IT'S AN EVIL RUBBER DUCKIE THAT GLOWS IN THE DARK."

"Goodness, gracious me! How long has it been since your last vacation, Demo?"

"I can't remember."

"Take some time off. Take six weeks. Relax. Read some Captain Zap comics. Shop for scotch."

"Don't you need me to keep an eye on Macklin?"

"Not as such. I have a supply of tax evaders in my dungeon. Polydoor will do a nice clone of your personality and download it into one of my prisoners."

"I won't have that!" yelled Demo. "I don't want any duplicate Demo's milling around, jostling for primacy."

"It won't be that sort of duplicate; it will be more of a leitmotiv, symbolizing the eternal quest for the perfect model railroad."

Demo eyed Vlod suspiciously.

"Really?" he said. "You can use a ringer? I can go back to being a seedy academic? I can join Sally Popoff and we can ride Spot of the Negev off into the sunset?"

"Of course! As long as you consent to having a leitmotiv functioning independently of your control."

"You mean a doppelganger?"

"I most certainly do not. Doubling a Toronto Maple Leaf goalie would accomplish nothing. A leitmotiv, however, will keep up the pressure on Macklin."

Demo wasn't so sure about this part of the bargain--what if his leitmotiv got carried away and tried to set the agenda for both personalities?

On the other hand, anything was better than wobbling around on skates all day long!

"Done!" he said.

Moments later, Polydoor led a miserable wretch of a tax evader out of the dungeons and into his lab, where he strapped him down on a metal table.

Copper cylinders glittered in the light filtering through a high window. Static electricity crackled and hissed. Cuneiform script flashed across a computer screen; then it vanished beneath a little sign that said: 'This application has unexpectedly quit•c.'

Polydoor uttered an oath.

Custer had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 36: SALLY REDUX

Demo was congratulating himself on his bargain when Sally Popoff materialized with her basket of rutabagas and her camera.

"Hello sweetie," she said.

"Oh Sally!" exclaimed Demo. "I'm so glad to see you!"

"Oh Demo!" said Sally. "Me too!"

"Oh dear," said Spot of the Negev, who was trying to pretend he was with someone else.

Demo rushed to embrace Sally and the two sweethearts smooched for awhile.

After a long moment, Sally said, "I think it might be better without the goalie mask, sweetie," and Demo hurriedly doffed it.

"And you might want to change out of those silly clothes," she added.

Demo at once cast off his goalie's outfit and changed into his Armani academic costume.

Everyone was amused by the rubber duckies on his underwear.

"Never again will I complain about the life of a seedy academic," he said.

"That is good, my love," said Sally, "because there's something I want you to do."

"Name it, sweetheart."

"I want you to go into the Fabulous Mists of Antiquity with me and help me find a new and exciting venue for my next work of art."

"I'll be glad to, my dear; it will help me forget my nightmares of an evil rubber duckie."

"Of a what?"

"An evil rubber duckie," said Demo irritably. "A big one."

Sally looked at Vlod.

"Is this your doing?"

Vlod lifted his arms in a gesture of helplessness.

"A little vacation time should do the trick," he said. "But there's always electroshock, if everything else fails."

"We don't need gadgets; we have rutabagas."

Sally embraced Demo again.

"You just forget about the nasty rubber duckie, sweetheart!" she said. "I'll look after you."

Vlod shook his head. He was beginning to feel dizzy. Life was so complicated now that people felt free to talk openly of their fetishes! Why couldn't they just bite each other and drink each other's blood?

"Catch!" yelled Sally, playfully tossing him a rutabaga.

Then she climbed up onto Spot of the Negev and rode away with Demo, through the Gothic forest, into the noonday sun.

Vlod offered Polydoor the rutabaga.

"No thanks," said Polydoor. "I gave at the office."

Hours later, Polydoor found an entry for the Rubber Duckie of Evil in THE GREAT BIG BOOK OF THINGS TO SAY AT PARTIES.

He immediately showed it to Vlod, who turned a whiter shade of pale.

"There IS a big rubber duckie, master," said Polydoor. "Or perhaps a mud-brick duckie--no one is sure. It was forged by twelve angry wizards to collect all of the evil thoughts and wishes in Tockworld."

"Good grief!" said Vlod. "It's like the Jolly Fat Llama; it knows whether you've been bad or good."

"Correct as usual, master. The wizards wanted to draw our evil thoughts into a receptacle and then destroy the receptacle so we'd all be much nicer."

"Don't tell me; let me guess," said Vlod. "Something went wrong."

"Yes Master. There were too many evil thoughts in the world. The mud-brick duckie quickly filled up, and then the evil thoughts were squeezed and compressed."

"Into the Power of Durable Evil?"

"Precisely, master. It soon took on a life of its own and began to influence people, to make them do nasty things."

Vlod listened in a stupor.

"A rubber duckie?"

"A mud-brick duckie, master--at least initially. It soon began influencing artisans to make other, smaller duckies--the sort of rubber duckies you see in bathtubs."

Vlod glanced over his shoulder at his collection of decoys, confiscated from the humans who had taken refuge on Tockworld after they had blown up their own planet.

Was it his imagination, or had they taken on a sinister air?

"What happened to the wizards?" he demanded.

"It says here they were killed, master. One by one. By an evil presence."

"By the Big Rubber Duckie?"

"By it's acolyte--Freddy Manichean Heresy."

Vlod shuddered. "Freddy wanted to accentuate his evil side, I suppose."

"I'm afraid so, master."

"I was hoping to use the Power of Durable Evil for my own ends, Polydoor. But I never imagined it would take the form of a monstrous rubber duckie. If the wizards couldn't stop it, I don't see how we can."

"But we have the model railroad Lenore envisioned, master. She would not have foreseen it if it did not offer some means of thwarting the Rubber Duckie of Evil."

"We don't have it yet, and we may never have it if the aliens subvert Macklin."

"Then we must redouble our efforts, master. We must ensure that he completes the model railroad."

"Where is this Rubber Duckie of Evil? Does it say in the book?"

"It's in the Fabulous Mists of Antiquity, master. The author thinks it's somewhere in ancient Babylon."

"That is precisely where Demo, Sally and Spot have ventured," said Vlod. "The Rubber Duckie of Evil must be influencing them."

"I'm afraid so, master."

"I wonder if Demo and Sally mean to betray me, Polydoor. Hurry after them. Be the first to find this monster duck and there'll be a nice treat for you in your Llama's Eve stocking."

Polydoor had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 37: PARTING IS SO MUSHY

Polydoor was in a foul mood.

Demo and Sally had only just departed the scene, but already they were far, far away.

How was he to find them?

He began his search where so many important quests have begun; at the University of Strange Thoughts.

Criminals always return to the scene of the crime he reasoned, and what could be more criminal than Demo at a lectern preaching philosophy to a lot of helpless undergraduates.

True, he hadn't perpetrated a lecture since joining his little gang of stooges, but there was always a chance he'd maintained an office there.

It wouldn't be the first time an absentee professor had conned his students with a virtual presence. He might have used the old Inflatable Professor trick, using a complete sound system, a course of lectures on a CD, and a graduate student to field questions.

If he was careful, and scheduled all of his classes for early in the morning, the undergraduates would undoubtedly play along, glad of the chance to sleep off their nightly debauches.

Anyway, If you've never seen the University of Strange Thoughts, you're in for a treat.

It was a sprawling place, of course, dense with strangler figs and phosphorescent undergraduates decaying among the trees.

There were lots of ivory towers; there were mobs of unruly social consciences, and there was even a pauper's cemetery, where flocks of unpublished academics were buried in unmarked graves.

Like many self-contained institutions, the University of Strange Thoughts had a caste system.

The richest academics, the researchers in biochemistry, computers, and financial derivatives, lived in ivory towers, which were festooned with corporate logos.

The poorest academics, those who examined literature in hopes of enriching the lives of Tockworld's downtrodden masses with empowering visions of meaning and beauty, taught in pup tents, telephone booths, and old shipping containers.

These poor souls got grants by begging on Queen Street, where street musicians sometimes took pity on them and dropped a few loonies into their shabby briefcases.

The more enterprising among them managed to eke out a living by converting their lecture notes into rap lyrics, and performing in special clubs.

Demo, a mere philosophy professor, belonged by rights among the lowest of the low, with three or four deranged students, a bit of canvas for a home, and a can of beans for supper.

But Demo was an exception to the rule; Demo taught EXPERIMENTAL philosophy, which involves finding the right ends to justify the means, and has military applications.

Not, alas, for the Canadian military, which has been forbidden by the government to buy ammunition because it's too expensive and might hurt someone, but for Vlod.

The mayor of Toronto, unlike members of parliament, is forced to deal with the harsh realities of life on Tockworld.

Anyway, Demo had, in fact, kept his old corner office, with a view of a golden statue of a platypus, symbolic of the university's mission.

Polydoor enquired at the desk on the mezzanine floor.

A crew of graduate teaching assistants carried him up the stairs in a sedan chair and deposited him in the reception area, outside Demo's office.

There was a framed photograph of Demo's sinister criminal pals on the wall.

When you have something in your past that makes you cool, it's a good idea to rub people's noses in it.

Aliens came and went, talking about Michelangelo.

A receptionist got up from behind her desk and pointed a cattle prod at him.

"Get out!" she said. "He's busy until the end of the decade."

She was a big, tall, Viking dressed in leather and bronze.

The name engraved on her name plate was Gerda. She looked tough enough to chew up a Pickard Trilobite and spit shrapnel at Polydoor.

But she made one mistake.

She noticed his hump.

"Are you staring at something?" Polydoor said in a dangerous voice.

Gerda was stupefied. It was an enormous hump; it made him look like a camel. And yet, it was not without its strange attractions.

"Ummm, I was looking at your nice jacket."

"Were you staring at my hump?"

"Hump? Is there one?"

"It's a mole. I could have it removed if I wanted to, but I've grown attached to it."

"Hump!" quoth the raven. "Get it right, humpy!"

There was a brief silence. Custer vibrated on Humpy's shoulder as a shockwave passed through the air.

"I believe in calling a hump a hump," quoth the raven, winking at Gerda. "It maketh you dithingithed."

Polydoor thought about this.

"It doth?" he said.

"Oh yes, it doth!" said Gerda, lowering her cattle prod. She really wanted to--but NO! MUST SUPPRESS ALL WEIRD DESIRES.

"You should think about exposing it," she said. "Perhaps with an off-the-shoulder shirt. You might want to have it pierced; you could wear a really good-sized chain through there!"

Polydoor was pleased. He reached up and patted Custer on the head.

"Treats for you tonight," he said. "A whole easy-rock DJ, complete with play list."

"Yummy!" said Cuther.

Gerda, realizing she'd come into the presence of a superior force, decided to be ingratiating. She was itching to caress Polydoor's hump. Her fingers stretched involuntarily towards it.

"Professor Demo isn't home," she said. "But his office is."

Polydoor ignored this while his Machiavellian brain did a quick inventory, checking off the marble walls, marble floor, marble desk, and rococo ceiling.

There was a special reading chair for Spot of the Negev, and a box of camel treats.

On the wall was a large, framed Sally Popoff work entitled 'Norman'.

There was the standard, Peake's Commentary on Sartre, in nineteen volumes.

Demo had written volume XI, an analysis of the famous scene in which Roquentin, the hapless narrator, receives a vision while staring at the roots of a chestnut tree.

All in all, it was an impressive office, if you like offices.

But Polydoor noticed a certain absence in the Demo department.

In fact, Demo didn't seem to be there at all.

"There's no one here," he said.

"That's what I told you," Gerda said. "I know how disappointed you must be. Perhaps if I caressed your hump, you'd feel better."

Polydoor moved away. Only Babette could touch his hump. He was a one-spider duck.

"Where is he?" he demanded.

"He's off raiding tombs in ancient Babylon. He wants to find out who invented philosophy, and kill him before it gets any worse."

"Hmmm," said Polydoor suspiciously. "So he's already left for ancient Babylon? That was quick!"

Then he noticed something else.

It was a corpse, to be exact; a dead duck in a green silk kimono.

"There's a dead duck on the floor," said Polydoor.

"DIBS!" quoth the raven.

The receptionist knelt beside the rapidly cooling duck.

"Oh my goodness, that's his secretary!" she said. "I'd better tell the dean. What a mess! I suppose I'll have to put in a request for a new secretary now. This is going to take masses of paperwork. MASSES! You wouldn't believe the forms you have to fill out."

"Look, she was playing with her Nokia," Polydoor said. "I've never seen a tortoise shell Nokia before. I wonder if she was playing DOOM."

"There's blood all over it," said Gerda. "Yech!"

"Yummy!" quoth the raven, licking his chops.

"Wait, she's written something in blood on the screen," said Polydoor.

"I can just make it out," said Gerda. "There's an 'F' an 'M' and an 'H'."

"Fu Manchu Himthelf," quoth the raven. "I'm not eating thath! It's probably poithoned."

"I thought Fu Manchu was just a literary figure," said Gerda, looking around nervously.

Polydoor glanced at her, a cold feeling going up his spine.

"Not Fu Manchu," he said. "Freddy Manichean Heresy. The most dangerous creature in all of Tockworld. If he's mixed up in this, we're all in trouble."

Then he found the secretary's 'to-do' list:

1. Search for delicious food that can be eaten in great quantities and has no calories.

2. Find a slightly used male with clean fingernails.

3. Book ticket for D. and S. to fabulous mists of antiquity. Economy class.

Just then, an evil laugh echoed through the room, and a shadow loomed over the little group of interlopers.

Then all was silence again, except for the lonely whistle of the Orient Express pulling into the campus station, near Inquisition Hall, where the final exams were in progress.

Final exams were always in progress at the University of Strange Thoughts

Polydoor had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 38: POLYDOOR'S PERIL

Polydoor glanced out the window at the golden platypus. He had to get going, but he was in a tight spot. If anyone discovered the corpse on the floor of Demo's office, they'd think he'd put it there.

Granted, the receptionist was a witness to his innocence, but what if she wanted to blackmail him so she could goose up her retirement fund a little?

Custer's Last Stand was no help; the raven would probably turn him in for a share of the corpse.

Meanwhile, back in Vlod's dungeon, Polydoor's girlfriend, Babette, sensed his anxiety. A tremor of fear went through her.

She knew immediately this meant Polydoor was in danger, because the only other time she'd felt tremors was when she'd discovered a spam artist trapped in her web.

Polydoor's in danger, she said to herself. Must help Polydoor!

So she called him up on her cell phone.

Polydoor answered at once.

"If this is a telemarketer calling," he said, "I'm going to find out who you are and where you live, and I'm going to send a ravenous werewolf to your door!"

Babette was momentarily tongue-tied. Her heart went thump-a-lump, thump-a-lump, and she felt dizzy with love.

"If this is the dean," said Polydoor. "I didn't do it! She was already dead when I got here."

"Thath right," quoth the raven. "I thaw him do it."

"I love you, Polydoor," said Babette.

At the sound of Babette's voice, Polydoor melted.

"I love you too, sweetie," he said.

"So what are you doing, Polydoor?" Babette asked.

"Oh nothing much. Trying to avoid being found with a dead body and an evil master criminal and assassin while I start out on a quest for Demo."

"That's nice," said Babette. "I was just thinking about you, Polydoor. I love you."

"I love you, Babette."

"I really love you Polydoor."

"I really, really love you, Babette."

"Thith ith thickening," muttered Custer.

Fortunately, the connection eventually fell apart, as they so often do with cell phones.

Gerda, meanwhile, had been calling the dean. She put down the phone and smiled inappropriately at Polydoor.

"We'll have to get out of here until this blows over," she said.

Polydoor sighed wearily.

There was nothing for it; he'd have to go into the Fabulous Mists of "Antiquity and find Demo. But where in the FMA? Nineveh? Eblis? Ancient Tewksbury?

If Freddy Manichean Heresy was involved, that probably meant ancient Persia. Perhaps he could start with Babylon and work his way east. Anyone who was anybody went to ancient Babylon!

He wondered if the ancient Babylonians had cell phones. They were probably on a different system, so his phone wouldn't work. Or there'd be an enormous roaming charge for trying to dial out from the ancient world.

He'd just have to send carrier pigeons.

Meanwhile, the aliens disguised as quacking elephants were having doubts about their plans to build a model railroad with Macklin's help.

They decided to consult a management guru.

Thus it was, while the main force of quacking elephants remained at their posts in front

of Macklin's condominium building, Bessemer Converter and a select few went off to see Felix Unman at his magic shop (It used to be a tent).

The magic shop was conveniently located in a park right next to George's Trains, where tennis players threatened each other with ghastly deaths.

Felix greeted the quacking elephants irritably. He'd just taken off his port-wine colored corduroy jacket and was busily examining it for ketchup stains.

"Are you going to stand there all day, or are you going to show me what you brought?" he said.

Bessemer whispered to the others, and they handed over a large, angry creature.

"We offer you this," he said.

Felix eyed it suspiciously.

"That's an ostrich."

"No it isn't," said Bessemer.

"Yes it is."

"Well, technically it's an ostrich, but it has self esteem."

Felix examined the ostrich.

The ostrich batted her eyes. "I like you too sweetie," she said.

It was love at first sight.

"Okay," said Felix. "It's a deal. What do you want in exchange?"

"We have a problem," said Bessemer Converter. "We're supposed to invade Tockworld, enslave its inhabitants, despoil it, and force the survivors to stop recycling. Unfortunately, we don't want to do these things."

"Have you got a business plan?" asked Felix.

"We don't need one. We'd prefer to live here peacefully and help people select attractive floor coverings, but we don't know how to deal with our boss, General Fumarole. We need phony ID so we can disappear and blend into the crowds."

Felix eyed the elephants skeptically.

"What you really need is a goal," he said. "People on Tockworld all have goals now; it's the latest thing."

"We were thinking of having a model railroad built," said Bessemer. "Does that qualify as a goal?"

"Barely," said Felix. "EVERYONE wants to have a model railroad built. It's not very original."

"We could start a model railroad club."

"That's a little better. I can work with that. I'll design some official documents for you, and a logo, of course. Perhaps an elephant in a caboose."

"I like that," said Bessemer.

"Good. Here they are."

Felix handed Bessemer a package of official forms, signed by the prime minister of Canada, Anne of Green Gables.

"Now you're safe," he said. "No one can extradite you."

Bessemer flapped his trunk in delight. All of the elephants waxed exceedingly joyful. Then they bid their farewells to the grumpy wizard and his beautiful ostrich girlfriend, and went skipping out into the park.

When Bessemer looked back, however, the magic shop (it used to be a tent) was gone.

In its place was a privy, currently occupied by someone who was singing 'Moon River' at the top of his voice.

"I wonder who he was, really," said Bessemer.

"Doris Day?" said his staff officer, Cordless Screwdriver.

"Doris Day is a lovely woman, very attractive, with a marvelous singing voice," said Bessemer. "Don't insult her."

Just then, Bessemer noticed something odd in the grass.

"Look, there's something odd in the grass," he said.

"It's a small, fossilized thing," said Cordless.

"Holy armadillos; it's a hockey puck!" said Bessemer.

"What's a hockey puck?" asked Cordless.

"It's a votive object. This is a good omen. We're going to succeed!"

The elephants headed back to George's Trains in high spirits, thinking they were about to find a solution to the problem of how to avoid invading, looting and pillaging Tockworld.

Meanwhile, Randomized Timer, master of Sparkles the Wonder Computer, and programmer and tech support to the stars, was perplexed.

Sparkles kept crashing.

Maybe she needs some new parts, he said to himself.

Male computer experts sometimes think of their computers as females, and sometimes they think of them as evil entities.

Random was on good terms with Sparkles, so he went out on a quest for parts.

Naturally he went to George's Trains, the famous model railroad shop.

Pushing his way past a mob of aliens disguised as quacking elephants, he became curious.

The quacking elephants were all looking at track plans.

Just then, a group of young ducks who happened to be passing by began yelling at each other.

"What's that noise?" said the quacking elephants, alarmed.

"It's a Game Wart," said one of the youngsters. "We got it from this weird magic tent (It used to be a shop). It comes from the future, when everybody worships hockey pucks."

The quacking elephants all gathered around for a look at the Game Wart.

Random was curious. The young ducks were playing a version of Death Hockey, a game of skill.

He'd played Death Hockey on the Game Wart Mark X, of course, but this was different.

"What are they doing?" said the elephants. "What's the Stanley Cup?"

"You get the Stanley Cup when you've sacrificed all of the players on the opposite team," said Random. "It gives you super powers."

Bessemer peered closely at the screen. Lots of tiny hockey players were beating each other to death with sticks.

"We could use this as a signaling device," he said.

The young ducks were growing excited.

"Kill that one, eh!" they shouted.

"This is war, eh!"

"His head fell off, eh! That's a penalty!"

"No it isn't; he's gluing it back on."

"I really don't understand this hockey thing," said Bessemer.

"It's a primitive ritual," said Random.

"Primitive people believed in video games?" said Bessemer.

"They still do," said Random.

"Our people were never that messy when they sacrificed.

"Yeah, but we only sacrificed broccoli," said Cordless.

"Will you guys shut up!" shouted Static Charge, the communications officer. "General Fumarole is on the line."

"Again?" said Bessemer wearily. "Give it to me, please."

He took the intergalactic cell phone, expecting anger and recriminations.

Instead, he got the honeyed tones of a contented psychopath.

"You were discussing sacrifice?" said General Fumarole. "Blood and gore? That's encouraging."

"Umm, yes," said Bessemer.

"Now you're talking, Bessemer! To be frank, I was worried about you. I thought you were turning into a wimp. What do these hockey players do?"

"They hit each other with sticks."

"Really? It's remarkably like a Captain Zap episode. These people would make good allies. What's the little black thing?"

"It's their god. Every so often they take a break from bashing each other and hit it. The object is to kill another player with it. They try to avoid getting it into those net things."

"They hit their god? What chutzpah!"

"Maybe you have to hit it to get its attention," said Cordless.

"The net thingy must be an altar," said Bessemer. "Look at all the worshippers in the pews. They must be really devout!"

By now, a crowd had gathered around the Game Wart.

"I think we attracted some worshippers," said a young duck.

"Kill him!" shouted another duck. "Stuff marmots into his ears. Make him eat mashed turnips and beets until he explodes."

"Holy Rutabagas, these people are dangerous," said General Fumarole. "This is going to be an exciting invasion. I can hardly wait."

"Look, they're bashing each other again," said Bessemer, horrified by the game.

"There's blood all over the screen."

"They're playing some stock brokers from New York. That one has a bone through his nose."

"What's New York?"

"A suburb of Toronto, I think."

Suddenly, one of the elephants who had been watching the game shouted excitedly, "LOOK, LOOK, SEE, SEE! ZAMBONI DRIVERS! THEY HAVE ZAMBONI DRIVERS HERE! I DON'T BELIEVE IT!"

"Oh my gosh, they're real!" said Bessemer. "They're not fake. Pinch me! I've never seen a real Zamboni driver before. Only in pictures from the Lost City of Atlantis. They must have come right here after they lost Atlantis."

"That's possible. Remember the stories we used to hear from the old guys at Samuel Taylor Coleridge's Game Shop? When Atlantis got lost, a few Zamboni drivers survived by building a bunch of huge Zambonis, each one eighty cubits by ninety cubits."

"Yeah, and they built the pyramids to park their Zambonis in."

Several of the elephants fainted.

"My life is complete," murmured Bessemer Converter.

"Look, that Zamboni driver is a female! Isn't she beautiful! She has gold breast plates."

"Stop it!" shouted Bessemer. "General Fumarole wants to see blood and squishy bits. We have to oblige him...."

"We could buy him tickets to a Leafs game," said a passing model railroader.

Bessemer had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 39: EVIL SPIES

Meanwhile, Polydoor continued to be nervous about the corpse on the floor of Demo's office.

What if it sued for wrongful dismissal?

Technically it wasn't Polydoor's problem, but a lawsuit might distract Demo. If he heard about it while robbing a tomb somewhere in ancient Babylon, he might lose track of things. He might not notice Freddy Manichean Heresy's minions creeping up behind him.

In fact, Demo might be assassinated immediately after finding the Rubber Duckie of Evil.

Just then, the dean showed up. He was a choleric, red-faced drake in a horned helmet and chain mail. There were corporate logos on his back, mostly from mutual funds. He took one look at the mess and shoed the conspirators out.

"I should really fine you for this, but I'm much too busy," he said.

Gerda warned Polydoor not to bite him, and apologized on behalf of the absent Demo.

"I suppose it's not as bad as stealing her ID, but even so, it's not very nice. See that it doesn't happen again."

"Yes sir."

"You'd better clear out while I cover everything up and bury the body in a shallow grave."

Gerda took Polydoor to the buttery, where he could enjoy a quiet meal while making plans for his trip to ancient Babylon.

The buttery was a copy of Caesar's Palace. The Emperor Vespasian sat in a corner, playing the slots.

Polydoor sat with his back to the door so his hump would take the brunt of any sneak attacks.

Gerda ordered two dandelions and a slab of birch bark.

"Very original," said Polydoor. "Most people make canoes with that stuff."

"I'm on a diet," she explained.

Polydoor ordered anchovy jelly.

Then he glanced out the window and noticed a sinister figure standing on the corner.

"Don't look now, but we're being watched," he breathed.

"We are?" said Gerda. "Is he a spy, or just a marketing executive?"

"He's a spy."

"How can you tell?"

"He's reading a romance novel. A true professor would hide it behind something more appropriate to this setting, like an 'Archie' comic."

"Oh my goodness; I never thought of that!" said Gerda. "You're brilliant, Polydoor. I want to have your children, as long as I can do so without actually coming into physical contact with you, or growing large around the middle."

"It's possible," he said. "But it would be a non sequitur."

"What do you want to do? How will you escape him?"

"Just keep talking. Pretend I'm still here."

"I didn't know you'd left."

"I'm GOING to leave," said Polydoor testily.

Then, without finishing his bowl of anchovy jelly, he crept out the door to the airport, on the edge of the city.

Custer joined him in the new terminal, which was being torn down for renovations and was quite noisy.

The two companions took a convenient flight to Paris, where they went looking for the Orient Express.

They could have boarded the Orient Express in Toronto, of course, but the ferry ride across the ocean can be stormy, and Polydoor gets seasick.

Sinister eyes watched Polydoor as he made his way to the ticket agent.

The ticket agent adjusted his beret and pointed his baguette at Polydoor.

"Go away," he said. "We're French."

Polydoor was in no mood for the absurd antics of foreigners; he snatched the uppity fellow out of the booth and tossed him into a wagon-load of clotted cream.

The new ticket agent wore a bowler hat and a cigar.

"Closing time," he said. "We're British. Come back tomorrow."

"One adult ticket and one children's ticket for Ancient Babylon, please," said Polydoor. "I'm challenged because of my hump, and if you refuse to serve me, I shall sue you for discrimination."

"Oh, you want tickets!" said the ticket agent. "We don't actually sell the tickets here; this is where we take requests. The ticket handler is in the next booth."

Then he filled out a form in triplicate and handed the illegible copy to Polydoor.

The ticket handler, upon reading the form, sucked in his cheeks.

"That's a weekly, sir. Not much call to go to ancient Babylon anymore; the time door is a bit unreliable. Perils of war, you know."

"I'll take my chances," said Polydoor.

"They'll be glad to see you, I suppose. Tourism is suffering, what with the carnage."

He handed Polydoor two baked clay tablets.

"May you live in interesting times," he said.

Polydoor thanked him and threaded his way through a mob of sinister passengers to the boarding platform.

By now he could sense the evil Freddy Manichean Heresy watching him, but where was he?

He glanced at the hamburger chain with the famous yellow things standing outside.

Then he made his way down the corridor, looking for his compartment.

He missed Babette terribly. He wondered whom she was killing and eating now.

He even missed Vlod. How would that silly vampire ever get along without his Polydoor to fawn over him.

Acolytes are the real power behind the throne in case you didn't know.

At last the train pulled out of the station and plunged into the deepening gloom of the French countryside.

A woman sang 'Some of These Days.'

Jean-Paul Sartre wrote BEING AND NOTHINGNESS.

Husserl was furious. "That's not what I meant," he said. "Not what I meant at all."

Shots rang out.

Polydoor settled into a crowded compartment and silently passed gas.

Soon he and Custer were alone.

He was dozing off when the door slid open and a beautiful duck dressed in a little black strapless dress and toting a purse and a gun stepped inside the compartment.

"Do you mind if I sit here?" she said.

Polydoor stood up politely. His every instinct cried out, DANGER! WARNING! INCOMING FEMME FATALE!, but he was helpless.

Only the thought of his lovely Babette kept him from leaping across the compartment and smooching with the stranger, or at least politely asking her if she'd like to smooch.

"I'm waiting," said the femme fatale, smiling at him.

Oh she was a slinky one! She wore high heels that looked like waffle irons on pedestals, and she had the sort of eyes that can read you like a balance sheet.

Polydoor smiled and gestured to the seat across from him.

The sultry duck sat on his lap.

"I'm very shy," she said. "This way you won't be able to see my face."

"Good thinking," said Polydoor in a strangled voice.

Then he forced himself to think about Babette. She was probably killing something for lunch right now. After that, she'd wait demurely for his return in a nineteenth century woodcut.

Oh it burned, it burned!

"I like big strong acolytes like you!" the sultry one said. "They make me feel all gooshy inside!"

Polydoor's heart started beating. This was all wrong! She was up to something wicked.

Be suspicious! he thought. She probably works for Freddy Manichean Heresy. She'll wait until I'm off guard, then she'll stab me in the hump with a hat pin.

The faithful Custer would probably help her.

Or maybe I'm just being paranoid, he thought. After all, I'm a charismatic acolyte! The atmosphere changes whenever I walk into a room. People sense my charisma.

"My name is Lucy Borden," the sultry duck said. "I'm Florentine."

Polydoor examined her closely. She didn't look like fine glassware, but you never knew.

An actress filming a horror movie screamed.

Polydoor adjusted Lucy on his lap. "Do you think there's something odd about this

train?" he said.

"Thertainly," quoth Custer. "They let YOU ride on it."

Custer smiled lasciviously at Lucy.

Lucy winked at him.

Polydoor had a bad feeling about this--

CHAPTER 40: HISTORY UNRAVELS

There was fog everywhere.

Fog in the Luxembourg Gardens. Fog in the Opera House. Fog in the House of Commons.

Fog in the Orient Express mail coach, where choleric sorters puzzled over a bundle of letters that had been sent from Orlando to Miami.

Fog in the baggage car, where the suitcases chatted quietly among themselves: "I've got a green, silk bathrobe from the Bronx; who wants to trade it for an Anaximander card?"

Fog in the tiny galley in the restaurant car, where the pastry chef rushed about, taking haggises out of their Tiffany's boxes, sprinkling them with icing sugar, and popping them into special pastry ovens.

Fog in the philosophorium, where Jean-Paul Sartre and Husserl discussed Louis L'Amour.

Fog in the library car, where Sherlock Holmes perused VIOLINS FOR DUM DUMS, while the faithful Watson took his constitutional in the corridor.

Mysterious shapes glimmering in the foggy corridor, where telemarketers searched for virgins to sacrifice.

Fog crept into Polydoor's compartment, until he could barely see the stitches in his wrists and hands.

Lucy Borden had moved to the opposite seat, where she was preparing a snack on her portable butcher block, hacking methodically away at something slippery and disgusting.

Blood and gobbets of flesh flew like shrapnel, and Custer snatched them out of the air in a perfect ecstasy of greed.

"Lithen Polydoor!" he quoth. "Thith ith the girl for you. Naughty and metthy; thath the kind you want. Take it from me."

But Polydoor's heart was bound over in hoops of love to his sweetie pie, Babette the spider.

He could hardly wait for Mister Tasty Chocolate Day, when all true lovers everywhere celebrate by giving their sweethearts truckloads of dental chocolate.

Polydoor told himself he'd give Babette the biggest chocolate inquisitor anyone on Tockworld had ever seen, if he survived this expedition to ancient Babylon.

Actually he was worried about this.

He had to keep awake all the way to Constantinople, in case the enticing Lucy Borden really WAS one of Freddy Manichean Heresy's minions and planned on stabbing him in the hump while he was sleeping.

It was a long journey. He tried to distract himself with a copy of FLUFFY'S GUIDE TO ANCIENT BABYLON.

"The Orient Express used to go no further than Constantinople," Fluffy had written.

"Now, however, there is a branch line running straight through a time door to Hammurabi Station in ancient Babylon.

"Before proceeding on your journey, you might want to spend some time in the lovely city of Constantinople, where civilization persisted long after the Europeans had given it up for soccer....."

Polydoor put his travel book away and thought about the inhabitants of Constantinople.

The world seemed to contract around him. He heard voices like echoes coming from other parts of the train.

Shots rang out.

Polydoor smiled, lulled by the soothing sounds.

"Get it off me!" a woman screamed. "Get it off!"

"It's only a haggis, my dear! Look, it's still in its Tiffany's box."

"I don't care! Get it off me! Aaahha...aggggh...argghh...."

This was followed by a disturbing silence.

Polydoor's eyes popped open. He hated silences; it usually meant that everyone was dead and he'd have to go around cleaning up.

Then a voice reassured him.

"Well, that's done! I suppose we shall have to rid ourselves of her corpse now!"

"We should clean it up, first."

"Forget it, sweetums! We can bury her with the haggis still attached; I'm not scraping THAT off!"

"Shhh. Alone at last, sweetie. Now we get all her money."

"She didn't have any, sweetie."

"She didn't?"

"I thought you knew. YOU'RE the one with the money, angel face."

"I am? That's true, isn't it! So why did we have to kill her?"

"Because something went wrong. Marie and I were supposed to kill YOU. Then we'd get YOUR money and run off to Omaha."

"Oh. It was all a mistake then. I don't suppose we could revive her?"

The voices faded, and others took their place, coming through the ventilation system.

"Oh do it again," crumb cakes. "I love it when you talk like Imhotep. I want to have your children, if I can do so without coming into actual physical contact with you and growing large around the middle."

"But darling; this train has Internet access. We can do it on the computer."

"Oh Myron! That's so cool!"

"Oh Wanda!"

Polydoor, half asleep, wept as he heard these words. Where was his lovely Babette? Would he ever see her again?

"Is this a dagger I see before me?" another voice said.

"It's a prenuptial, babe! Read it and weep."

"Look, look! There's Theophrastus von Hohenheim, the Swiss alchemist and physician. He's reviving a dead woman. She's getting up now."

"Ooohh! Where was I? I had a dizzy spell."

"You were dead for awhile, sweetums, but that's okay. No one noticed."

"Oh good. I'm glad I got that over with. Is it time for snackies yet? I'm ravenous."

Suddenly, a crowd materialized in the corridor outside Polydoor's compartment.

"What's going on?" he asked.

A passing Viking warrior grinned at him.

"Jean-Paul Sartre is autographing trading cards," he said. "We're lining up."

"But he's dead!"

"No he isn't; he's down the hall. You're probably thinking of the OTHER Sartre--the one on Earth, sadly immolated by deranged humans, using nuclear weapons."

Polydoor and the Viking made signs to ward off evil and bloated philosophical tomes.

Everyone knows what happened on Earth.

"An autographed Sartre trading card is worth a lot," said the Viking. "You can trade it for fifty boxes of McBowel's Rocket Brand Beans. Look; they're having a philosophy contest. Turn on your TV and you can watch it."

Polydoor turned on a convenient TV set. The Viking crowded in and sat on Lucy Borden's lap.

Suddenly there was a knocking on the compartment wall.

"Quiet in there! I'm trying to murder my husband."

"Okay, okay!" said the Viking. "Don't be so touchy! Do you need any help?"

"I can manage, but thanks for asking."

"Can I have him when you're finished," quoth the raven.

"Everyone on this train is quite mad," said a passing Goth.

"I'm feeling peckish," quoth Cuther. "Have you got any extra body part I could feast on?"

Lucy opened her purse, revealing the jeweled crown of Aquilonia.

"This is my stepfather's crown," she said. "If you marry me, Polydoor, you get to wear it."

Polydoor batted his eyelashes.

"I'm spoken for," he said. "My sweetheart awaits my safe return from ancient Babylon."

"She must be quite a dish," said Lucy resentfully. "Do you have a photograph of her?"

The unsuspecting Polydoor extracted his cell phone from his hump, logged onto Babette's web page, and downloaded a color photo.

Lucy examined the PDA enviously. Then she examined the photo.

"Your sweetheart is a spider!" she said.

"You noticed," said Polydoor, beaming at her.

"Spiders have all the fun!" said Lucy bitterly.

"I'd take you home in my longship," said the Viking, "but I'm on my way to ancient Babylon."

"You are?" said Polydoor, flabbergasted. "What a coincidence!"

"Not really," said the Viking. "Everyone on this train is going to ancient Babylon. We've all had mysterious dreams about a mysterious rubber duckie."

"That's true," said Lucy. "That's exactly how it began. I had a recurring dream of a mysterious rubber duckie."

Polydoor yawned. Other people's dreams bored him to tears.

"For me, it began in the Kalahari Desert," said the Viking. "That's where I found a squadron of longships that had been missing off the Florida coast for twenty years."

All at once, the lights flickered. Polydoor glanced out the window. Dr. Watson was jogging along for his constitutional. Charlemagne waved from a nearby battle. All of the moors opposing him shouted algebraic equations.

"Look, that's Ezra Pound in a romantic pose on that cliff," shouted Lucy.

"So?" said Polydoor. "I can be romantic too."

"Of course!" said the Viking, slapping his forehead. "THE CANTOS! Why didn't I think of it!"

"Huh?" said Custer.

"Ezra Pound wrote fortune cookies for some very nasty people during one of the last big wars," explained Lucy. "When he wasn't doing that, he was busy compressing all of Tockworld's history into one long, incomprehensible poem, full of Greek and Chinese myths, and diatribes about interest rates."

"Your point being?" said Polydoor.

"Don't you see? Pound knew all about the ancient Babylonians and the Rubber Duckie of Evil. He knew EVERYTHING. The key is hidden in the Cantos. If you read them all at once, in a certain way, you'll find what you're looking for. Or you can just open it at random."

"It'll never happen," quoth the raven, and hopped onto her shoulder.

"I like big women," he said. "Thall we danth?"

Custer and Lucy danced in the corridor while the Lombards invaded the Italian peninsula.

Polydoor was jealous. His hump turned green.

Charlemagne had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 41: BABYLON BOUND

The compartment was getting entirely too crowded for Polydoor's taste, but more and more people kept pouring in.

"Is this the ancient Babylon compartment?" said a 747 pilot.

"You've come to the right place," said the Viking.

"Thpeak for yourthelf," quoth the raven.

The 747 pilot put a squeaky rubber duckie in an overhead compartment and sat down beside Polydoor.

"Does everyone here have dreams about a mysterious rubber duckie?" he said. "Thank goodness for my copy of Ezra Pound's CANTOS. It tells me everything I need to know about dreams of rubber duckies."

"Thpare me," quoth the raven, rolling an eye.

"You have dreams too?" said the Viking. "I've been haunted by them. I didn't know what they were until I found this old copy of the CANTOS in an airport bookstore."

"Ooh, fancy that!" said Lucy. "I've been looking for an old copy of the CANTOS for ages!"

"It was right next to the boxes of mints on the counter," said the Viking. "I was scooping the mints into my loot bag when it just seemed to pop into my hand."

"Is this the ancient Babylon compartment," said a passing dentist as he put a green rubber duckie in the overhead compartment.

"No it isn't!" hissed Polydoor. "It's the death cart. We all have bubonic plague here!"

Lucy Borden laughed and patted him on the head. "I do love your jokes, Polydoor."

Polydoor blushed. No one had ever liked his jokes before.

EXCEPT BABETTE, OF COURSE! whispered The Voice of Conscience. DON'T FORGET THE LOVELY BABETTE.

Polydoor squirmed in the grip of a moral dilemma.

The Viking saluted the dentist.

"Welcome," he said. "Did you bring a loot bag? Would you like some tea and biscuits?"

"Thank you," said the dentist. "I'd like to know why I dreamt about a rubber duckie, who really built the pyramids, and what they're for."

"You don't think the dream has mundane, psychological underpinnings?" said a passing priest. He was carrying a copy of the CANTOS bound in thistles.

"Oh goody!" quoth the raven, eyeing him. "Thnacth."

"It could be something like an Oedipus complex," said the priest. "You hate your mother, therefore--"

"MOI?" wailed the 747 pilot, bursting into tears. "Hate my mummy? My dear old mummy! You can't mean it!"

"There, there," said a passing grief counselor. "I'm sure the nasty man didn't mean it. He was only trying to ruin your life." She patted the pilot on the head and showed him her copy of the CANTOS, bound in New-Age blue.

The Viking glared at the priest.

The priest hypnotized the Viking and convinced him that the early Viking raiders had really been a delegation of Shriners.

"The horror!" said Joseph Conrad, brandishing a copy of the CANTOS wrapped in fish and chips.

"I hope mummy didn't hear you," said the 747 pilot. "I'd better call her, just to make sure she's okay." Then he whipped out his cell phone and speed-dialed Caesar's Palace.

There was a silence as everyone eavesdropped.

"Hi, mummy!" said the 747 pilot. "Everything okay? Shooting craps again? I'm on my way to ancient Babylon to find out what my dream is all about. Yes, of course, mummy; I'll dress warmly and in layers."

Just then, a party of Scottish elementary school teachers crowded into the compartment. They were dressed warmly, in layers, and they brandished copies of the

CANTOS wrapped in math homework.

"My name is Gracie MacHomework," their leader said. "Is this the ancient Babylon compartment?"

"No it isn't," said Polydoor. "It's an erotic masque."

"Good," said Gracie. "We Scottish elementary school teachers have an undeserved reputation for prudishness. Does everybody do it all at once, or do we take turns?"

"Do what?" said the 747 pilot, wiping his tears with an embroidered life jacket.

Then his cell phone rang, infuriating everyone.

"Hi mummy," he said. "Uh huh. Yep. Nope. Uh huh. It's okay, mummy. I have fresh underwear in case I get into an accident and have to go to the hospital. It's the special set you gave me for Llama's Eve. I mean, THE JOLLY FAT LLAMA gave me. You know, the one with the frilly...um....Yes, the 747 is fine; my copilot is flying it until I get back from ancient Babylon."

Just then, a party of bond traders from the New York Stock Exchange tried to squeeze into the compartment. They had a bit of trouble at first, because the bones in their noses wouldn't fit through the door, but the grief counselor explained to them that if they turned sideways, they'd get through okay.

"The name is Ticker Tape," one of them said, a pretty woman with a plate in her lower lip and a necklace of shrunken heads.

The plate was an antique, by the way--eighteenth century Spode, with a nice scene of a man fishing peacefully in a bosky stream outside a manor, near a cemetery filled with mutilated corpses left over from the religious wars of the seventeenth century.

Rural scenes often seem peaceful and quiet after the population has been slaughtered by true believers, and the crows have departed.

"We're friends of Bond, Queequeg Bond," said Ticker Tape. "So don't try any funny stuff."

"I'm a Viking," said the Viking. "Honk if you like looting and pillaging."

All of the bond traders honked.

Ticker Tape brandished a copy of the CANTOS wrapped in a loin cloth. "Is this the ancient Babylon compartment?" she demanded.

"It's a centrifuge," said Polydoor. "I'm starting it up right now."

"I had this dream about a rubber duckie," said Ticker Tape, rudely ignoring Polydoor. "I had no idea what it was; I had to look it up. I didn't even know how to spell it."

"How can you look it up if you can't spell it?" said the grief counselor.

"Now there's a philosophical conundrum for you!" said the priest, suddenly interested. "Which came first, the spelling or the word?"

"I think you should stop shooting craps, mummy!" said the 747 pilot into his cell phone. "You've already lost the canning factory and the production company. I know it's just temporary, but--"

"You have a production company?" said the Viking, batting his eyes. "Do you need any leading men who don't need any special training in looting and pillaging?"

"I suppose you have to spell the word to write it!" said the priest. "Therefore, the spelling came first."

"I can see why you never made bishop," said Polydoor.

"Suppose you make a spelling mistake?" said the grief counselor. "Doesn't that mean you construct a false reality?"

"Then you have a doctrinal error," said the priest.

"We can't afford to lose the aluminum smelters too, mummy," said the 747 pilot. "Maybe you should take up bridge--"

"Is a doctrinal error like a heresy?" said the grief counselor.

"Oh my gosh!" yelled the Viking. "Heresy! Freddy Manichean Heresy! We're doomed! What shall we do?"

Meanwhile, a platypus climbed up Polydoor's hump.

"Let's consult the CANTOS," said the priest.

"My mole is very sensitive," warned Polydoor. "It's an EXPLODING mole. If you don't get off--"

"The CANTOS?" said the Viking. "Whose copy shall we use?"

Just then, a defrocked priest squeezed into the compartment, brandishing a copy of the CANTOS wrapped in vine leaves.

"Is this the ancient Babylon car?" he asked.

The frocked priest eyed him enviously. There was something glamorous about defrocked priests. Women found them irresistible.

Custer sniffed at his copy of the CANTOS. "Did you thquath thomething in there?" quoth he. "Ith it edible."

Lucy Borden gently removed the platypus from Polydoor's hump and put it on his head, where it would be comfy.

"I was hoping it would sprout tendrils, like a Greek myth," said the defrocked priest.

"The name is Entropy, by the way."

"Lets forget about the CANTOS," said the jealous, frocked priest. "The name is Waterboy, by the way."

"We just open it at random like this," said Entropy, ignoring Waterboy.

Everyone ducked.

"Do you really think that's a good idea," said the Viking. "Pound had a dark side, you know."

"Did he?" said Polydoor, adjusting the platypus on his head so that it covered his bald spot.

"Oh, Pound could be nasty," said the Viking. "If you happened to belong to a tribe he didn't like, you were the lowest of the low."

"Sounds like everyone else," said Polydoor.

"But is it right to profit from utterances originating from one who was not nice?" said the grief counselor.

"Aha! A moral dilemma!" said Waterboy.

"Really?" said Gracie MacHomework, moving closer to him and touching the edge of his cowl. "That's very clever of you. How did you recognize it?"

"That's nothing!" said Entropy. "I've seen tons of them."

"Is that why you were defrocked?" said Waterboy. "Because you're so good at recognizing moral dilemmas?"

"I was defrocked because I'm no good at cooking haggises, if you must know," said Entropy frostily. "They always came out flat. Also, there was a little thing about stuffing my bishop into a parcel and mailing him to Tewksbury."

"You have to use yeast, dear boy," said Gracie. "Not just any yeast, mind you! It has to be McBowel's Undead yeast."

"Really?" said Entropy. "I never thought of that."

"Och, he's a bit slow on the uptake, but he's a nice enough looking lad," said Gracie, squeezing Entropy's biceps to see if they were compressible.

"About this moral dilemma," said Lucy Borden. "What's the answer?"

"You mean, how can a work be both beautiful and evil?" said Waterboy, who was filled with an inexplicable desire to run off with Gracie and smooch in the mail car.

"Don't forget boring," said the Viking. "The CANTOS have lots of boring parts."

"That's the duck condition," said Polydoor. "Good mixed with evil, and lots of boring parts, too. Nothing is pure. Absolute purity is impossible in this fallen world."

"You can do it in a space capsule," said Gracie.

"Do what?" said Waterboy, intrigued. "Smooch?"

"No, silly! Make something pure. You can smooch too, if you like, but everyone can see you because there's a web cam."

"I don't mind," said Waterboy. "It's not as if smooching is evil."

Gracie laughed and thumped him on the back.

Lucy grew amorous and sat on Polydoor's lap again.

Meanwhile, Charlemagne went off to become a medieval hero.

The defeated Moors boarded the train and began crowding into the compartment.

"Is this the ancient Babylon compartment?" they said.

"It's the Children's Crusade," said Polydoor. "We're all going to Marseille; so go away!"

"Sounds good to me. One thing's for sure, I can't go home. Not without any loot to show for my time."

"Tell me about it!" said the Viking. "If I go back empty handed, mummy will spank me. She told me to bring lots of illuminated manuscripts for the outhouse. Mummy's got hemorrhoids."

"Has she tried McBowel's Inflammable Porridge?" said Gracie MacHomework.

"Does that help?" asked the Viking.

"Oh aye, it does, cutie," said Gracie. "It causes so much gastric distress, you don't feel anything else."

"It's too crowded in here," Polydoor, " said. "I have important homework to do. I have to assassinate Freddy Manichean Heresy before he assassinates ME. I can't do it with all of these people standing around watching. Anyway, I don't even know what he looks like; I've never seen him."

"I have a picture of him," said Lucy Borden, and she handed him a Kodak CD.

Polydoor squinted at the CD. It was bright yellow, and there was a Kodak logo in the center.

"I don't see any pictures," he said.

"Here, try it on my smart phone with the optional extra external CD drive and toaster oven," said Lucy.

She held up a shiny new phone. There was a map of Toronto on the screen, showing all of the gaps in the fortifications where an invading army of Visigoths would find little or no resistance.

Polydoor eyed it suspiciously.

"Oops!" said Lucy, quickly changing the image. "That was my saved copy of a WarHammer campaign."

"Oh that explains it," said Polydoor, relieved. "I thought you were a spy uploading a map of our weak points to a Visigoth satellite."

"My goodness, what an imagination!" said Lucy Borden. "Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!" said Polydoor.

"Here's a picture of Freddy Manichean Heresy," said Lucy."

Polydoor looked at the image with a mixture of trepidation and envy.

What he saw was disappointing. The duck on the screen looked quite ordinary, apart from his two heads. He was dressed as he was in a plaid, used-car salesman's suit, with a fedora and a battered briefcase full of worthless documents.

"Where's his symbolism?" demanded Polydoor. "You can't be an evil villain without symbolism!"

"He keeps his symbolism in his briefcase," said Lucy.

"Is that where he keeps his hump, too? I don't see a hump."

"It doesn't matter about his hump," said Lucy.

"A hump is important," said Polydoor, scandalized. "It's a mark of distinction. Never trust a duck without a hump!"

"But you don't have a hump; you have a mole."

Polydoor blushed.

"You don't need a hump when you have a mole," he said. "I have a mole AND a cowl AND a rotting jacket."

Lucy was impressed.

"How come you're not wearing your cowl?" she said.

"Because I'm wearing a platypus."

"But you weren't wearing a cowl BEFORE the platypus."

"I keep it in my hump--in my mole, I mean. I only wear it on special occasions because I don't want to use it up."

"I'll bet you're embarrassed by it."

"Certainly not," snorted Polydoor. "The very idea!"

"Put it on! Let me see!"

"No," said Polydoor, pouting.

Lucy put a hand on his knee.

"Come on," she said. "Don't be shy! I love cowls! I can't resist cowls. Ducks who wear cowls look so--contingent!"

"They do?" said Polydoor. He was confused now. His knee had gone numb.

"Go on, put it on!" said Lucy.

"Come on, put it on!" said the Viking. "What's the matter with you! It's been a long day; we need something to laugh at!"

Polydoor looked around at the heartless mob in the compartment. Then he reached into his hump, extracted his cowl and lovingly held it up to the light.

A flock of spiders crawled out of it and flew grumpily away on silken threads.

"Oh, it's wonderful!" said Lucy, her eyes shining. "Put it on!"

"Really?" said Polydoor. "You really want me to?"

"Oh yes," breathed Lucy.

Polydoor reached up and gently pulled the cowl over his head, dislodging the platypus, who burrowed underneath.

Babette had never asked for this.

THAT'S BECAUSE SHE LOVES YOU FOR WHAT YOU ARE, NOT FOR YOUR COWL! an angry voice in the back of his mind said.

Lucy couldn't help herself. She reached up and touched Polydoor's cowl. Then she touched it again, her fingers caressing the bristly surface, lingering over bits of fossilized pizza and soft, spongy mold.

"Oh Polydoor."

Polydoor gritted his teeth. It would be so easy to yield to this seductive duck, to cheat on his sweet Babette, to indulge in pleasure for its own sake.

Must think of sweet Babette, he thought. Think of home, country, baseball games, shining faces, Norman Duckwell, the approval of upstanding citizens, happy children torturing each other in sand boxes.

"I can't help myself," moaned Lucy. "I'm going to...I'm going to...oh Polydoor!"

At this dramatic moment, when Polydoor almost had to make a profound moral choice that undoubtedly would have an impact on generations yet unborn, the Viking cleared his throat.

"If you two are gonna smooch, dibs on your seat," he growled.

The dramatic moment evaporated.

Polydoor looked at the image of Freddy Manichean Heresy again.

"You can't keep a heresy in a briefcase," he said. "A heresy is a big thing, like a pumpkin."

"What is it exactly?" said the grief counselor.

"Anything a priest doesn't like," said Polydoor.

Just then, the image on the screen laughed maniacally and vanished.

The 747 pilot had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 42: ALARIC'S PLAN

"How did he do that?" said Lucy Borden. "He just vanished."

She gave her phone a vigorous shake. Freddy Manichean Heresy did not reappear, though a pleasant little winter scene materialized, complete with falling snow, and the Jolly Fat Llama in his Zeppelin, pulled by nine prancing llamas.

The snow stopped falling after a moment, but recommenced when Lucy shook the phone again.

"What will they think of next?" she said.

"I think you need to recharge your battery," said the Viking. "That's why you lost the Freddy Manichean Heresy screen saver."

"It wasn't a screen saver," muttered Polydoor. "It was a virus."

"That llama lookth thick," quoth Cuther. "Ith got a green nothe. I should eat it and put it out of ith mithery."

"That's Baudelaire," said the 747 pilot. "He's got a green nose from drinking too much absinthe. It's nice and shiny, so he leads the flock."

"To light the way," said Waterboy.

"Isn't there a song about Baudelaire and Llama's Eve?" said the pilot. "Twas brillig, and the slithy toves did--"

"That's not the 'Jolly Fat Llama song,'" said Polydoor, outraged. "That's from a school play about bigoted knights and mistreated jabberwocks."

"The 'Jolly Fat Llama song names all the llamas that pull the Zeppelin,'" said the 747 pilot. "There's Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Madame de Stael, Jean de Meun, La Rochefoucauld, William Hazlitt, and Matthew Arnold."

"You missed some," said Gracie MacHomework.

"I still think you should recharge your battery," said the Viking. "The same thing happened to me when the batteries in my long ship went dead."

"What? You shook it and you got a snow scene?" said Entropy.

The Viking scowled at him.

"I must have drained my battery when I uploaded a recipe for haggis to the Visigoth satellite," said Lucy.

She wept bitter tears.

"There, there," said Polydoor, trying to comfort her without actually touching her.

"We're in trouble now," said the platypus. "We need that phone. We have to keep tracking Freddy Manichean Heresy, or he'll sneak up on us and take over the world."

"Oh woe!" said the 747 pilot. "We're doomed."

"Relax," said Polydoor. Then he reached over and jabbed the phone, and Freddy showed up on the screen again, stroking his moustaches and grinning.

This time, Polydoor could see that his nemesis was reaching for the uncoupling lever between the tender and the reconditioned Western Pacific boxcar, which served as a baggage car.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha," Freddy said maniacally.

"Oh no!" said Entropy. "Look what he's doing! He's going to hide until the conductor's gone so he doesn't have to buy a ticket! That's not orthodox."

"I think 'Kosher' would be a better word," said Waterboy. "Orthodox comes from the Greek, and has to do with the straight and narrow--"

"Kosher comes from the Greek too!" said Entropy. "It's a kind of sea creature."

"Freddy's uncoupling the engine!" said Gracie MacHomework. "That's against the rules."

"Don't worry about it!" said the 747 pilot. "Let him have the engine if he wants it. Engines are messy things. WE get to keep these neat passenger cars."

Polydoor was silent. He'd noticed something else now.

Freddy had acquired a hump.

And that wasn't all.

Sticking out of Freddy's hump, like a comb out of a pocket, was a Minoan double axe, fashioned out of a bronze sheet. There was also a complete set of bull's horns, and a

libation rhyton."

"I think Freddy is going to sacrifice us to make the crops grow," said Polydoor.

"You mean he's going to chop us up with a bronze axe?" said Entropy. "That's a bit excessive, isn't it!"

"I think he'll probably use his heresy," said Polydoor.

"That's why heresies are so dangerous," said Waterboy. "In the wrong hands, they can mutate."

"Where is it?" said Gracie MacHomework. "I don't see it."

"You have to know what to look for," said Polydoor.

"The uninitiated hardly ever notice them," said Waterboy. "We priests see dozens of them every century. It's a talent, like scrofula."

"Scrofula's a disease," said Gracie MacHomework."

"Speak for yourself," said Polydoor.

"No heresy, however small, can hide from a priest," said Entropy."

"Yeah?" said the Viking. "What about Historical Necessity? You guys let that one slip through, didn't you! People never worship the gods anymore; they're all too busy making tractors and collective farms for the Historical Necessity."

"That's Marxism, and it's dead," said Gracie. "Everyone worships central bankers now."

"Don't be too sure," said the 747 pilot. "I've seen plenty of bankers swooping through the eerie bank towers in the heart of Toronto's sinister financial district, but I've never seen any worshippers making offerings to them."

"Those are ordinary bankers," said Gracie. "Central bankers are different. They glow in the dark."

The Viking was puzzling over this, when Freddy Manichean Heresy maniacally uncoupled the engine from the passenger cars. The engine pulled away. The passenger cars rolled free, picking up speed as they descended the long, eastern pass through the mountains of Gad.

"Quick!" shouted Lucy. "Forget about good and evil. Open the CANTOS and look for helpful advice from the mysterious Ezra Pound. This is a matter of life and death."

"But how will I know what good and evil look like?" said the 747 pilot. "I've never seen them."

"He has a point," said Waterboy. "You can't really see pure evil; it has no essence--it's merely a negation."

"The question is," said Gracie, "Do we allow innocent young platypuses to read this nonsense?"

"There aren't any innocent young platypuses," said Waterboy.

"Oh, and I suppose there are innocent young ducks!" said the platypus indignantly.

"No one is innocent," said Entropy. "We have all been born into a fallen world. Ever since Jack and Jill dropped the forbidden pail of water."

"I see evil every day," said the platypus. "Stuck out there in the wilderness, diving for crustaceans in slimy water filled with soap, bed springs and beer cans. And I have these MONSTROUS hemorrhoids!"

"Have you heard the story of Job?" said Waterboy.

"Yes, but I didn't like it."

"We weren't put here to LIKE things. We were put here to gain our haggis by the sweat of our brows. It's punishment."

"That's not fair; I didn't even get to commit the crime! Besides, I never liked haggis."

"AHM!" said Entropy. "I AM NOW GOING TO CONSULT THE CANTOS."

Then, with a flourish, he opened the CANTOS, jabbing reverently at the dazzling sheepskin with a crooked forefinger.

"I have eaten the flame," he read.

There was a silence. Entropy glanced up, a lost look in his eyes.

Everyone waited for an explanation.

"Hmmm," said the Viking.

"Deep," said the platypus.

"McBowel's Inflammable Porridge!" shouted Gracie.

"Huh?" said everyone else.

"Don't you see? Ezra Pound is telling us that if we want to defeat Freddy Manichean Heresy, we have to trick him into eating the flame, which is a metaphor for something very hot."

"Does anybody have any hand grenades?" said the 747 pilot.

"I've got a hockey puck," said the Viking.

"Almost as good, but not quite," said Polydoor.

"Why not use McBowel's Inflammable porridge," said Gracie. "It's quite volatile, like TNT. You could fling it at him while he's attacking you."

"Hmmm," said Polydoor.

"Dibth on your eyeballth when the monther finitheth with you," quoth Cuther.

"Oh Polydoor; my hero!" said Lucy Borden.

"But what if he's just looking for Pasiphae?" said the 747 pilot. "What if he just wants his mommy to acknowledge him and be nice to him."

"He doesn't want his mommy," said Grace. "He wants the Power of Durable Evil."

Polydoor wasn't happy about this; he didn't feel like a hero at all; he felt like a sacrificial offering.

And yet, the whole of Tockworld depended on him.

If he went through with this, if he defeated Freddy Manichean Heresy, then no one would ever laugh at his hump again. Humps would become a fashion statement. Giant corporations would come to him and ask him to endorse their lines of hump wear. He'd be rich and famous.

The passenger cars swayed and rocked as they charged down the mountain.

Freddy laughed maniacally.

Lucy Borden held tightly to Polydoor and waited expectantly for some smooching to calm her nerves.

But Polydoor had other things on his mind. He had to kill Freddy before Freddy killed HIM.'

Then he had to stop the runaway train before it ran off the rails and plunged hundreds of feet into Sodom and Gomorrah, or perhaps the Tyrol, killing everyone.

Then he had to find the engine and couple the cars again.

But what if all of this heresy stuff was just a ruse?

No one had suspected Freddy of being a closet minotaur.

What if he wasn't really interested in the Rubber Duckie of Evil? What if he just wanted to kill people?

Polydoor got slowly to his feet, trying not to disturb the platypus purring on top of his head. Then he made his way out into the foggy corridor.

"Dibth on your eyeballth!" quoth Cuther.

Meanwhile, high overhead, the Visigoth satellite winked and flashed in the blast of photons from the sun.

Alaric was busy studying the pictures his spy, Lucy Borden had uploaded to the satellite. The pictures showed an enormous gap in Toronto's defenses, where Highway 400 ran north to cottage country.

"There's an area about the size of a football field without any housing developments at all," said Alaric. "It doesn't even have any theme parks, strip malls or used car lots. We could hide an entire army of barbarians among the tree stumps, wait until nightfall, then storm the gates."

"We shouldn't be doing this, Al," said Gristle, his acolyte. "It's not our era. We had our innings."

"I can't help it. I keep having these dreams about a big rubber duckie. It wants me to go

back to sacking and looting."

"Nothing wrong with that, Al. Looting and sacking is eminently respectable, and it keeps the boys from getting into mischief, but do we really want to do it in the future? You know how dangerous the future is--plagues, wars, famine, corruption, civil disorder, enormous, toxic clouds."

"I know, I know," said Alaric. "It makes you wonder, doesn't it! We bequeath a vigorous stock of noble warriors, and look what they do with it! I'd rather stay in the past."

"So? What's keeping you? Why don't we just turn this thing around and go back where we came from?"

"Because I'm compelled by some strange force beyond my comprehension."

Gristle sighed. "By the rubber duckie, you mean?"

"It's a mud-brick rubber duckie, actually. But yes. That's the long and short of it."

"I don't hold with mysticism, Al. We didn't bring down an empire with New-Age chanting; we SACKED it, with sharp, pointy weapons."

"I have a plan," said Alaric. "We can sneak into town disguised as SUV's, with racks of skis on our heads."

"It's summer, Al."

"Your point being?"

"We'd could wear canoes and crates of mead on our heads. But no skis."

Alaric thought about this.

"Whatever," he said finally. "We'll have to move quickly before the land is developed."

Gristle sighed. He was tired. He'd worn himself out looting and sacking ancient Rome.

Other people had taken jewels and costly raiment, which you could stuff into loot bags along with the balloons and party hats.

Gristle had pilfered books.

Manuscripts, actually. But tons of vellum can add up after awhile. And then, on the way back to Frankfurt, he'd had to fight off all his colleagues who'd wanted some of that soft classical literature for the outhouse.

That was the trouble with sacking and looting ancient civilizations. You got soft. Telephone books weren't good enough anymore; you had to use fine vellum.

Anyway, it was crowded in the little satellite, and there was a strong smell of horse, because Alaric's new horse, Pussywillow, was sweating.

Gristle didn't mind the smell of horse, as long as he was eating it.

Horseflesh that could at any moment deposit a large quantity of fragrant pie filling, however, was quite another matter.

Alaric didn't mind the smell; it made him feel wanted.

"These pictures are excellent," said Alaric. "We attack at dawn."

Gristle crowded in for a look.

Gristle was a werewolf, of course. One of the best werewolves around. He'd arranged a dental appointment in Rome, so he still had all of his teeth.

Well, most of them. There were a few made of lead and mercury, but they didn't count because they made him sick.

Gristle had a hump, too, which he used for storing illuminated manuscripts. When he wasn't killing and rending, he liked to read Plotinus on the universal spirit.

He had a cowl, of course, but he used it for wiping foam from his lips after conversations.

When his lips weren't green and white from flecks of foam, you could see the traces of a red dye he'd used when he was pretending to be Little Red Riding Hood.

Gristle had pretended to be Little Red Riding Hood so he could get into bed with granny.

We'll talk about this later.

Meanwhile, Freddy Manichean Heresy, who had leapt the increasing gap between engine and uncoupled passenger cars, made his way down foggy corridors, seeking the

one person who could thwart his designs on the unsuspecting Tockworld.
The raven quothed and quothed, but no one listened.
Lucy Borden had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 43: THE ELUSIVE MANICHEAN

Polydoor made his way into the billiards car, carrying a bucket of McBowel's Inflammable Porridge.

He was beginning to have doubts about his new weapon; what if it misfired? What if it solidified in flight and rebounded like a hockey puck?

He was deeply absorbed in these melancholy thoughts when a maniacal laugh startled him.

It was coming from overhead, where Freddy Manichean Heresy clung, spider-like, to the ceiling.

"YOU!" gasped Polydoor.

"We all have our bad sides," said Freddy, taking a swipe with his bronze axe.

Polydoor skipped away from the blow and hurled a gob of McBowel's Inflammable Porridge straight at Freddy. It made quite a spectacle, bursting into flames immediately as it arced through the air.

Unfortunately, it missed Freddy, passed through the wall of the coach and piercing a 747 flying low overhead.

Fortunately, there was no serious damage. The molten gob burned its way through a lavatory floor, shot through the toilet, punched a hole in the ceiling and headed for the moon.

A passenger was about to take his rightful place on the throne when the lump of flaming porridge shot out of the bowl, but he managed to leap away in time.

"I meant that to happen," said Freddy, scrambling down the wall.

Polydoor wound up like Sandy Koufax at the mound, fired off a quick shot, and this time he scored a direct hit. The gob of porridge burst inside Freddy like a bladder filled with cow gas, and he began to dissolve.

"I'll be back soon!" yelled a disembodied voice.

Seconds later, Polydoor was overcome by the fumes and passed out. When he woke up, he discovered Lucy Borden sitting on his lap, busily smooching with him.

Freddy had vanished, leaving only a set of bull's horns, a Minoan double ax, and a libation rhyton.

The Viking, attracted by the smell of battle, made his way into the billiards car.

"Oh goody!" he said. "Loot bags!"

The Viking and the 747 pilot helped the exhausted Polydoor back to his compartment. Custer had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 44: INVASION 101

Meanwhile, in Alaric's headquarters in the gothic forest near the ruined bank towers in the heart of Frankfurt's financial district, Alaric and his acolyte, Gristle, were sitting at the Monopoly table, plotting a hostile takeover of Toronto.

Gristle alerted the scattered Visigoth horde with a conference call, during which he outlined their strategic objectives.

"In closing, gentlemen," he said, "May I remind you of our battle cry: MORE VELLUM!"

"MORE VELLUM!" thundered the mighty horde over their various cell phones, walkie talkies, tin cans, and carrier pigeons.

Gristle used the term 'gentlemen' very loosely, by the way. He knew as well as you and I do, that Visigoth ranks included many examples of the female persuasion interested in a bit

of sacking and looting.

"The real problem with invading Toronto is Vlod Ironbeak," said Gristle. "He's very sneaky."

"Relax!" said Alaric. "We have a bigger army than he does."

"Yes, but Vlod is allied to the cannibals of the New York stock exchange."

"What can they do? All they have is money. My horde has technology, brains, skill, courage, and a sincere desire to redistribute economic goods. What can mere cash do against all of that?"

"It can buy Frankfurt and kick you out."

"Hmmm."

"Hmmm."

"What if we made an alliance with the French?" said Alaric.

Gristle looked up from his pile of Monopoly properties. "It might just work," he said. "The French are very angry because the Internet is full of English words."

"That's it!" yelled Gristle. "We'll promise them control of the Internet if they join our invasion. Everyone who wants to log on will have to learn French."

"It might work, but it could make problems for us," said Gristle. "You know how picky the French are about food and culture."

"It's worth the trouble. Arrange a meeting with Charlemagne, their president. Meanwhile, I'll begin learning French."

"Umm, do we really have time--"

"How hard can it be! I'll start right now."

Alaric extracted a book from his backpack and showed it to Gristle.

FRENCH FOR DUM DUMS.

"Hmm," said Gristle. "I'll organize the horde, shall I? They'll need to start packing."

Meanwhile, Polydoor was recovering his strength.

The lovely Lucy Borden stroked his fevered brow and the 747 pilot read from THE HOUSE AT POOH CORNER, while Waterboy and Entropy fought a duel in the corridor, and Custer dribbled something squishy down his sooty black feathers.

At last, Polydoor was ready.

Brushing aside Lucy Borden's ministrations, he rose to his feet and girded himself for another battle with Freddy Manichean Heresy, now disguised as the Bull of Minos.

Gristle had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 45: FEAR AND TREMBLING

The alliance between the French and the Visigoths was something to behold! When the two hordes met on neutral ground, at the Villa Dodati in Switzerland, there was much acrimony.

The playground supervisors were hard put to keep things orderly.

"We can be friends now," said Gristle. "We're going to sack and pillage the same city."

"Yes, but are we going to do it in French?" said Croque Monsieur, Charlemagne's acolyte.

"You may do it in either language."

"If we're going to be friends, how come the Visigoths built all of these railroads that go right up to our border?" demanded several angry Franks.

"We built them to carry tourists who want to look into France but can't afford to travel there," said Alaric.

"How come the French built that huge wall stuffed with cannons pointing at US?" said a choleric Visigoth.

"We built the wall so tourists could climb up and look into the lands of the Visigoths," sneered Croque.

"And the cannons?"

"The cannons are for clay pigeons."

Alaric and Charlemagne, sensing growing hostility, struggled to pacify their warriors.

"We have much in common," Alaric yelled, over a horde of boos and hisses. "We want to take over the Internet and make it speak French."

At these words, the French began to listen more closely.

"Hey, this Visigoth chap speaks our language," they said among themselves.

A Visigoth warrior extracted his head from a barrel of Olde Shatterhand Ale and yelled, "What about the Visigoths? What do WE get out of this?"

"All Arabic numerals on the Internet will be in German," said Charlemagne. "Every single one."

"Hey, that's not so bad," said the Visigoths. "These French chaps aren't so bad."

"Music will be in German too," said Charlemagne.

The Visigoths cheered.

Then the French cheered.

Soon the warriors had linked arms and were singing a rousing chorus of 'How Much is That Doggie in the Window?'

"Wait a minute," said a fair-minded Visigoth. "The English will complain."

"Hmmm," said Charlemagne.

"Hmmm," said Alaric. "Clausewitz never foresaw this problem."

"I know!" said the fair-minded Visigoth. "We could make it a rule that all graphics on the Internet must be in English."

"Excellent," said Charlemagne and Alaric.

"What about the Chinese?" said a stickler for details. "And the Russians? And people from New Jersey?"

There was a murmur of disapproval.

"Relax," said a priest. "I'll draw a line of demarcation. Everything on one side belongs to the French, everything on the other side belongs to the Visigoths, and everything in between belongs to the English. If anybody complains, we invade them."

Some people might think this division was rather unfair. How could a priest divide up the world without regard to the millions of inhabitants who were neither French nor Visigoth?

Ours not to reason why.

Anyway, a monk drew up the contract on the finest vellum. There were international symbols for poison ivy all over it, just to make sure no one got any ideas about a quick trip to the outhouse.

"Wait a minute," said Alaric. "There's plenty of stuff in here about making the Internet safe for the French language, but how come there isn't anything about looting Irish monasteries?"

The monk looked at the contract.

"It's in invisible ink," he said.

"Why?"

"Because we don't want anyone reading it and getting ideas."

"Oh," said Alaric. "That's a good idea."

"Bon, d'accord!" said Charlemagne. "We attack at dawn."

It was the work of a moment to round up the two hordes, who were now fraternizing openly, exchanging photographs of their horses and cats, sampling each other's snacks and drinks, and trying out each other's costumes.

The French loved the neat hats with horns, and the Visigoths were impressed with the special baguette pockets in the French tunics.

The Swiss bankers waved goodbye.

The hordes waited for transport.

And waited.

Getting the hordes to the patch of undeveloped land Alaric had spotted north of Toronto

was a bit difficult.

The only direct flight from Geneva to the nearest community, Mrs. Tidy's Teapot, was an Air Texas 747.

The French went along grudgingly, complaining because it wasn't an Air France jet. They managed to ignore the armadillos in the overhead luggage racks, but when the flight attendant tried to serve them refried beans they almost went to war.

They ate them finally, under threat of punishment, but they blew up afterwards, and it took ages to fumigate the plane.

Land transportation from Mrs. Tidy's Teapot to the patch of undeveloped land north of Toronto was by camels of the Negev.

When the disgruntled hordes finally arrived at the spot, they were met by young people in coveralls with shining faces and official 'Farm Person' badges.

"I thought this was vacant land," said Alaric.

"It only looks vacant because there aren't any shopping centers or car dealers on it," said a young Farm Person. "Actually it's a model farm, where school children from the nearby housing developments can come and see how our ancestors made food. We have cows, pigs, sheep, armadillos, and a real, working pumpkin patch, with actual pumpkins."

"That's very messy," said Charlemagne "Do you have paperwork showing that you're allowed to make disgusting stinks and noises that annoy your neighbors?"

"We have lots of paperwork," said the young Farm Person. "But the farm isn't messy or noisy. The animals are all robots, of course. We have to protect the children from unsightly stinks and behavior. The real animals emigrated to the First Nations Planet of Refuge a few years ago. Sitting Bull came and rescued them."

"But the pumpkins are real?"

"Yes. The manager designed them himself. There's a website where you can do your own genetic modifications. The company FedEx's the seeds and the robots plant them."

"Don't touch our beer!" warned Alaric.

"Don't touch our baguettes!" warned Charlemagne.

"You've come on a good day," said the Farm Person. "We're celebrating Scary Pumpkin Eve today. It's a bit early, because it's only July, but genetically modified pumpkins mature early."

Scary Pumpkin Eve, as you know, is a feature of the last evening in October. It's a special time, when ghosts and goblins pretend to be afraid of little kids dressed up in frightful costumes, and Mister Scary Pumpkin makes an appearance in pumpkin patches all over Tockworld.

Traditionally, young consorts of the goddess Corn Cob were sacrificed on this day, to signify their entry into the underworld, beneath Yorkville, where they had gone to fetch their sweethearts, who had been purloined by Disser, the god of the underworld.

Disser isn't his real name, of course. He has others, which sound better.

It's a long story.

Anyway, the sacrifices gave way to more civilized activities. Now the young consorts are simply drafted and sent off to war.

The farm was crowded with city dwellers who had traveled great distances to see where food used to come from.

"Our visitors can pick genetically modified pumpkins, pet the robot animals, and ride on the rides," said an official Farm Person.

Ghosts and goblins were running around shrieking with simulated fear, and signing autograph books.

The French and Visigoth hordes gave a great roar of delight and rushed in to join the games.

Soon the children were riding on the warriors' backs, ordering them to form circles and squares, and moving them about like chess pieces in their complicated games. The warriors were no longer cogs in mighty hordes; they were activity counselors.

Alaric and Charlemagne grew nervous.

"Looks like your mighty hordes have been conquered by a bunch of kids," said the young Farm Person. "I don't think they'll be good for very much at the end of this little party."

"Are you sure those are children?" said Alaric. "They look like goblins to me!"

"How can we invade Toronto when the Visigoth hordes and the Frankish hordes are playing hide and seek with a bunch of little kids in costumes?" complained Charlemagne.

Some of the kids got up a soccer game, and two of the horde fought a duel over a miscalled foul.

Another group was playing Romans and Barbarians, but there was an argument, because everyone wanted to be Marcus Aurelius and write interesting things about life, death, and the fear of taxes.

The French began showing the children how to make protest signs and attack parliament.

Things were slipping out of control.

And then it got worse. The children began egging the warriors on, urging them to try out really dangerous roller coasters and Ferris wheels.

Soon Alaric and Charlemagne were beside themselves. They yelled at the kids to leave their hordes alone, but no one paid any attention.

Eventually, many of the warriors had to lie down on the grass, clutching their stomachs or their heads. Others were picked off, one-by-one, by the children, and were forced to tell scary stories before everyone packed it in for the day.

"Once upon a time there was a cute little kitten," said Hrothgar the Evil Skull Smasher.

"Does Godzilla step on the kitten?" a cute little girl asked.

"Does it get eaten by eagles?" a cute little boy asked.

"Tell us more stories with blood and guts in them," said another little boy.

"Yeah; we want to hear about the Coliseum!" said the little girl. Tell us about the crows picking eyeballs out of corpses."

"I'll deal with thith," quoth Custer. "You talk about the thitthy thuff. Grown men waving thords and thpearth!"

"Oh, hi Custer!" said Alaric.

"Ith Cuther, thoopid!"

Everybody on Tockworld knew Custer's Last Stand, the crabby raven.

Custer had a fund of stories that would make any adult stay up all night with the lights on, the doors barred, and the bathrooms boarded up.

But what really fascinated the children was his recipe book.

Eventually, the parents, who'd been sipping cappuccinos in the mental asylum in back of the barn, picked up their kids, and everybody trooped off, terrified but happy.

The weary hordes wound their way slowly over the lea, and put up their tents in the authentic rabbit patch, with plastic carrots and clockwork bunnies.

Alaric and Charlemagne read them bed time stories from THE HOUSE AT POOH CORNER, and LA NAUSEE.

"We invade at the crack of dawn," said Alaric. "You'll need your beauty rest, chaps. We have a long way to go."

Dawn came a few hours later, of course, and everyone groaned and complained bitterly.

But barbarians are nothing, if not resilient. Soon enough they were lined up at the door of the Ontario Northland passenger terminal in Mrs. Tidy's Tea Time.

When the train puffed into the station, there was a scramble for seats, but only a few of the horde were killed.

Meanwhile, back in his mansion in the gothic forest in the heart of Toronto's financial district, Vlod Ironbeak was not entirely unaware of the invaders' plans.

You might think that Vlod, preoccupied as he was with matters of state, would have little time for anticipating invasions by barbarian hordes.

You'd be wrong.

"I think we're about to be invaded by anachronistic barbarian hordes," said Bagman Gladhand, his substitute acolyte.

"Relax," said Vlod. "It will stop the rioting over the glitches in our high-speed Internet service. Have we executed the service provider yet?"

"Yes, master. "But what about the barbarians?"

"We'll direct them to the bank towers in our financial center. The bankers and financial advisors will make short work of them."

"But, isn't that a risky thing to do?"

"There's always risk in the stock market. If you can't afford to lose, don't be a player. Besides, we want the barbarians to have an exciting time so they'll come back with their friends and spend even more money."

Vlod wasn't afraid of the barbarians. He looked forward to them; they were a kind of solution.

Meanwhile, the Orient Express thundered down the mountains on its way to Trieste, or possibly Montparnasse.

The engineer, who was dead, had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 46: HANK OF UR

Some people think that ziggurats are extinct.

These are the sort of people who think that archaeologists do nothing but equip themselves with NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC excavation kits and root around in big sand hills in the desert, looking for crumbling mud bricks.

The mud bricks look a bit like construction blocks, except they're covered in dust, and they have pictures of armadillos and winged marmots on them.

Some of them feature little inscriptions: This brick belongs to Nebuchadnezzar, mighty ruler of all the eye surveys, adored by the people of Uruk, Lagash, Nippur, Kish, etc. (see enclosure), and feared by Amorites, Canaanites, Elamites and Benthamites. Also known as the Inventor of Ancient History, and Chief Enforcer of the god, Marvin.

Some of the bricks were inscribed with the name of the mysterious god, Kilroy Was Here, but archaeologists are unsure about this one.

Some people think that once archaeologists have dug up all of the lost construction blocks they can find, they sit around campfires, toasting marshmallows, arranging the blocks in neat piles, and reconstructing lost ziggurats and ancient outhouses.

Tomb robbers, however, knew better.

And right at the pinnacle of the tomb-robbing crowd, celebrated for their vast knowledge of artifacts and local night spots, were Demo and Sally.

They had arrived in ancient Babylon on the Orient Express the day before, and were already well along the bumpy path to secret treasure.

Ancient Babylonians didn't have trains, of course, so in deference to the king, the train stopped at Hammurabi station, in the suburbs.

The first thing Demo noticed when he left the station was an encampment of Camels of the Negev.

They weren't called the Camels of the Negev at this point, of course. They were called the Wandering Camels, although they were prosperous and important, and anything but wanderers.

The camels were preparing to leave Babylon, with a bunch of camels from Ur of the Chaldees, as a matter of fact, having packed up all of their Cuneiform Comix, their Fig Newtons, and their Coleman stoves.

They would be missed. In fact, once the camels left, the city of Ur went into a serious decline.

Babylonians had a gloomy view of things, by the way. So gloomy, in fact, they had to cheer themselves up by sacrificing virgins, drinking lots of beer, and thinking up creation stories in which lots of people get drowned or butchered.

It all comes from building square arks.

Gilgamesh, as you know, was instructed to build a square ark, ten dozen cubits on each side.

Once he figured out what a cubit was, the rest was easy--until he got to the part about sailing on the flood waters.

Have you ever tried to sail a square ark? It's a big problem, because you have to keep asking yourself, which bit is the bow and which bit is the stern?

Luckily for Gilgamesh, he got stuck on Mount Nisir, and didn't have to spend too much time worrying about what the different parts of an ark do.

Having read the manual very carefully, he sent a lot of birds out to see if there was any real estate available, and they all messed up, heading straight back for their comfy beds, and pretending there was no place to land.

Then he sent out Edgar Allen Poe.

"Thath where I came in!" quoth Cuther.

You know the rest; it is written: He eats, circles, caws, and turns not round.

Anyway, the trouble with Babylon was the square ark, which confused everyone, and led to incorrect ideas about the deluge and the reasons for it, and what to do with all that mud afterwards.

So, the Camels of the Negev spent long years puzzling over this unsatisfactory business. They were particularly displeased with Marvin, the Babylonian god of Changelessness and Routine.

In those days, The Camels of the Negev believed in variety.

So while the average Babylonian indulged in an unexamined life of toil and soccer, the camels honed their intellects and collected bits of information.

They weren't mean about it; they didn't try to hoard their carefully assembled data. Quite the contrary; their priests taught them about the importance of charity and helping other people.

It's a little known fact that the Camels of the Negev kept Babylon going long after it would ordinarily have lapsed into barbarism and savagery. They did this by serving as reference works and search engines. Anyone who had any questions about anything would go to the camels and find an answer.

For free!

The kindly camels were always glad to help.

There came a day, however, when the camels decided to leave.

There is some mystery about this. Even now, in more enlightened times, scholars continue to scratch their beaks and puzzle over this conundrum: Why exactly DID the Camels of the Negev leave Babylon and Ur of the Chaldees?

We do know that their leader, Hank of Ur, gave the order, but we aren't sure why.

Anyway, it was a mystery that preyed on Demo's mind, and one of the first things he did after disembarking from the Orient Express was to seek out Hank at the bagel shop, where he was gathering his people prior to setting out.

"So how come you're leaving?" Demo asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" said Hank. "The Supreme Being told me we should give up this life of luxury and contentment, pack up all of our possessions, and set off into the inhospitable desert to experience pain, fatigue, suffering, hostile tribes and endless wandering, until we come to a place where everyone will hate us and try to kill us. Who could resist?"

"Why don't you negotiate with the Supreme Being?"

"I tried that. You're allowed a certain amount of grumbling and negotiation--it's in the Geneva convention--but if you push it too far, a big, dark cloud gathers over your head and you get this tingling feeling all over your skin. So you can either back down, or volunteer for

duty as a storage battery."

So there you have it, the real reason Hank of Ur led his people out of ancient Babylon, and also out of Ur of the Chaldees.

As it happens, the two priests, Waterboy and Entropy, were arguing about this very topic in the billiards car of the Orient Express as it sped towards Hammurabi station, bearing Polydoor and others on their quest for the missing Demo.

"There are many conclusions to be drawn from the story of exile," said Entropy. "It certainly does highlight the problem of the nature of Evil, who made it, why would a nice Supreme Being allow such a thing to exist, and how could a nice Supreme Being even think of evil? Merely thinking about evil summons it into existence."

"That's a rather Lockean concept, don't you think," said Waterboy.

"Not really. It ORIGINATES as thought, so it's more of a Cartesian concept, because it underlies all reality."

Entropy plugged his ears. "Stop! Stop!" he shrieked "Blasphemy!"

Polydoor, who had been listening to this, while adjusting the platypus on his head, rolled his eyes.

Meanwhile, an aura of doom penetrated ancient Babylon.

Hammurabi had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 47: THE NASTY SPY

Demo and Sally watched Hank of Ur and his Camels of the Negev start out on their long trek to a land where they would find milk and honey and pain and suffering.

Demo was inconsolable for a few minutes. There was something about Hank of Ur, the weather-beaten old leader of the camels, that inspired unaccustomed feelings of affection in him.

Then he watched Sally climb up onto the roof of a hovel and drop a selection of rotten rutabagas onto a passing delivery chariot. Afterwards, she photographed the mess with her new digital camera.

"I'm calling this one, 'Babylon Without Hank of Ur'," she said.

"Digital cameras aren't allowed in ancient Babylon," said Demo.

Sally grinned at him.

"Neither are chariots, sweetie," she said. "Rules are for the bourgeoisie. You know that!"

Then, like all true tourists, they stopped at a kiosk to buy some of the local food and bacteria.

The baguettes, unfortunately, weren't very good. They were made in the Sumerian style, with brick dust and bits of extraneous chaff.

Demo was picking goat hair out of his baguette when a voice hailed him.

"Was that one of my enemies?" he said.

"It's a fortune teller," said Sally, pointing at a llama sitting at a table outside a hovel, near the Ishtar Gate.

"That's no ancient Babylonian," said Demo. "That's one of the Jolly Fat Llama's elves!"

"I got a severance package," said the fortune teller. "I was caught organizing for the Teamsters. Come here and I'll tell you your fortune, big boy!"

She was wearing a blonde fright wig and enough makeup to camouflage a battleship.

"What's the matter?" she said. "Afraid?"

"I'm an existentialist," said Demo. "I don't believe in fortune."

"It's a good thing you don't, big boy. You wouldn't want to see the horrors that come to ducks who haven't prepared themselves by consulting fortune tellers."

Demo immediately crossed her palm with silver, but only because he felt sorry for her.

"Just out of respect for local customs, mind you," he said, in case the first excuse was

lame.

The fortune teller examined his Canadian coins. The one-dollar coin, in particular, intrigued her.

"Your king is a loon?"

"That's our prime minister. No, I mean--"

"Demo doesn't see money very often," said Sally. "He's a philosophy professor. "It would be different if he was the Maytag repair man."

"Demo? Ah. An auspicious name." The fortune teller bent over his hand, inspecting it with a jeweler's loupe.

Then she shuddered. "Oooh; I see a rubber duckie in your life."

"You do?"

"A BIG rubber duckie."

Demo felt a chill go through him.

"You just made that up. EVERYBODY has rubber duckies in their life."

"This one is evil."

Demo had heard enough. He turned away abruptly, and that was when he noticed a shifty duck standing in the shadow of a magic Internet cafe.

"Don't look now but there's someone watching us," he said.

"You mean that duck over there in the blonde wig with the blue contacts, the leather tutu and the official secret police hat?" said Sally.

"He's smoking a Gitane," said Demo.

"That's not a Gitane," said the fortune teller. "We don't have Gitanes in ancient Babylon. It must be Black Lotus."

"He's only pretending to read that baked-clay tablet," said Sally. "It's upside down."

Demo shuddered. "How did the spy know we'd show up here?" he demanded. " WE didn't know we'd be here until we got off the train."

"Oh my gosh!" said Sally. "Those cigarettes aren't Black Lotus; they're Volksmokes! I've heard about Volksmokes. They're Gothic, from the Gothland."

"How do you know?" said Demo.

"I can tell by the little death's head on the tube."

"Isn't that just a mandatory health warning?"

"There ARE no mandatory health warnings in ancient Babylon," said the fortune teller. "Hammurabi didn't put anything about smoking in his code."

"In that case, the spy must be a Goth," said Demo. "Which can only mean--"

"He works for Antler of Austria, Leader of the Nasty Party," said the fortune teller.

"Which makes him a Nasty. I need a drink."

"So do I," said Sally.

"So do I," said Demo.

Some of you might be wondering about Antler. Why did he take time off from World War II to send spies into ancient Babylon? What kind of a flanking move is THAT?

We'll talk about this later.

The three companions made their way into a smoky beer hall inside a nearby inn, close to the customs shed, just outside the Ishtar gate.

The bar tender wore a green linen tutu with a picture of Hammurabi on the front.

"What'll it be?" he asked.

"Southern Comfort," said the fortune teller.

"Scotch!" said Sally.

"A vodka martini, shaken, not stirred," said Demo.

"Beer it is!" said the bar tender.

He drew a great quantity of smoking liquid into three clay drinking pots.

"What can you tell us about the Nasties?" said Demo, crossing the bartender's hand with Canadian coins.

The bartender eyed them suspiciously, particularly the image of a loon.

"Is that your king?" he demanded.

"It's a symbol."

"We usually prefer eagles here, but I'll make an exception this time. You were asking about the Nasty? A bunch of came through a time door and invaded Nineveh last year, but the Assyrians kicked them out. They don't like being invaded very much."

"How come the British didn't object?" said the fortune teller.

"They sent their prime minister, Chamber Pot, to negotiate. Antler gave him a baked-clay tablet loaded with sincerity and heart-felt desires for peace inscribed in disappearing cuneiform. The small print, featuring a logo with crossed fingers, was in Akkadian. Chamber Pot doesn't read foreign languages, because he thinks they're foreign."

"People say Antler wants to invade Babylon now," said the fortune teller.

"Babylon isn't really what he wants," said the bartender. "He has his eye on the steppes. He wants to put Nasties on the steppes, so they'll have more room than anyone else in Tockworld."

"Do the rest of the Goths know about this?" asked Demo.

"Lots of Goths despise Antler, but they're dying off, for some reason. One of the first things Antler did when he came to power was increase the death rate. He said not enough people were dying; it made the Nasties look bad."

Suddenly the bartender leaned closer.

"I'm not really an ancient Babylonian," he whispered. "I'm French. We have to stop Antler before he takes over the past!"

"How do you know this?" said Sally.

"He wrote about it in his book, INFLATABLE ME," said the bartender. He doesn't like people very much, so he wants to kill everybody and make room for more scenery."

"That's not very nice," said Sally.

Demo had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 48: HAMMURABI'S HOBBY

Suddenly a troop of large ducks came into the bar and rattled their spears at the newcomers.

Demo, Sally and the fortune teller were marched off to a waiting paddy-wagon chariot and taken to Hammurabi's palace.

I won't bother describing their route through ancient Babylon. You've all gone back in time and traveled through ancient cities, making your way along narrow streets surfaced with clay packed down on top of generations of garbage.

You've all inhaled the fragrance of open sewers clogged with excrement and old software boxes, and you've all prayed for rains to come and flush it down to the Euphrates River.

You've all seen people bathing in cisterns along the shore, or among the clumps of sewage floating on the surface of the river itself. You've all enjoyed the scent of tanneries and breweries, and you've admired the din of hammers on copper and bronze.

I'm sure everyone here today has stepped over people wasting away from cholera and such in the streets, and edged around women carrying huge clay pots filled with questionable river water, and you've probably all been run down and killed at least once by the chariots that squeeze, illegally, between the close-packed houses.

You've all baked under a sun that looks like a choleric red eye glaring out of a god's wrathful face. You've exclaimed in wonder at the flies in their millions thickening like oil on every bit of exposed flesh and every portion of raw meat in the reeking markets.

So I won't bother describing any of that. You need a strong stomach, an excellent constitution, and blocked nasal passages to survive a walk through ancient Babylon. You need good rubber boots as well, and tons of disinfectant.

The chariots clattered through the big metal detectors in the entranceway--two guys from Gath with clubs--and the little band of heroes was whisked into the throne room, where nobles sat around picking their noses, waiting for an audience with the king.

Priests floated everywhere, scribes scribbled away with their styluses on clay tablets, and gangs of archaeologists from the Museum of Strange Things patrolled with whisk brooms and sketch pads.

Then Hammurabi strode in, blocky and strong, with glaring eyes, perfumed beard, and a beak like a triceratops.

He examined them carefully, while his acolyte, Hanging Gardens, clung to a niche below the ceiling and salivated.

Hanging Gardens by the way, wasn't a duck; he was a very large bat, and he saw things from a bat's perspective. In other words, if you showed up on his radar screen, you were the enemy.

There were two kinds of enemy in Hanging Gardens' universe. Big enemies and little enemies. Big enemies were harder to drag up into the treetops.

He was called Hanging Gardens, by the way, because of the astonishing number of green things that grew on him, and because he liked to cling to a palace wall, waiting to drop onto some unsuspecting telemarketer.

Hanging Gardens eyed the newcomers from his perch on the wall, and grinned.

"Do you see something growing on me?" he asked.

"Ummm, no--" said Demo, fearing reprisals. "Is there something?"

"It needs rutabagas," said Sally.

"WHAT?" Hanging Gardens turned crimson with rage. "YOU DARE--"

"I could make you famous," said Sally. "Your name would become a household word all over Tockworld. The mysterious beaker people would build pottery shards in your honor."

"They would?" said Hanging Gardens. "Really?"

"Of course."

"You can do this for me?"

"You'll be famous."

"I WILL?" said Hanging Gardens excitedly. He'd never been famous before.

"I expect someone will be calling to book you on the Ed Sullivan show," said Sally.

"You'll need an agent."

Hanging Gardens grinned from ear to ear.

"I LIKE these people," he said.

Hammurabi contemplated him through his beard.

Demo took the opportunity to look out the palace window. There was a wonderful view across the Euphrates river of a certain amount of terrified greenery huddling against the water for protection from the vast quantity of sand blowing in the wind.

Off in the distance, the tiny dots that were Hank of Ur and his tribe wended their weary way over the sea.

"Why doesn't he take a cruise ship up the river to Haran?" said Hammurabi. "It would be much easier, and the food would be better."

"It's more romantic this way," said Demo. "Besides, the river is full of archaeologists. You'd spend all your time filling out interview forms and keeping expedition diaries. You'd forget what you were supposed to be doing, and history would change forever. You'd never get to the Land of Milk and Honey."

"History is overrated," said Hammurabi. "Now tell me about action paintings."

Sally explained action paintings to Hammurabi.

The others listened with increasing astonishment to her lecture.

"Hmmm," said Hammurabi. "I'd like to try this myself."

Demo had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 49: ALARIC AND CHARLEMAGNE

Meanwhile, in the heart of Toronto's sinister financial district, with its eerie, gothic bank towers and its menacing brokerage firms overgrown with lichens and strangler figs, the bankers, financial advisors and brokers waited expectantly.

High up on the walls of gloomy towers, the agents of financial extraction watched and plotted, their talons fixed to crooked crags, a wrinkled sea of money crawling beneath them.

Word of an impending invasion had spread through the whole of Toronto's sinister financial district. Alaric and Charlemagne would find their enemy well prepared when they breached the outer walls of Toronto's defenses, which girdled the Zone of Car Dealerships and Strip Malls.

Back in ancient Babylon, however, Hammurabi was still very keen to try out action painting.

"We'll start at the Ishtar Gate," he said.

"You'll need plenty of rotten rutabagas," said Sally Popoff. "The softer the better."

"What exactly is a rutabaga?" said the fortune teller. "Does it have anything to do with fertility rites?"

"A rutabaga is a yellow turnip, commonly known as the Swedish turnip," said Sally. "It's related to the cabbage--"

"So the Vikings are responsible for inflicting turnips on Tockworld?" said Demo. "One more crime against Western civilization--"

"The rutabaga is a noble vegetable," said Sally indignantly. "It goes very nicely with chocolate ice cream. Besides, there aren't any Vikings yet. Just hunter-gatherers. Sweden hasn't been invented."

"And the Vikings use these rutabaga thingies to ward off vampires, do they?" said Hammurabi, smirking at Hanging Gardens.

"I think they have something to do with fertility rites," said Sally.

Hammurabi wrinkled his nose. "More fertility rites! As if the world didn't have enough of them!"

"What's wrong with fertility rites?" said the fortune teller. "Honest to Pete, all the men in this burg want to do is talk about irrigation canals, tractor factories and sheep!"

"Is it true what you said about Sweden?" said Hammurabi. "It doesn't exist yet? Perhaps you just overlooked it in your travels?"

"Sally's right," said Demo. "The Vikings haven't even invented rune stones yet. They won't become Swedes for another thousand years."

"A technicality," said Hanging Gardens. "Whatever is going to happen has already happened. That's why we have infinity--to hold the sum of all possible temporal states, plus one."

"Sort of like the Kama Sutra is it?" said the fortune teller.

"STATES, not POSITIONS!" said Hanging Gardens.

Hanging Gardens, being an acolyte, disapproved of conjugations.

"So what do we do if there's no Sweden, and there aren't any Swedish turnips?" said Hammurabi. "I was looking forward to trying action painting."

"If you don't have the things you want, you ANTICIPATE them," said Hanging Gardens.

"How does that work?" said Hammurabi.

Hanging Gardens sighed. "You close your eyes and you concentrate really hard. Or you can have them FedExed through a time door. There's a surcharge for going back in time, I think."

"But if you don't know a thing exists, how can you anticipate it?"

"Everybody should have a goal in life," said Hanging Gardens. "Mine is to find a virgin and drink a large quantity of her blood."

"It is?" said Hammurabi.

"I'm an acolyte of simple tastes," said Hanging Gardens.

Hammurabi nodded. "About these rutabaga thingies," he said. "Aren't they rather hard? I mean, if you threw them at something, they'd be more likely to go 'bonk' than 'splat', don't you think?"

"Not if they're thoroughly rotten," said Sally. "We professionals make our own by exposing them to damp, moldy acolytes. Novices should start with pre-rotted rutabagas, of course."

Hammurabi patted Hanging Gardens on the head. "I think we'll make do with dead fish," he said. "We can buy those in the market."

Then he summoned the palace chariot.

A Nasty spy slid along the wall like a shadow behind them, keeping his sinister eye on them while he tried to light another Volksmoke with his tinder and flint.

Hammurabi's chariot was the size of a Honda Civic. There was a primitive television set, which consisted of an artist from Gath who drew cartoons very quickly.

An attendant from New Jersey stood on the running board yelling curses at the other chariot drivers.

The chariot raced along the processional way leading through the majestic Ishtar Gate to the celebrated Dirt of Mesopotamia outside.

The thing about ancients cities is they were walled. You had to go in through the gates, where security and customs monsters waited in line to extract your loot, so there was always a disgruntled throng milling about the gates. Fortunately, the area immediately around the Ishtar Gate was clear, because Hammurabi had expropriated the land for a monument.

The chariot stopped right outside the gate.

You've all seen the Ishtar gate. It's blue, and it features graphics of dragons and bulls. The top is wide enough for a chariot, but you can only use this venue if you're car-pooling.

Nasty spies gathered around the gate like a flock of sinister manta rays.

Hanging Gardens flew up to a crevice near the top of the gate and surveyed the spies.

Sally offered Hammurabi a nicely rotted fish.

He admired it for a moment, rolling it around in the palm of his hand like a squishy internal organ; then he pegged it at the gate.

There was a satisfying splat. The mighty king grinned from ear to ear and tried another shot.

Soon the Ishtar Gate had become the Fish Guts Gate. The flies of ancient Babylon set to work on it immediately, of course, and Sally had to work quickly with her digital camera before it vanished into the Fabulous Mists of Antiquity. She uploaded the images to her Pocket PC, then tried to print them on a battery-operated printer.

The printer was a bit of a problem, of course. It was a cheap model, with settings for glossy photo paper, letter paper, and envelopes, but no setting for clay tablets.

When the tablets jammed the mechanism, Sally called tech support and everyone waited a few days for someone to pick up the phone.

Tech support told her to download a new driver. Finally, Hammurabi summoned a wizard, who cast a spell on the printer.

After that, the printer worked reasonably well, but every time Sally tried to access her address book on the Pocket PC, it offered up the Babylonian King list.

Anyway, the printer buzzed and clacked, and spat out a clay tablet with a nicely inscribed graphic.

Hammurabi fidgeted impatiently as he peered over Sally's shoulder.

I did this?" he said.

"You're an action painter now!" said Sally. "A very good one. You can make a bigger mess than anyone else."

Hammurabi beamed. "Naturally!" he said. "I'm a king!"

"This is called art?" said the fortune teller. "Throwing rotting fish at a wall is art?"

"It's all in your intention," said Sally. "Ordinary people just throw fish. That's called littering. ARTISTS throw them in a special way, while thinking about what it all means. When

you think artistically about what you're doing, you're an artist."

"You could say the same about fertility rites," said the fortune teller. "If you think about it artistically, you're an artist."

Hanging Gardens flew down from his niche on the wall and took a turn at pegging fish at the gate.

"Remember to think artistically," said Sally.

"I'm thinking about my mother-in-law," said Hanging Gardens.

"You don't have a mother-in-law," said Hammurabi. "You're celibate."

After that, everyone climbed back into Hammurabi's chariot in a special, artistic way, and they all went back to the palace.

The Nasty spy sent a picture of the mess to Antler.

Winston Churchill had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 50: MACKLIN WIMPS OUT

Meanwhile, Gladys KindHeart was beside herself.

Aliens disguised as quacking elephants were lurking in the stairwell of Macklin's condo, working up the nerve to make him an offer.

If Macklin listened to them, who knew what would happen!

She had to convince him to finish the model railroad Vlod wanted him to build.

Gladys wasn't sure exactly what would happen if Macklin ever did finish his model railroad, but this is a common problem with big works of art.

It's like the Manhattan Project. Did the scientists who worked on that opus know what they'd have when they finished?

Of course not.

That's why the first Earth, the REAL Earth, vanished in a puff of smoke and was replaced by an inferior copy, which broke down like a cheap toy in no time at all.

Anyway, Macklin was merely a shadow of his old self; self-loathing and embarrassment enervated him.

He tried very hard to think about model railroading, but his mind was overcharged with memories of the Shameful Smooch. He had betrayed his lovely Gladys; he wasn't fit to be in the same room with her.

The mere sight of the lovely Gladys brought him to the brink of a swoon.

"I shall expire!" he murmured.

And then, of course, he fell into a coma.

Gladys tried everything to wake him up. She held him in her arms, she tickled him, she sang his favorite song, 'How Much is That Doggie in the Window?', and she made his favorite dessert--broccoli pie with broccoli ice cream.

Nothing worked.

Fluffy, took pity on her and offered helpful suggestions.

"Why don't we try warming him up?" he said.

"That's a good idea," said Gladys. "I'll get a blanket."

When she came back, she found Fluffy stuffing Macklin into a microwave oven.

Gladys rescued him in the nick of time.

"Relax," said Fluffy. "I was just going to defrost him."

"He might mutate in there," said Gladys.

"Anything would be an improvement!" muttered Fluffy.

Fluffy went into the living room in a huff, where he ate a box of cigars and read the financial papers.

Meanwhile, Hank of Ur was in trouble.

Hank, you recall, was last seen wending his weary way over the lea towards the land of milk and honey.

"Are we there yet?" a troublemaker named Brubaker, asked.

"For this we left UR the Chaldees?" his wife, Sari of Ur, said. "Where is the milk? Where is the honey?"

"Be patient," said Hank. "We'll get there."

"Not if you refuse to ask directions, we won't! Look, there's a Phoenician gas station just ahead. Why don't we stop?"

"I have to pee!" said Odd Camel, a very strange camel.

Hank sighed and trotted over to the gas station.

The Phoenician attendant grinned.

Meanwhile, back in ancient Babylon, Hammurabi built a new gallery to display photographs of his action art.

Actually, his official carpenter built a gallery.

Carpenters in Babylon tended to work with mud bricks, so technically they were brick layers, but occasionally someone would bring in a load of genuine timber from northern climes.

"You'll need a docent to help people understand your action art," said Sally Popoff.

"You'll probably need Laugh Police too," said the fortune teller. "They'll curb inappropriate laughter. It's a sign of schizophrenia, you know."

"Everyone in Babylon is schizophrenic," said Hanging Gardens. "It's because they can't make up their minds whether they like the Tigris or the Euphrates better."

A priest from the god Marvin's temple examined the photographs.

"I don't know if Marvin approves of these," he said.

"The gods love action paintings," said Sally. "But it takes a priest to interpret them properly. It's like reading entrails."

Really?" said the priest, growing interested.

It's an entirely new aspect of religion," said Sally. "You'll need a bigger budget, more priests, and more beer to help with meditation."

"I see you've thought very deeply about the things that are truly important in this life of woe," said the priest.

"All the best galleries are run by priests," said Sally. "They offer sermons and lectures to explain modern art to the masses. Actually, you'll need an entirely new category of priests, called critics."

The priest was so happy, he levitated.

Hammurabi patted Sally on the shoulder. "You've made my life complete," he said.

"How can I repay you?"

"We need a permit to go tomb raiding so we can find the Power of Durable Evil and defeat Antler," said Sally.

"Consider it done!" said Hammurabi. Then he turned to the fortune teller, from a safe distance.

"How may I repay you for bringing these foreign wizards to my attention?" he said.

"The god Marvin wants me to take part in the fertility rites," said the fortune teller. "He wants me to rehearse with a number of different priests, until we get it right."

"That can be arranged," said the priest, eyeing her enormous webs.

Everyone smiled.

Then Demo spotted a Nasty spy in the throne room, behind a decorated pillar, and he pointed him out to the others.

Hammurabi moved closer to the pillar and put on his reading glasses.

"Ah yes," he said. "There's me at two years old, with my nanny, and there's me crushing enemies."

The Nasty spy fidgeted.

"Go away," he said.

"I'm afraid you'll have to leave," said Hammurabi. "There's no smoking in my palace."

"I'm not smoking."

"Yes you are."

"This is a Volksmoke. You don't inhale it."

"Second hand smoke causes warts."

"No it doesn't. You get warts from handling toads."

"You don't get warts from handling toads," said the fortune teller. "You get them from abstinence."

Everyone stared at the fortune teller.

Then everyone stared at the Nasty spy.

"What are you looking at me for?" he said. "I'm busy collecting data for Leonard Woolley."

"He was a specialist in Ur, wasn't he?" said Hammurabi.

"He was?"

"Yes. Ur will be conquered and destroyed. But much later."

"No wonder I couldn't find it."

The Nasty spy had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 51: NO MILK, NO HONEY

Hammurabi was growing irritated. This Nasty business was interfering with his action art. It was time to put an end to it.

"You can't spy here!" he said. "You'll have to go somewhere else."

"Who says?"

"I do. It makes a lot of extra work for the janitor, cleaning up bits of dismembered spy."

The Nasty spy turned pale under his sneer.

"Okay," he said. "I confess. My name is Hit Counter. I'm a spy for Nasty Military Intelligence! I'm supposed to find out who you're smooching with so I can corrupt her and get her to report on all of your movements."

"Do you have interesting movements, your highness?" the fortune teller asked. "Like to compare notes?"

"Guards!" bellowed Hammurabi. "Take this spy to the spam pits!"

Two guys from Gath came and dragged the terrified spy away.

"Try not to kill him too much," said Hanging Gardens. "We can use him to feed false information to the Nasties."

"What sort of information?" said Hammurabi.

"We can use him to convince Antler that your army has gone off to fight British soccer fans, leaving ancient Babylon defenseless."

"I see. And meanwhile?"

"Meanwhile, you set up an ambush. You disguise your army as a harem, complete with veils and harem dresses."

"I see," said Hammurabi. "And when the Nasties attack, my warriors hit them with their purses?"

"No, sire! Your warriors cast off their veils and dresses--"

"I can help with that!" said the fortune teller.

"Shock tactics!" said Hammurabi. "Very clever. The Nasties will all die of laughter."

"No, sire! Your warriors then produce their concealed spears--"

"I can definitely help with that!" said the fortune teller.

"ANYWAY," said Hanging Gardens, your warriors will then leap out of their costumes and slaughter the Nasties."

Hammurabi grinned. "I like the way you think."

Hanging Gardens smiled modestly.

"How do we convince the spy?" asked Demo.

"It's simple," said Hanging Gardens. "We write up a plan for invading Britain's soccer

stadiums, and we leave it on a convenient table in the spam pits. Then we let Hit Counter escape."

Everyone liked this plan, and in short order, it was accomplished.

Hanging Gardens left a baked clay tablet on a convenient table in the spam pits. On the tablet was a complete battle plan, in Akkadian and in Gothic script, in case the Nasties had trouble with cuneiform.

Then HG pushed a key under the door of the Hit Counter's cell.

It took Hit Counter awhile, but eventually he realized his luck had turned.

Quickly he grasped the key, thrust it into the lock, and pushed on the door.

An hour later, exhausted and near despair, he pulled the door open.

Then he discovered the fictitious battle plan and ran down the hall to the escape tunnel.

Hanging Gardens was well pleased.

The fortune teller had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 52: ANTLER'S GANG

On the whole, Hammurabi was pleased with his new friends. They were a bit presumptuous, but he made allowances for that, because they came from the future, where everything had gone bad.

"I'll give you a special pass to go tomb raiding," he said. "But suppose Antler attacks while you're up to your neck in dusty antiquities?"

"I'm sure your army will do an excellent job of opening up Antler's soldiers and discarding their vital bits," said Demo. "It's a simple logistical problem--how quickly can they leap out of their harem dresses and wield their concealed spears?"

"I'll be there to help and encourage them in their struggles," said the fortune teller.

"Suppose Antler wins?" said Hammurabi. "You'd be locked up in a tomb with a lot of repulsive snakes."

"Some people have all the fun!" muttered Hanging Gardens.

"I don't mind snakes," said Demo.

"Really?" said Hammurabi. "It wouldn't be just snakes, of course. There'd be telemarketers, and mimes."

"Telemarketers?" gasped Demo. "I think I'll postpone the tomb raiding and help you fight Antler."

"A wise choice," said Hammurabi. "Your mission is to infiltrate Antler's HQ, listen to one of his speeches, and learn his technique for mesmerizing the masses. Once we know that, we can use it to demoralize his troops."

"Piece of cake," muttered Demo.

Hammurabi was pleased.

Thus it was the intrepid heroes set out for danger and glory in Hammurabi's Pickard chariot.

Hammurabi, meanwhile, remained behind to conduct affairs of state.

Affairs of State smiled and waved until the door closed, then she winked at Hammurabi and showed a bit of ankle.

The Pickard chariot lurched away from a horde of beggars at the palace door and shot out into the heavy traffic.

Hours later, it pulled up outside Dieter's Beer Hall and Gasworks, a lumpy looking building made out of the customary mud bricks.

Hanging Gardens started for the door, with Demo and Sally in his wake.

The fortune teller lingered for a moment, patting the driver affectionately.

"Come up and see me sometime, baby," she said.

The driver blushed and giggled. He hadn't had so much fun since he'd smashed down the walls at Lagash and slaughtered everyone inside.

The fortune teller turned away reluctantly and hurried to join the others.

The beer hall was jammed with red-faced Nasties, and it reeked of farts.

"Don't light any matches!" yelled Demo.

"We don't have matches," yelled Hanging Gardens. "We rub things together until they catch fire."

The fortune teller winked at Demo, but he couldn't hear what she was suggesting.

The little band of heroes paused in the entranceway for a moment, getting their bearings.

The air was blue with smoke from the ever-present Volksmokes.

The Nasty Song of Victory rang out from dozens of throats like a construction project:

"How Much is That Werewolf in the Window? The one with the waggellyyyy tail?"

The noise was deafening.

At the front of the room, Antler's friends, Himlet and Gormy, were testing the mikes while Antler pedaled his little Antlermobile around and around the cordoned-off area.

The mikes were three guys from Gath holding rolled-up clay tablets.

"We'd better grab a seat," said Demo. "We don't want to get stuck up in front. There might be a test after the speech."

The good guys threaded their way through the jubilant mob of bad guys around the bar, but they had not gone far before a peculiar figure showed up.

It was an alien.

Not a quacking elephant, not a creature with too many rectums and heads, but a real alien--a duck dressed up in a green costume.

"Loopy!" said Demo. "What are you doing here? You're supposed to be with Herman, watching Macklin."

"Macklin has turned himself into a defective kitchen appliance," said Loopy.

"What if he slacks off and fails to build a superdetailed model of the --"

"He's in a coma! How slack can you get?"

Demo was shocked.

"What if he suddenly emerges from it, forgets about Vlod's project, and starts building something completely different?" Demo said. "Where is your sense of duty, your Victorian system of values?"

"I can't help it!" said Loopy. "I was abducted by aliens."

"Why would they do that? You LOOK like an alien!"

"They apologized afterwards. They said there were so many aliens flitting around Tockworld, it was hard to find suitable targets."

Sally kissed him on the cheek and gave him one of her rutabagas.

"Don't be upset," she said. "Nothing matters."

"How did you get here?" Demo asked.

"I went through the magic shop (It used to be a tent)," said Loopy. "It was just outside Macklin's condo building. I should be getting back. I think I'm beginning to attract attention. Someone might suspect Demo isn't a Nasty warrior."

It was true; everyone in the beer hall was staring at the little group. The emergent laughter had given way to a typical Nasty mental state--sluggish and incoherent belligerence.

"It's okay!" yelled Loopy. "We were just organizing a little alien abduction here. We're finished now. Thanks for letting us use your beer hall. Have a nice day!"

"HAVE A NICE DAY!" yelled the mob, and promptly went back to drinking beer.

Loopy went out into the street, where a magic tent, (It used to be a shop) was waiting for him.

Meanwhile, Demo and his friends gave their attention to the podium, where Antler had decided to warm up for his speech on his Antlermobile.

Gormy stood behind him, looking a little bit like an enormous cheerleader with a full set of antlers.

Himlet went off to kill something so he'd be in a good mood when it was time for HIS speech.

The mob wedged itself into chairs. Demo and the others found themselves seated IN THE FRONT ROW!

Demo watched with trepidation as Himlet returned from some convenient victim and Antler rose to his feet.

The great man moved haltingly to the very edge of the podium and looked down at the fortune teller's embodiments. He had drunk much, he had eaten much, but he was none the worse for it--there was very little he could do that would make him any worse than he already was.

Then he looked up.

"Fellow Nasties," he said.

This was followed by three solid hours of cheering and 'Hail Antler' yells.

At the end of it, just as Demo was falling into a stupor, Antler let fly a gaseous emission that blasted across the podium, lifting Gormy right off his feet, and blowing a hole through the wall behind him.

There was an awed silence.

"Oops, backfire!" whispered Demo.

Moments later, the mob rose to its feet, screaming with adulation.

"Hail Antler!" they cried. "HAIL ANTLER!"

It was unbelievable.

The mob was in a frenzy. It was completely in Antler's power; they'd do anything he asked!

"Crush enemies!" it yelled. "Crush enemies! Crush enemies!"

Demo stared at the others in wild surmise.

"That's it!" he yelled. "The secret of Antler's mesmerizing power over the masses! It's flatulence."

"Who would have thought!" said Sally.

Hanging Gardens was in a daze.

"There goes a duck who's fouler than I am," he said. "And yet, he garners adulation to which I remain a stranger, bereft and loveless."

"Yea verily," said Sally.

"Antler isn't just an ordinary duck," said Demo. "He's full of sour gas extracted from rotting vegetables."

"Oh, we all have that!" said Sally. "It's the duck condition."

"But Antler has more gas than anyone else," said Demo. "He can spew for hours at a time; that's what mesmerizes his followers."

"An ever-spewing source of inspiration to his followers," said Hanging Gardens bitterly. "While I, possessed of far more discriminating powers, toil on in obscurity."

"Imagine!" said Demo. "An entire philosophy based on sour gas. How can we fight such a monster?"

"We could plug the outlet," said Sally. "No opening, no words."

"Brilliant," said Demo. "He'd self-destruct."

"Explode, you mean," said Sally.

"But how do we get close enough to plug the hole?"

"We don't have to," said Sally. "All we need to do is to add some McBowel's Self-Sealing Porridge to his veggies. It'll swell up inside him and plug his bung holes."

"Where does he get his veggies?" said Demo.

"He has them shipped in from the modern era," said Hanging Gardens. "He doesn't like Babylonian food."

"Presumably the veggies are inspected at the border," said Demo.

"They are," said Hanging Gardens, grinning to himself. "Leave the details to me, please. Oh, this is going to be such fun."

"Meanwhile, let's leave this place," said Sally. "I'm not happy here."
Loopy had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 53: PLATYPUS IN THE SKY

"I think we should go back to the palace now," said Hanging Gardens. "I've got committee meetings to attend, people to bite."

Everyone agreed this was a good idea.

But to reach the door, they had to pass through a frenzied mob.

Demo eyed the blurred forms of the Nasties with growing horror.

"Run away, run away!" yelled the fortune teller.

"Run where?" said Sally. "We're trapped."

Then a small, crabbed, humped figure beckoned them from a shadowy area near the bar.

"Hsst! This way. Quickly now!"

"Look, there's a small, crabbed, humped figure beckoning us from a shadowy area near that Llama's Eve cactus," yelled Sally.

"What's a Llama's Eve cactus doing here?" said Demo. "It's not Llama's Eve."

"Antler thinks every day is Llama's Eve," said Hanging Gardens. "It's very medieval and Wagner-like."

"Wagner wasn't a Nasty."

"Well, Nietzsche was."

"No he wasn't! Nietzsche hated gloomy medieval things. He thought the Gothic emphasis on death, despair and fate was morbid and Canadian. He loved French music, wine and spirit."

"You wouldn't know it from his philosophy!" said Demo. "He built a very gloomy system. Life is crappy. If you're strong enough to survive being nearly killed, you get to make up your own rules and decide your own values, and then you die anyway."

"Sounds like the Marines," said Sally.

"What good are philosophers?" said the fortune teller. "Name one philosopher who discovered a single new position."

Demo touched the cactus.

"It's fake," he said. "It's made of mud bricks."

"You'd be surprised what you can do with mud bricks," said Hanging Gardens. "You can make very powerful motors, for instance. You glue a lot of bricks together with camel dung, until you have a large, mud-brick core. If you turn the core around and around, very fast, inside a magnet, you get enough electricity to power up an electroshock machine."

"Oooh, I never thought of doing it with magnets," said Sally.

Everyone looked at Sally.

Demo edged away from her and watched the frenzied Nasties. The feathers on the back of his neck prickled.

The Hippopotamus of Fate hung in the balance.

Meanwhile, in another part of the forest, the Camels of the Negev were standing around in the waterless desert, griping about the heat.

"Listen, Hank," said a camel by the name of Little Big Hump. "What are we trying to prove with all this wandering in the desert? Everywhere we look, we find enemies! To the north, people who hate us and want to kill us. To the south, people who hate us and want to kill us. To the west, people who hate us and want to kill us. We have to go back!"

"You forgot something," said Hank.

"What? Scorpions maybe?"

"To the east, people who hate us and want to kill us."

"Yeah, but we know THOSE people," said Little Big Hump. "If you're going to hang

around people who hate you and want to kill you, you might as well make sure they're people you know and trust. The people in this neck of the desert are all STRANGERS."

"We don't have any choice," said Hank.

"Why not? Everyone gets choosing time. It's in the contract."

"Not us. We were chosen."

"That's not fair! Why US? Why not the guys from Gath?"

"Because!" said Hank.

"Oh that's a great answer! That's really good! I wish I was a Supreme Being so I could go around telling people, 'Okay, I've got a special treat for you guys. You're gonna love this! You get to wander around in the desert and hang out with guys who are gonna slaughter you and drag you off to exile and jump up and down on you until your bones break. But wait; there's more! You're gonna starve to death because this is basically arid land; the milk and honey is a mirage. And you're gonna get plagues too. And boils. Isn't that nice!'"

Hank stepped away from Little Big Hump and shrank within himself, waiting for the ZOT.

When it didn't come, he said, "You don't question the Supreme Being; not if you're allergic to scorched fur."

"Oh, so!" said Little Big Hump. "A real democracy that is! Argue with me and fzzzt--well-done camel burgers! What a nice immortal the Supreme Being is!"

"He's just being who he is," said Hank. "He loves us."

"Is that so! What about Sodom and Gomorrah? Did he love the people in those cities?"

"They were bad. They deserved what they got."

"Oh, yeah, I forgot! They were ALL bad. Exceptionally naughty, the whole lot of them."

"Relax! The Supreme Being got a bum rap for that. He didn't destroy those cities; the geologists did. They were the ones who discovered tectonic plates and fracture zones. After that, it was only a matter of time before the whole mess started working, and lava blew out of the cracks in the ground."

"I thought it was the chariots of the gods," said Two Big Humps, an orthodontist.

"Okay, okay," said Little Big Hump. "So maybe the Supreme Being didn't really kill all of those people. He let something else do it. What about the Deluge? He admitted that one!"

"It was a one-time thing," said Hank. "He was really steamed at us for watching too much soft porn and besides, he said he was sorry and wouldn't do it again. He made the platypus as a symbol and put it up in the sky."

"I thought it was a rainbow," said Two Big Humps.

"You can't put a platypus up in the sky," said Little Big Hump. "There aren't any crustaceans up there."

"The Supreme Being can do whatever he likes," said Hank. "A platypus is a sign of hope. Any old god can design a marmot or a raccoon, but it takes a Real Supreme Being to think up a platypus!"

"One thing I can guarantee," said Two Big Humps, "Platypuses don't twinkle, so it's definitely not like a little star."

"Yes they do!" said Hank. "They have lovely smiles."

"Any animal that roots around in the mud and eats crustaceans does not twinkle," said Little Big Hump.

"Okay, okay!" said Hank. "Does anyone see a platypus in the sky?"

"There, up there!" said Two Big Humps. "I see one."

"That's not a platypus; it's a big cloud," said Little Big Hump.

"There aren't any clouds over the waterless desert," said Hank. "It's a platypus."

All of the camels stared intently up into the sky.

"It is a platypus!" breathed Hank. "A sign from the Supreme Being."

"Why a platypus?" said Two Big Humps. "I mean, they're Australian marsupials. Why not pick something local, like a goat?"

"How should I know!" said Hank. "I'm not a medieval theologian; I'm only the founder of our nation."

"Follow that platypus," said Little Big Hump. "It will lead us to the land of milk and honey."

"I still think it's a big cloud," said Two Big Humps.

"Clouds don't come in ones," said Little Big Hump. "They get together in huge armies and try to kill us."

"EVERYTHING is trying to kill us," said Hank. "That's what gives life meaning."

"We're so lucky!" said Little Big Humps. "Let's give thanks for our gifts!"

"It will be different in the Land of Milk and Honey," said Hank. "A big platypus will give us shade."

"It's not THAT big," said Little Big Hump.

"Nevertheless, it's a sign from the Supreme Being. We have to follow it."

"What if it's just a logo? What if it's part of some weird new ad campaign for soft drinks?"

Just then, a gullible camel by the name of Little Brains spotted a dark smudge on the horizon.

"Behold!" he proclaimed. "The hills of the Land of Milk and Honey."

Everyone turned to look.

Then Hank chortled and said with a twinkle in his eye, "Those aren't the hills of the Land of Milk and Honey. Those are warriors who are coming out in a large horde to kill us."

"Oh goody!" said Two Big Humps.

Little Big Hump had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 54: MARVIN IS A GOD?

Demo noticed the small, crabbed, humped figure waving at them again.

"I wonder if that's Peter Lorre," he said.

"Sally squinted into the distance, a few feet away. She needed glasses, but they interfered with her action art. You can't be an action artist if you don't look youthful and edgy, and glare at people a lot.

"It's Hammurabi!" said Sally.

"Master!" said Hanging Gardens joyfully.

There was a tearful reunion.

"Shhhh!" said Hammurabi. "I'm disguised as an ostrich. I came to rescue you from the Nasties. Let's leave this place."

This was easier said than done.

The horde of Nasties was getting larger and larger. Thousands of screaming fans packed themselves into the little beer hall, yelling and sweating.

Demo and his pals stared at the pullulating mass in horror.

Somebody had to do something fast, because the Nasties were growing suspicious.

If there is one thing Nasties hate, it's an individualist, a person who refuses to mingle at frat parties.

Just then, a tall, thin sliver of a duck, disguised as a fisherman in an outfit that consisted of tweeds, brogue hip waders, a split bamboo rod, and a bulldog pipe with a Union Jack engraved on the bowl, waved urgently to Demo from beside the water fountain.

"Pssst!" said the fisherman. "Pssst!"

"Who could that be?" said Demo.

"Looks a little like Wittgenstein, doesn't he!" said Sally.

"What's HE doing here?" said Demo. "He talks too much."

"Who cares?" said the fortune teller, pushing her way towards him. "I can see he's lonely; he needs affection."

"How d'ye do?" said the fisherman. "Bender's the name. United States Secret Intelligence is the game. I've had my eye on these Nasty chappies for some time now.

They've invaded Poland and France. You mark my words; they're up to something!"

Demo's relief gave way to suspicion. An American Secret Service agent would never smoke fish and chips in his pipe. Nevertheless, he and his friends had little choice but to play along if they were ever to escape the beer hall.

Bender looked down his long nose at Hammurabi

Then he said, "I can help you disguise your army if you'll help our gallant friends in the old country with a lend-lease agreement so they can stop Antler at the channel, blow up his landing craft, inflict heavy casualties on his air force, and accumulate a terrific debt which we--I mean THEY-- shall have to repay, unlike the chaps who started the war."

"I think you'll have to talk to the barbarians of the New York stock exchange about lend-lease agreements," said Demo. "And you'll need to do something about your disguise; it's un-American."

"Drat!" said Bender. "How did you guess? I never wanted this job anyway. I suppose the intelligence wallahs didn't know what to do with me, so they sent me back in time to ancient Babylon. Not quite England in April, is it!"

"It doesn't get any better!" said Hanging Gardens.

"About this lend-lease business," said Hammurabi. "The barbarians of the New York stock exchange will size up your credit rating while they're boiling you in a pot, and if it looks reasonable, they'll do business with you."

"I can put in a word for you, if you like," said Demo. "We Canadians are loyal to Britain, you know."

"Are you indeed!" said Bender, and he turned away, overcome with emotion for a moment.

"Must have a bit of shrapnel in my eye," he said, wiping away a tear. "Please forgive me; it's been ages since anyone's inflicted loyalty and honor on me. Why, only this morning, our very own prime minister, Chamber Pot, agreed to give away part of Europe to Antler's descendant, and it's not even his to give! I ask you! They'd never have done a thing like that in the Tewksbury of old."

"Shocking!" said Demo.

"I wish I could do something for you in return," said Bender. "Perhaps I could recite some of my poetry. There's a particularly good one about Wellingtons--"

"SADLY, we have no time," said Hammurabi.

"I suppose you're right, old chap. "Here we are, trapped in a pullulating mass of frenzied Nasties and all that. Actually we've seen it all before, haven't we! History keeps repeating itself."

"Blasphemy!" said Hammurabi. "Only the god Marvin has seen it all before. Marvin is the god of Changeless Routine and Relentless Boredom."

"And fertility rites," said the fortune teller.

Meanwhile, in the waterless desert, Hank of Ur drew everyone into a circle.

Hank and his people were about to be attacked.

The attacking army, a party of Phoenicians, hadn't encountered this defensive maneuver before, perhaps because they were a seafaring people and usually conducted their martial affairs in ships of the line. They stopped for a moment to look it up in Clauswitz, then they attacked, running around and around in circles, waving their spears and yelling insults.

"You camels are wimps!"

"You have very small humps."

"Your Canadian dollars are worthless here!"

"Marvinites go home!"

"What was that supposed to mean?" said an inquisitive Phoenecian.

"It was an insult," said a patriotic Phoenecian. "An especially demeaning one, because the Camels of the Negev worship Marvin."

"No they don't!"

"Yes they do! Some of them are even carrying the pet rock, which is a symbol of Marvin."

Several Phoenicians stopped running around and around and joined the argument.

"Who is this god, Marvin?" They asked. Is he like Dibs, the god of economics?"

"Marvin is responsible for boredom," said a learned Phoenician. "He makes us do exactly the same things in the next life that we did in this life. That's why we're all doomed to eternal repetition. He also makes sure everybody gets the gifts of pain, suffering, famine, war, disease and death."

"All gods do that! It's a feature."

"Anyway," said the learned Phoenician in a snit, "these gifts make you feel really good when you die and it's all over. You're supposed to thank Marvin every time someone hurts you."

"Dibs is better," said a fanatical Phoenician. "He just wants money! Are you sure the camels don't worship Dibs? EVERYONE worships Dibs!"

"I don't think the camels do," said a doubting Phoenician. "Their priests dress up in costumes and flagellate each other."

"No, no!" said the learned Phoenician. "That's the Dionysian revels. And it's SHREDDING, not flagellation. A bunch of drunken Greek women get together, lure some men by flaunting their attributes, and tear them to pieces in a frenzy."

"Oooh, Black Orpheus! I like that! We could use a bit of that!"

"We don't need intense revelries," said the Phoenician patriot. "We have purple dye. Besides, too much passion is bad for business. Dibs is a benevolent god. He just wants everyone to trade things."

"What if you don't have something to trade?" said the doubting Phoenician.

"I never thought of that. I suppose you could give your trading partner something so he'd have something to trade."

"You can't do that!" said a Phoenician social climber. "You can't give something to everybody! That's Marxism. Everyone would make really crummy appliances and tractors, and go home and drink a lot."

"Back to work or I'll disembowel you!" yelled a warlord.

The Phoenicians, anxious to escape the Hippopotamus of Fate, began running around and around the camels again.

Hank of Ur shook his head. He was old and tired. He was sick of wandering, sick of wars, famine, disease and death. He just wanted someone to invent hot tubs and TV.

The Phoenicians had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 55: CLYDETTE OF EDINBURGH

Fluffy was getting fed up.

He had things to do, places to go, but he was stuck in Macklin's condo, waiting for the famous model railroader to snap out of his coma.

He went into the kitchen, where Gladys KindHeart was reading aloud to Macklin from an old copy of MODEL RAILROADER, hoping to lure him back with fancy track plans.

"Macklin is such a wimp he probably doesn't WANT to come back," said Fluffy.

Gladys turned away, a hurt look in her eyes.

Fluffy immediately felt remorseful.

"I'm sorry, my dear," he said. "I didn't mean to stimulate your tear ducts. Care for a cigar?"

"No thank you," said Gladys. "You go ahead, though. I don't mind."

Fluffy opened a convenient cigar box.

In his agitation, he scooped up three, and ate them all at once.

"Oh Fluffy!" said Gladys, a catch in her voice. "What are we going to do? How can we

get my precious Macklin back?"

"There, there," said Fluffy, awkwardly patting her on top of the head. "I have an idea that might work. Why don't I go tomb raiding and discover the legendary Rubber Duckie of Evil. I believe it holds within its vile body the Power of Durable Evil. A little dab of that, and Macklin will be as good as new."

Gladys looked at Fluffy with shining eyes.

"Oh Fluffy! You'd do that for Macklin?"

"For you, my dear. Not for that feathered sloth."

"But isn't the Rubber Duckie of Evil lost in the Fabulous Mists of Antiquity?"

"Ancient Babylon, I think," said Fluffy. "A city built on garbage. There may very well be mists, but I imagine they'd be rather fragrant."

"Dear, dear Fluffy; what would I ever do without you! You're such a fount of knowledge! How do you know these things?"

Fluffy looked modestly down at the pearl stud in his belly button.

It was a fake belly button, of course, attached to his starched white shirt.

"I owe whatever knowledge I have to my friends, the Camels of the Negev," Fluffy said.

"They collect data and store it in their humps, as you know. I learned about the Rubber Duckie of Evil from the camels."

Gladys stared at him, her face radiant with sudden hope.

"Is it possible?" she said. "Could you--"

"For you, my dear, anything is possible," said Fluffy.

"But are there any flights to ancient Babylon? It would be a charter, wouldn't it?"

Fluffy thought about this for a moment. There weren't any direct flights, of course, because airline executives don't want people enjoying themselves.

"Perhaps if we booted up Macrohard Angst and said we wanted to go to ancient Babylon--" he said.

"Macrohard can't take you there anymore," said Gladys. "It's part of the court settlement. They get ancient Nineveh and Ur, but Linux gets ancient Babylon."

Suddenly a Harrier Jump Jet landed on the balcony.

A duck with a wild mop of tartan-colored hair popped the canopy, leaped to the hash marks, and bounded inside the condo.

"Och, aye!" she bellowed. "Clydetta's the name. Jamie Clydetta. Licensed to Kill."

"How do you do," Fluffy managed to say. "Fluffy's the name. I don't believe we've met."

"I've been busy thwarting a deadly international conspiracy to defeat Woodrow Wilson and destroy the League of Nations," said Clydetta.

"Umm--"

"I'm from Edinburgh, by the way. The Scots invented narrative surprises, you know."

Fluffy was bemused. He watched in a daze as Clydetta removed her pilot's coveralls.

Then he suppressed a gasp.

Beneath the ridiculous pilot's costume was a gorgeous beauty, with tartan feathers, a sensible miniskirt, plaid rubber boots, and a caramel-colored vinyl vest. She looked like a clan map wrapped in butterscotch.

Then she went back to her Harrier and extracted a Gladstone bag.

"I brought a few essentials," she said. "Bagpipes, a haggis, Tomahawk missiles, extra fuel for the jet, lipstick for those nights at the casinos."

The last object was a very large stone weight.

"That seems to be an enormous fishing weight," said Fluffy. "Or is it one of a pair belonging to a troll?"

"Clydetta guffawed loudly and clapped Fluffy on the back.

"HAW, HAW, HAW! You're a card, you are, Fluffy!" she said. "This is my little practice stone for the shot-put. I like to toss it around when I'm bored."

Fluffy took it from her and nearly popped his spine.

What a duck! he thought. She was magnificent!

Where are my manners?" he said. "Care for a cigar?"

"Thanks, don't mind if I do."

Clydette and Fluffy polished off the rest of the box and started another one.

Fluffy was almost certain he was in love, but he decided to try a little test, just to be on the safe side.

"Do you like Barbara Cartland novels?" he asked.

"Aye, that I do," said Clydette.

Fluffy, of course, was an aficionado. He eyed her carefully, checking for telltale signs of dissimulation. There were none.

"What about Louis L'Amour?" he asked.

"I've read them all. I like Karl May, too."

"Hmmm. How about preSocratic philosophy?"

"Suits me to a tee. I'm a fan of Thales, meself."

That was enough for Fluffy. His heart leaped up, and he felt like a young leech gatherer again. He couldn't help smiling. He took Clydette in his arms and danced around the living room with her.

After the dance, they smooched for a time, then Clydette patted him on the snout.

"Enough small talk," she said. "I'm here to help you find the Rubber Duckie of Evil."

"How did you know I was looking for it?"

"I overheard you while I was flying past your window."

"Well I'm glad you're here," said Fluffy. "I'm really fed up with this Macklin wimp."

"EVERYBODY is," said Clydette. "We model railroaders are very upset, but we can't do anything about it, because he's a brilliant modeler."

"You're a model railroader too?" said Fluffy, astonished.

"Of course I am!" said Clydette. "I'm a Scot, aren't I? We Scots invented model railroads. I'll bet you didn't know that."

"Very busy people, the Scots!"

"We needed something to do between bouts of thrashing the Sassanachs, so we invented model railroads. First we had to invent railroads, of course, but that was the easy part. There's nothing you can't do with a bit of haggis and a barrel of single malt."

"So much talent!" breathed Fluffy. "So much beauty, and a model railroader too! Oh joy!"

"Oh YOU!" said Clydette, patting Fluffy on the snout.

"We'll take care of this rubber duckie business soon enough! Don't you worry your pretty little head about it."

By now, Fluffy was deeply in love.

"Where have you been all my life?" he breathed.

"Waiting for you, sugar scales!"

This was a little white lie, of course. Clydette chose not to tell Fluffy about her first love, Lewis Carroll, but she hadn't inhaled, so it didn't count.

Anyway, after their initial burst of smooching, the two turtle doves went out to see how Gladys and Macklin were doing. They held hands as they walked, and made crocodile tears at each other.

Gladys smiled radiantly when she saw them. It was a pure, wonderful, selfless smile that lit up the whole room.

"We'll be leaving for ancient Babylon as soon as we can locate transport," said Fluffy.

"Will you be okay while we're gone?"

"I'll be fine," said Gladys, holding Macklin's frosty hand in her own. Her forehead glowed with self-sacrifice.

Fluffy hated to see her like this.

Clydette went out onto the balcony, locked her Harrier jet, and set the alarm. Then she joined her sweetheart on the long trek down twenty flights of stairs to the street below.

"How exactly will we get to ancient Babylon?" she asked. "Are we going to take the

Orient Express?"

"The Orient Express is too slow," said Fluffy. "Besides, you have to pretend to like the other passengers."

"You're so diplomatic, sweetie! You're wasted here in Toronto. You could be working for Kaiser Wilhelm."

"I've thought about it. Anyway, I want to be alone with you."

"Oh, YOU!" said Clydette, pleased. "Where are you taking me?"

"It's a surprise," said Fluffy.

Meanwhile, Charlemagne and Alaric drew ever closer to Toronto. Vlod raised taxes to cover the increased cost of collecting taxes. Financial advisors bankers and brokers everywhere sharpened their beaks and filed their fangs.

At the same time, the aliens slowly climbed the stairs in Macklin's condo.

Aliens disguised as quacking elephants aren't fond of elevators, as you know; they fear having to enter into conversation with strangers, and inadvertently giving themselves away through a slip of the tongue.

Up on the twentieth floor, Macklin opened one eye.

If there's anything calculated to awaken a model railroader from a comatose state, it's the chance of building a model with someone else's money.

Master model railroads are psychic and can sense clients approaching. Little did it matter that Macklin already had one client in Vlod Ironbeak. Great artists like to have a number of commissions in the bag, in case there's a nuclear war and one client is forced to withdraw.

Meanwhile, Hank of Ur watched with a jaundiced eye as the Phoenicians ran around and around the circle of Camels of the Negev.

He had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 56: NASTY POLKA

Meanwhile, Demo and his new chums were about to escape the beer hall, when Sally Popoff made a fatal mistake.

She stopped and looked at Antler--REALLY looked at him, taking in all of his impacted logic, his warty ideals, and his ingrown emotions.

"You know, I think I've seen Antler somewhere before," she said.

Her words rang out during one of the inexplicable silences that so frequently punctuate scenes of mass revelry.

All of the Nasties stared at Sally, as if seeing her for the first time.

Most of them WERE seeing her for the first time, actually.

Nasties are forbidden to see anything that has not been defined by Antler himself in his book, INFLATABLE ME.

The reason for this is quite simple; Antler knew all too well that people who are allowed to go around seeing everything they want to see will begin to question established doctrine.

So if you don't want your congregation rushing off to a local printer with a lot of demands written on the back of a cocktail napkin, you'd better lay down the law very early on in the game, setting forth what is real and what is not.

The Nasties, though unable to actually see Sally, had begun to notice a certain perturbation of the air where she stood.

At first they attributed this to a pocket of concentrated gas.

Once Sally uttered the magic words, 'I've think I've seen Antler somewhere before', she lost her invisibility, and became an object.

There are only two classes of objects: ONE OF US, or ONE OF THEM.

The Nasties began to mutter among themselves.

"Now would be a good time to fade out," said Demo."

"I can't put my finger on it, but I've heard about him somewhere," Sally said. "He did something nasty once."

Bender smiled encouragingly at her.

For some time now, Bender had been having doubts. Was ancient Babylon really the best place to spy on Antler, as his superiors at the shop had suggested?

Was Antler really and truly the prototype for the later model that would cause such havoc in Tockworld?

Or had Bender's department head made the whole thing up and sent him back in time merely to get rid of him?

If Sally was in fact troubled by memories of the evil Antler, and not just having a fashionable, New-Age moment, then, quite possibly, Antler was real, and by extension, Bender himself was real.

What an achievement that would be!

The Nasties moved closer.

"I'm sure I've heard of him," said Sally.

"Possibly," said Hanging Gardens. "We all have doubles. Some of us even have descendants, though I don't know why people bother. I mean, what good are descendants? What have they ever done for ME?"

"You have descendants, old chap?" said Bender, annoyed by this interruption. "A rather difficult feat for the undead isn't it!"

"Thanks to the miracle of modern science, we of the undead are capable of active procreational lives long after we've departed this tissue of lies," said Hanging Gardens.

"Really?" said the fortune teller, eyeing him lasciviously.

"WITHOUT the messy bits," said Hanging Gardens quickly.

"I didn't know you had the procreational apparatus here," said Demo.

"Not EVERYTHING rots off," said Hanging Gardens. "Your turn will come, you know."

"I meant the lab equipment for DNA extraction. Or do you implant material in nuked cells --"

"ENOUGH!"

Hanging Gardens held up his arms to ward off evil. "I never discuss plumbing," he said with a shudder. "I've always felt that the god who invented reproduction showed his true feelings about living creatures when he made everything so messy!"

"It doesn't get any better!" said the fortune teller. "We should be thankful. I mean, we could have been given faucets for spawning, like fish."

"Faucets?" said Demo.

"Whatever," said the fortune teller. "Sprinkler systems, if you want to be a stickler for details."

"I thought you LIKED messy things, HG," said Sally. "You know, mold and fungus and all that."

"Only when they're tastefully arranged and discreetly consumed," said Hanging Gardens prissily.

Himlet looked up 'lascivious' in INFLATABLE ME.

Several Nasties peeked over his shoulder.

"Close your eyes," he said. "The master has filed it under 'degenerate'. You know what that means!"

"Really!" said Gormy. "Are there any pictures? I need to see, in case I meet a degenerate while I'm on duty and don't recognize it because I don't know what it looks like."

Himlet closed the baked-clay tablet. There was a muttered, "Awww, gee! We never get to see ANYTHING!"

"That's our exit cue," said Bender. "Quickly now, follow me! Walk this way."

Demo and the others followed, adopting the characteristic walk of the British secret service agent.

The Nasties glared sullenly at them.

Bender had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 57: PICKARDS OF THE GODS

The Phoenicians, meanwhile, kept up their attack. Around and around they went, faster and faster, yelling like demons and kicking up huge clouds of dust.

"We're doomed!" said Brubaker, the complainer.

"Thank you for that uplifting thought," said Hank.

"So it's true!" said Brubaker. "We really are doomed! We came all this way to be slaughtered! We could have stayed in Ur of the Chaldees and been slaughtered in the comfort of our own homes."

"It wasn't Ur of the CHALDEES; it was just Ur," said Hank.

"Okay, okay, we could have stayed home and been slaughtered in Just Ur, where everyone knows us."

"Nag, nag, nag!" said Odd Camel. "Have a little faith, baby; the Supreme Being will take care of us."

"Listen, Odd Camel; we're SUPPOSED to complain," said Brubaker. "We're SUPPOSED to be bitter and backsliding. That's what we do. We're gifted fact gatherers and intellectuals burdened by the excessive weight of the camel condition."

"Which part of that do you fit, Brubaker?" said Hank. "I don't see any intellectuals here. What I see is a tribe of whiners and backsliders."

Just then, Shining Harry, a fervent camel yelled, "Look, look! See, see! The Phoenicians have been struck down by an invisible force. They're all falling down and moaning. The Supreme Being smote them. I told you he would!"

Suddenly one of the Phoenicians groaned while falling down.

Now everyone noticed that ALL of the Phoenicians were in fact, falling down.

"I told you so!" said Shining Harry. "The Supreme Being smote them."

"It's a trick," said Brubaker. "They're trying to lure us into a trap by dying. If we go anywhere near them, we'll get horrible diseases."

"It's not a trap!" yelled Shining Harry. "It's a real, genuine, guaranteed plague! The Supreme Being sent a plague! He's smiting them, just like it says in the THE EGYPTIAN BOOK OF THE DEAD."

"I'm sure you mean THE GREAT BIG BOOK OF THINGS TO SEE AND DO," said Hank. "THE EGYPTIAN BOOK OF THE DEAD is the wrong script. It's about a tour group that takes people into the underworld to be torn to pieces by Anubis and fed to the alligators"

"Crocodiles," said a young camel by the name of Gamer.

"Huh?" said Hank.

"Egyptians have crocodiles," said Gamer. "Alligators live in Florida, with the Mouse."

"Whatever," said Hank irritably.

No one likes to be corrected by young people.

Video games, by the way, did not exist in their current form in ancient Babylon, or in any region bordering ancient Babylon. What the young camel was playing was a beta version.

"We don't know beans about the Egyptian Book of the Dead," said Brubaker. "We're from Ur. We don't have much contact with the Egyptians. Not in this era."

"Of course we do!" said Hank. "There are caravans crisscrossing the desert from Mesopotamia to Egypt all the time."

"Go on!" said Shining Harry.

"It's true!" said Hank. "All you have to do is look at the archaeological sites. Those guys dig up trade goods all the time."

"Broken trade goods," said Brubaker.

"Broken, shmoken," said Hank. "If you find Egyptian faience work in a Sumerian grave,

you know they traded. If you find old Radio shack model 100's in a Memphis grave, you know the Egyptians traded with the Pilgrim fathers across the Atlantic Ocean."

"Did you guys know that the Pilgrim fathers were actually aliens?" said Richard Fingers, an ex-Egyptian pharaoh and mathematician. "The notes and diaries we have from them are all written in a peculiar, alien handwriting. They had secret information about who really built the pyramids and what we're supposed to do with them, but they encrypted it in a special mathematical code. I've been trying different combinations--"

"Who invited THIS guy?" said Brubaker.

"I'm writing a sensational book about a flock of aliens who came down in Pickard Trilobites and instructed our forefathers in the art of building cities and writing software," said Fingers.

"What about our foremothers?" said Sari.

In case you've forgotten, Sari was Hank's wife. Her real name was Sarah, but there was so much confusion with Sarai, she spelled her name a different way.

Now there are philologists who claim she came from the Indus Valley, where her grandfather owned a sari factory.

Other archaeologists pointed out that saris hadn't been invented at that time. There WAS something similar, but it was called an Indo-European fashion accessory.

There was a war between rival archaeologists, of course; there's always a war; it helps to reduce surplus academics.

"Anyway," said a priest, "Our foremothers were too busy looking after the children to confer with aliens and invent civilization."

There was a silence, then a lot of noise, then a scream.

One of the last Phoenicians to fall down said, "Behold, the god Dibs is smiting our camel enemies, using as his instrument several female camels. Truly Dibs is kind to our gross national product."

Then the observant Phoenician fell down with his compatriots.

A tribe of vultures gloated for awhile before dropping down for a feast.

Brubaker, who had been watching them closely, saw his chance.

"About the Phoenicians," he said. "They're all dead. Can we go home now, before they spread a nasty disease."

"Relax, baby," said Odd Camel. "It's not the plague. The Phoenicians just got dizzy from running around and around."

Everybody looked at Odd Camel.

"How come you knew?" they said.

Odd Camel grinned. "Have a little faith, baby," he said.

"If you say that again, I'm going to kill you," said Brubaker. "Let's leave this place."

"I'm getting a headache," said Hank.

"You always use that excuse," said Sari.

"What do we do about the Phoenicians?" said Brubaker. "They're all getting up now. When they find out they aren't dead, they'll kill us."

"Negative waves," said Odd Camel. "Have a little--"

"Watch it!" said Brubaker, brandishing an axe. "Remember what I said about the consequences of repeating a certain phrase."

"Behold, the Supreme Being speaks through the simple among us," said Hank. "The least shall be strong in faith."

"Who are you calling the least?" said Odd Camel. "That's mean! What did I ever do to you?"

The priests, meanwhile, were growing angry. "You think the Supreme Being speaks through this idiot?" they said.

"Behold," said Thunderbags, the chief priest. "Odd Camel is still carrying the pet rock of Marvin and the shaft of recurrent pleasure, which is a symbol of the fertility rites."

Hank sighed wearily and put his hands on Odd Camel's pet rock.

"By the power invested in me as reluctant ancestor of multitudes who will be hated and slaughtered, I pronounce these items null and void. They are no longer symbols of Marvin; they are merely artifacts left over from the Big Bang. They have been shaped by those among us who have opposable thumbs into puzzle pieces for the entertainment of archaeologists, but they have no intrinsic spiritual merit, and symbolize no divinity. I therefore cast them aside in the name of the Supreme Being."

Hank tossed the pet rock and the shaft of recurrent pleasure into the air.

Not having reached escape velocity, they soon plummeted back to the sand, landing among the Phoenicians.

The Phoenicians, troubled by these mysterious falling objects, beheld them nervously.

"A sign from Dibs!" they said.

"I don't think so," said a skeptic. "That looks like a pet rock."

"What about this shaft?"

"It's definitely phallic. Probably has something to do with fertility rites. Late Akkadian, I'd say. Circa 2000 B.C.E."

"I wonder what it means? Are we supposed to rush home and have fertility rites now?"

"We did that last year."

"I wonder if Dibs wants us to do it more than once a year."

"Twice a year, maybe?"

"Twice a year! When would we have time for trading? Our whole economy would come crashing down. Besides, if you engage in too many fertility rites, you go blind."

"The women are always saying we should do it more than once a year."

"That's just like a woman! They're never satisfied. Egads! Twice a year! I'm worn out just thinking about it!"

"Still, it's a sign, isn't it! I mean, if that's what Dibs wants, that's what we'll have to do."

"Twice a year! I'm going to have start eating lots of oysters."

"What have oysters got to do with it?"

"They make you potent. Haven't you read James Joyce?"

"Where do we get oysters? This is a waterless desert."

"We go back home. We eat lots of oysters. We tell the women Dibs wants us to do it twice a year."

"I wonder if they'll be happy."

"In some cases, I think."

And so, the Phoenicians picked themselves up and wended their weary way over the lea.

First, of course, they turned to face the camels and banged their swords against their shields to show their respect for a brave enemy.

Then they ate lots of oysters.

Some archaeologists claim that the strain of doing it twice a year is what wrecked the Phoenician empire. They neglected trade and exhausted themselves.

Other archaeologists say that globalization wrecked them. Their sailors couldn't compete with the Americans, who had invested in new technology, thereby improving productivity.

The Camels of the Negev, meanwhile, entered the land of the Canaanites.

The Canaanites organized a cheery welcome party with lots of heavily armed soldiers, attack beasts, and angry priests.

"Welcome," they said. "You're just in time for the sacrifice."

Hank eyed the heavily-armed Canaanites.

"I have a question, sir," said Brubaker. "Are they going to slaughter us first and then sacrifice us, or are they going to sacrifice us first, and then slaughter us?"

"Have a little faith, baby!" said Odd Camel. "The Canaanites are beautiful people!"

Everyone looked at Odd Camel.

Then Brubaker grinned.

"I think Odd Camel is right," he said in a honeyed voice. "The Canaanites are beautiful people. They love all strangers."

"Right on, Brubaker," said Odd Camel. "I've got a nice flower for you!"

"What we need is an ambassador," said Brubaker. "Someone who would go to the Canaanites and tell them that the Supreme Being said he was giving all of this land to us and they should leave."

"Hmm," said Hank. "It just might work."

"I wonder who would make a good ambassador," said Brubaker.

Everyone looked at Odd Camel again.

A beatific smile spread across Odd Camel's face.

"You want someone to spread a little peace and good will?" he said. "You came to the right place."

Hank gave Odd Camel a seal with a picture of a canard on it, symbolizing lost causes.

Odd Camel shambled towards the waiting Canaanites.

Hank and the others hid behind some rocks and plugged their ears, in case the screams were really loud.

Moments later, a huge Canaanite stepped forward to confront Odd Camel.

"Ho!" said Odd Camel. "Me Odd Camel. Want Peace and Love. Bring gifts from Camels of Negev."

"How do you do?" said the big Canaanite. "My name is Bruce the Disemboweler. I like to open camels up and remove their squishy internal parts."

"Everybody should have a hobby, baby," said Odd Camel.

Bruce walked all around Odd Camel, inspecting him.

"I'm looking for a zipper or some buttons," he said. "You don't seem to have any. I'll have to make my own opening. It's a lot of extra work."

"Hey, I'm sorry," said Odd Camel.

"Oh, it's okay. I don't mind really. I could use a good workout."

Bruce called a time out while he consulted with his caddy about which implements to use, fingering his scalpel, the big scissors from China, and the Acme explosive pencil sharpener.

All of the Canaanites gathered around to admire his new set of instruments.

Hank, meanwhile, disguising himself as a rock, went out and led Odd Camel away.

Then he led his tribe to a convenient cave.

"We'll hide here until they find out we're gone," he said. "Then, when they're scratching their heads trying to figure out how we did it, we'll rush them with a sales contract and force them to sign."

"Sounds good to me," said Shining Harry.

"Do we have to go into that cave?" said Brubaker.

"What are those things hanging down from the ceiling?" said Shining Harry.

"Lawn ornaments," said Brubaker.

"Alien larva," said Kipper. "That's how they raise their young. They hang them upside down in caves."

"That alien larva has wings," said Brubaker. "I don't like the look of this."

"Those aren't lawn ornaments; they're vampire bats," said Sari.

"There aren't any bats in the waterless desert," said Hank. "There's nothing to eat. What would they eat?"

There was a silence.

"They wait for camels to come into their cave, then they eat them," said Brubaker.

Sari had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 58: SPIDER CAMEL

You might be wondering if anyone ever opposed Hank. I mean, REALLY opposed him, with sharp, pointy objects, or odd-looking potions with a hint of agony.

That's the sort of opposition that goes beyond mere backsliding and grumbling, and shades into academic rivalry, or arguments over who gets the remote.

Would anyone dare stand up to Hank in this manner?

Of course.

There were priests who hated him for various reasons.

Shocking, isn't it!

Priests are so crammed with love for their fellow camels and ducks, they glow in the dark. They're bastions of the numinous, guardians of our spiritual heritage; experienced guides willing to conduct us through the dark portals that stand between this world and the next like the gaping maw of a platypus.

A few of them were hoping to conduct HANK through the dark portals. These ambitious priests thought of themselves as his equals.

Unfortunately the Supreme Being hadn't come to any of THEM with his plan for a long and tedious trek to the land of milk and honey, slaughter and famine.

The Supreme Being had gone directly to Hank.

When the Supreme Being chats with you on MSN, or by any other means, it confers a certain advantage on you. It's like getting the ultimate card in MAGIC, THE GATHERING. No one can ever beat it, so you win every game.

After awhile, of course, you lose interest in the game; it becomes boring.

Long before you lose interest however, the other players come to loathe the sight of you.

It wasn't quite as bad as that for Hank, but there were certain priests who wanted to dispose of him.

Actually, quite a few people found Hank a bit difficult. He was that sort of person. He never wanted to wash the dishes or help with the tent cleaning, for instance. And he was a killjoy at parties, always frowning with displeasure at the fertility rites, or sneaking off to take dictation from the Supreme Being.

I mean, we all respect the Supreme Being, but sometimes you need a bit of a break from serious and profound doctrinal matters. Sometimes you need SESAME STREET.

So there you have it; famous people are important, but they can be a pain to live with.

Even the children were unhappy.

Hank loved the children, of course, but he had too many demands on his time.

Whenever it was his turn to read bedtime theological stories to the children, he begged off, saying he had more important things to do.

These more important things included yet more chats with the Supreme Being, taking notes on dietary laws and punishments, and telling everyone else what to do.

Anyway, most of the rebellious priests concealed their anger. Who wants to take on the Supreme Being?

But there was one priest, a thin, scowling stick of nettles by the name of Malicious who was so consumed by loathing, he could no longer dissimulate.

For a long time now, Malicious had been trying to convince the other priests to join him in a rebellion.

"Listen," he would whisper, "We had it good in Just Ur. We were part of the big picture. The Marvinites tolerated our god as long as we gave stuff at the sacrifices to Marvin. Big deal. We had plenty left over for our own rites. What have we got now? Centipedes, scorpions, flesh-eating spiders, and telemarketers."

"Why are you whispering?" the other priests would say. And, "Our people were backsliding. They were really getting into this Marvin worship business, and they couldn't wait for the fertility rites!"

"Our people are always backsliding," said Malicious. "That's what they do. Our job is to punish them. That's why we have whips, chains, and black leather."

"Ummm--"

"Don't criticize if you've never tried it."

In fact, only a tiny minority of the priests of the Camels of the Negev had tried these devices, usually on themselves.

"Just experimenting to find out if they're dangerous," was the usual line.

Anyway, we had to do something," said Loyal Jowls, a minor priest. "We were losing our people to the Marvinites. Hank saved us from all that."

"Did he?" said Malicious. "I wonder what's in it for Hank. I wonder what he's getting out of this?"

"Starvation?"

"Blisters?"

"Montezuma's revenge?"

Malicious jumped up and down and foamed at the mouth.

This was a very effective ploy. All of the other priests stopped talking and waited to find out if there was a demon inside him.

In those days, priests believed that demons were just like us, only they had special powers. If you took ordinary people aside and conferred special powers on them, using something like kryptonite or magic broccoli, they'd behave like demons.

Anyway, this is the story of Malicious's rebellion and wrath, and of how he tried to assassinate Hank.

The other priests were afraid of Malicious because he yelled a lot, foamed at the mouth, kept a rubber duckie in his pocket, had a shiny forehead and shouted everyone down.

This doesn't go over very well at parties, but it works nicely at committee meetings. If you shout your opposition down, you can write your own agenda.

Malicious knew he could control many of the other priests and take over the Camels of the Negev, if only Hank disappeared.

Hank couldn't be intimidated. He wasn't afraid of Malicious at all; he just looked at him with his transfinite gaze.

You get this special gaze when you've been selected by the supreme being for a chat session. It's a little like the hundred yard gaze of a shell-shocked warrior, only it's more positive.

One night, Malicious sent out his acolyte, Nugg, to collect and assemble weapons of destruction.

"I want you to go out into the dark, cold desert and collect a dozen large, economy size flesh-eating spiders," he said quietly. "Put them in a secure receptacle, NOT in a bunch of shards from an archaeological site, and bring them to me."

Nugg was terrified.

Nugg had two emotions in his mental library: terror of his master, and love of his master. They often inflicted themselves on him simultaneously.

Nugg had learned to deal with this confusing state by doing exactly what his master told him to do at all times.

Thus it was, he ventured out into the dark, cold desert with a collecting pot and a butterfly net. He didn't need bait; HE was the bait. He had only to sit down on a rock and whimper.

It took about five minutes of whimpering and terror.

This was followed by a sudden, fiery pain in the buttocks.

A spider had taken the bait. A whopper, judging by the intensity of the pain.

Grasping the flesh-eating spider gently with his fingers, Nugg pulled it away from the crater in his flesh and dropped it into the collecting pot.

The wound, of course, attracted more flesh-eating spiders. They're a lot like sharks or telemarketers, after all. When they smell blood or a dial tone, they go into a frenzy.

When Nugg had collected a dozen flesh-eating spiders, he bandaged himself as best he could, applied flesh-eating spider repellent, and staggered back to his master's tent.

The desert, as you can see, is no place for civilized creatures.

"Good boy!" said Malicious, handing him a camel treat.

Then he clucked his tongue as he examined the malevolent creatures inside the collecting pot.

If you've never seen an enraged flesh-eating spider, you don't know what you're missing!

Malicious was so happy, his bones cracked. He couldn't wait to put his plan into effect.

"Rested?" he said to Nugg. "Good, good! I want you to put these spiders into my special, trick pot of beard perfume. The pot, of course, goes on Hank's night table, beside his copy of WHAT TO DO AFTER YOU'VE BEEN STRUCK BY LIGHTNING."

Nugg tried to shrink into a small, invisible space, but Malicious, wise to the tricks of his unreliable acolyte, caught him by the scruff of the neck and threatened to turn him inside out.

"I haven't finished gloating over my plan," he said. "When Hank opens the pot of beard perfume, the spiders will leap out and consume him in a feeding frenzy. In the morning, I, of course will be the first to discover him, and I will run out shrieking, 'It is exactly as my dream foretold; the supreme being smote Hank because we were supposed to stay in Just Ur and modify the fertility rites to incorporate more pain.'"

Nugg nodded. It was all he could do for a moment, because he was exhausted from loss of blood, and his wounds hurt.

Then Malicious picked up the trick pot of beard perfume and motioned to Nugg to pour in the assembled flesh-eating spiders.

"Go ahead!" he said, in case Nugg didn't understand hand motions. "Dump them in! What are you waiting for?"

Nugg hesitated, a desperate look on his face. There was something wrong with this picture! He wanted to warn his master, but the trouble was, his master never listened to anyone and hated being corrected.

Besides, anything that didn't work out exactly as master wished was Nugg's fault.

"What are you waiting for, Nugg?"

Nugg tried to point to the problem, but the look in master's eyes was very dangerous indeed.

Then he shrugged, emptied the spiders into the trick pot, and stepped back with amazing speed.

Malicious set the trick pot down on Hank's night table and gloated over it. Then he withdrew to the tent flap and backed out, into the terrifying darkness of the desert.

Sometimes you have to choose between two terrifying things. Kierkegaard warned us about this in his treatise, LOOK BEFORE YOU LEAP. This, of course is the famous treatise that begins with the line, "He who hesitates is lost--"

Malicious didn't notice Nugg's dark night of the soul; he was transfixed by the trick pot, savoring a number of terrifying scenarios involving Hank and the spiders.

Meanwhile, the spiders had discovered something interesting about the trick pot.

There was an opening in the side.

It was supposed to be closed, but the little latching mechanism was broken.

Ancient spring and latch mechanisms, unlike modern mechanisms, were deficient sometimes. Early crafts people had not perfected the idea of the fail-safe device to lull their customers into a false sense of security.

The spiders didn't waste any time pondering the reason why; they just leaped through the hole into the folds of Malicious' robe, distributing themselves silently and stealthily for a coordinated attack.

Then, at a signal from Rage, their leader, they bit.

The screams were deafening.

Hank broke off in the middle of an episode of fear and trembling in the desert and made a run for the tents, expecting to find Malicious experimenting with yet another variation of the painful brand of fertility rites he seemed to prefer.

No one else followed him because Malicious, though feared and almost respected, was not loved.

Hank's extended family were visiting relatives in the Miami tent, and assumed the screaming was just someone losing at canasta.

Hank, who was still groggy after asking the supreme being for tech support, burst into the tent with a thundering denunciation on his lips. There he found some bones, some bits of sinew and hair, and a lot of flesh-eating spiders sleeping off their feast.

"Egads!" said Hank. "That used to be Malicious!"

Thunderbags, who had often chafed at the presumptuousness of his junior officer, tried to conceal his joy.

"This is good," he said elatedly. Then, with a visible effort at self control, he said, "I mean, we have been warned. It is good that Malicious sacrificed himself to warn us. The supreme being has clearly shown us that if we argue with Hank of Ur, we will be eaten by flesh-eating spiders."

Everyone nodded vigorously.

The camels, like many others, tend to be a little less respectful than they should of a god who treats them nicely. Give them a little terror and agony, however, and they will stick to their god like glue, never backsliding, never wandering off to the fertility rites.

It's hard work being a god, and there's a lot more to it than people realize.

Anyway, this brings up an interesting point.

What happens when someone dies in Tockworld?

If you're waiting for some weirdo in a suit of bones to enter stage left and wave a scythe around, forget it!

This is serious business.

Death's name is Grimsy. It used to be just Grim, but he changed it to Grimsy to make it seem less threatening.

He has an office that features big panels with a lot of tiny LED's. Green LED's signify health points, yellow LED's warn Grimsy to pack his lunch and get ready to rock 'n' roll, and red LED's accuse him of being tardy.

He has a little white truck with chimes and a sign that says, 'Ice Cream'. The ice cream was his own idea; he thought it would make things easier for people if they had a yummy ice cream cone before embarking on Charming's Ferry to the Underworld.

In keeping with the charade, he wears a white linen suit and a white apron with a picture of a black rubber duckie.

Hank spotted him when he showed up and parked his truck.

No one else did, of course, although some of the camels sensed a certain cold draft that made them shiver and scurry back to the warmth and illusion of their family tents.

Hank was special, his senses permanently altered by his encounters with the supreme being.

The little chime tinkled eerily. It was an odd version of 'How Much is That Doggie in the Window?'

Grimsy looked at Hank with interest, then checked his manifest.

It was a digital manifest, by the way. The software is available for download, but you have to register it right away or it deletes you.

"It's not your time," Grimsy said.

"Are you sure?" said Hank. "I'm getting a little tired, actually."

Hank had learned not to trouble himself with too much thinking when confronted with evidence of a world beyond this one. It was a protective device; it had evolutionary value.

Grimsy strode into Hank's tent and looked at the mess on the floor. The spiders eyed him warily.

"Hmmm," said Grimsy.

A small, angry being had made a pile of scraps and was trying to hide under them.

This was Malicious's soul.

It had once been much larger, but Malicious had worked assiduously while still physically intact to make it smaller.

Souls are troublesome things that interfere with politics, self-righteousness, and the proper functioning of the appetites. Many people try to shrink them to a manageable size so they can get on with their lives.

Malicious had done an excellent job. His soul resembled his previous form in nearly every aspect, but it was about the size of a poodle.

"I have work to do," Malicious said in a small, squeaky voice.

"There, there!" said Grimsy. "Come and have a nice ice cream cone. I've got thirteen flavors."

Malicious kicked his corpse.

"I don't WANT an ice cream cone," he said.

Grimsy was an expert. Before Malicious knew what was happening, he was in the back of the truck, a licorice ice cream cone in his hand.

Grimsy rolled down his window and winked at Hank.

"Hey, what about me!" Hank said. "I'm old; I'm tired; my wife doesn't understand me. Take me with you."

"Patience, patience," said Grimsy. "Your time will come. I'm afraid I'll need a bigger truck to transport YOUR soul."

Then he drove to Yorkville in Toronto, where he handed Malicious over to Charming, the ferrywoman.

Charming had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 59: CERBERUS THE WIENER DOG

Charming, the ferrywoman, is an athletic creature, built like an attractive bulldog.

That's because she IS a bulldog.

Ferrywomen have to be tough, steadfast, strong and courageous, like Winston Churchill. That's because there are so many interesting things in the River Glutinous.

The River Glutinous, as you know, flows beneath Toronto on its way to the Underworld. Shrouded in eerie fog, it is lined by creepy billboards, and chock-full of predatory advertising executives, ready to leap out and snatch away a transiting soul.

All of these special treats lay before Malicious when Grimsy dumped his soul into the ferryboat.

Malicious sat up as Charming signed the manifest.

He had grown even smaller now, like Alice on mushrooms.

Malicious hated being small. It wasn't a good fashion statement. He desperately wanted to be imposing and powerful, with a penetrating voice like James Earl Jones.

"There's been a mistake," he said. "The Supreme Being will correct it very soon by smiting those who persist in error."

Charming, who was tenacious and growly, but not unkind, said, "A word of advice. Disser is a crabby god. Don't mention the Supreme Being in his presence. Disser is not happy with his occupation. The other gods get to cavort with victorious heroes, comic book artists and chocolate makers. Disser gets psychopaths and spammers, and they're usually in poor shape when they arrive."

In case you're wondering about the ferry station, it looks a bit like Toronto's Union Station, only it's underground. It's not listed in Fodor's guide, but you can visit it if you like.

Start by going down the steps in the Yorkville subway station. When you come to the turnstiles, however, cut sharply to the right. You'll see a little door off to one side, behind a homeless person who looks remarkably like a heap of newspapers and food scraps bound together by a dense miasma of wretchedness and despair.

This is Jerry, an effective deterrent to curiosity seekers who might otherwise be

intrigued by a door with a sign that says: Danger, Keep Out.

Subway patrons can't see Jerry. Nor can they see the door, which is guilty of poverty by association with Jerry.

Poverty, as you know, is invisible.

Billboards assault you the moment you pass through the mysterious doorway into the Underworld.

This is the Not-Quite-the-Underworld actually. It's the resting ground for the indecisive--those who could not make decisions because something better might come along, or more often, SOMEONE better might come along.

The River Glutinous flows sluggishly through this wasteland. Indeterminate souls gather like mist whenever the ferry passes, clutching at the souls onboard.

They are neither good enough for Valhalla nor wretched enough for the Underworld.

Malicious was horrified. Silvery tendrils of mist reached out for him. Voices cried out plaintively.

"I tried to keep up my yoga classes, but I had the wrong instructor--"

"The Promised Land was ruined a long time ago when it became popular; now it's like 'The Flintstones do the Sacred Places'--"

"I can't believe it!" squeaked Malicious. "THIS is what descended from our fierce nomadic tribes?"

Charming took pity on Malicious, who shrank from contact with the wretched souls of the eternally indecisive.

"Those are indeterminate souls," she said. "Neither one thing nor another. Don't be afraid of them; they have no more substance than wisps of vapor. YOU, on the other hand, have the density of evil. When they touch you, they burn."

Malicious felt something insubstantial reach out for him, but even as he flinched, it crackled and burned in ethereal flames.

He felt better now. Carnage was something he understood; it was real.

They passed an old man sitting on the bank, his face shadowy beneath the brim of a fishing hat. His split bamboo rod hovered over the gloomy water. He was eating cucumber sandwiches from a wicker basket, and drinking tea from a flask that was labeled TEA.

A sign propped up by a fallen tree trunk said, "What Goes Around, Comes Around. Tiresias, Inc. Fishing Tackle, Bait, Foreknowledge, Bedtime Stories. "

"The Greeks think they invented mythology," grumbled Malicious. "I could teach them a thing or two."

"I'm sure you could," said Charming.

They ghosted silently past a dead tree, beneath which, two tramps harangued each other while a man with a whip looked on.

Beyond these, they came to a flotilla of BMW's drifting downstream. Vaporous forms in power suits reached through open windows, pleading for help.

Charming contemplated the dejected Malicious.

"Don't worry about the lost souls you see here," she said. "They can leave any time. They can board the ferry, or they can take Jake's escalator to Valhalla. All it takes is a simple effort of will. They'll manage it eventually; they always do."

Malicious brightened for a moment. "That's where I belong!" he said "Valhalla."

"Is it?"

Malicious squirmed under Charming's unblinking gaze.

"Deception is impossible here," said Charming. "The software has been deleted."

"But I'm REAL! I always have been. These people are just illusions."

"Hmmm," said Charming. "We wouldn't be afraid, would we, little fellow?"

Malicious couldn't bring himself to admit it, but his silence was all the answer Charming needed.

"Afraid of the poor souls crying out for help, are we?"

"Of course not."

"Afraid of the Underworld?"

"Never!"

Charming eyed him closely. "Of what, then?" she said.

There was a long and painful silence, interrupted only by the ripple of water, the cries of indeterminate souls, the sound of bagpipes along the shore, and the bloodcurdling yells of outraged theologians.

"You won't get anywhere until you admit it to yourself," said Charming. "What are you afraid of?"

Malicious felt something acrid and smoking hot rise in his ethereal gorge. He clamped down his jaws, trying to hold it back, but his mouth filled with scorching lava.

"I'm afraid of MYSELF!!" he hissed. "I know what I am!"

"Good!" Charming said mildly. "You're catching on. You'll do fine in the Underworld. It's a learning experience. Unfortunately, you don't get to cut classes or download pre-owned essays. You can't increase your marks by crying in front of the teacher or claiming the devil made you do it, or that you were drunk or, were cursed with bad genes over which you have no control. The only release is self-knowledge. Think of it as an error-correcting algorithm."

"How do you know so much?" Malicious asked suspiciously. "Do you spend a lot of time there?"

"I helped design the software."

"How come you got stuck with this job?"

"It takes a steadfast and tenacious being to endure the sight of so much misery and despair. Grimsy doesn't see it; he just sees the shocked and dazed souls who haven't had time to worry."

"But it's not that bad! I don't feel a thing!"

"No? Look at yourself."

Charming held up a pocket mirror.

Malicious looked nervously into it, half-afraid he didn't exist anymore. In fact, what he saw there was a small, tattered entity, pockmarked with holes.

"What's wrong with me? Am I rotting?"

"This is the outward aspect of your being, a suit you forged patiently and methodically with every choice you made. There is no dissimulation here; no masque."

Malicious shivered; he was beginning to understand the true nature of his predicament, and he didn't like it.

"But I wanted to save the camels from backsliding and incorrect thinking," he said. "If I punished them, it was for their own good. It hurt me more than it hurt them."

"Did it?" said Charming. "Who appointed you?"

Charming looked away from that implacable gaze. A certain, habitual part of his mind foraged busily among the heaped detritus of a lifetime, searching for reasons. Old, familiar arguments raved and screamed in the temple of his awareness like a chorus of ethereal priests goading their followers to attack the infidels.

"Renounce them!" they shouted. "Cast out the evil ones! Show no mercy! Behead them! Burn them! Stone them! Show them how much you love the Supreme Being!"

"Hurts, doesn't it!" said Charming.

Malicious withdrew into a prickly shell.

"How would you know?" he muttered.

"A god knows," said Charming. "A god experiences through mortals. Without mortals, there is only Platonism. How would you like to spend eternity contemplating a triangle or a square?"

Malicious cared nothing for the problems of gods. He was too busy thinking about his own problems.

"Can I have another peek?" he asked.

Charming showed him the mirror again and Malicious peered anxiously at it, wincing at what he saw there.

"I look like a sail that's been ripped to shreds by a storm," he said.

"A storm of your own making," said Charming.

It was unbearable! Malicious had always wanted to impose his will on people, telling them exactly what to do, but who would listen to a torn sheet? He turned away in horror and gave himself up to despair and sulking.

The ferry, meanwhile, took the opportunity to turn into a Venetian gondola.

Venice arose around them in all of its glory.

Malicious found it difficult to keep up his gloom and despair with so many interesting things happening around him.

"What is this?" he squeaked.

"Early Renaissance Venice," said Charming. "Before pizza."

"We're back in the world again?"

"I'm afraid not. This is the real Venice. The one back there, in the world, is just an outward manifestation, forged in the souls of those who abide within its walls. I thought you might like a change of scenery."

"You're responsible for this?"

"It's a job perk. I can change the scenery whenever I like."

A voice reached them across the water. It was a strong voice, a Venetian voice modulated by an acquired Scottish accent.

Charming pointed to some figures in wet suits on the edge of a drowned piazza.

"That's Giseppe Macklino," she said. "He's trying to sell his drowned piazza to a bunch of Scottish elementary school teachers. They're suspicious, of course."

Giseppe, unlike the wispy indeterminate souls floating over the River Glutinous, burned brightly in the mist.

The Scottish elementary teachers were heavily armored against death in their tweed jackets, sensible shoes, and bunches of dried haggis hanging from their belts like garlic.

"All the best Venetians live under water," Giseppe was saying. "It's very trendy. The dripping walls are picturesque."

"We Scots are not unworldly, you know," said one of the teachers. "You can't have dripping walls under water. Walls only drip when they're ABOVE the water."

Giseppe produced a small, foot-operated pump.

"That's what this pump is for," he said. "When you want to see the walls dripping, you pump out some of the water."

"That's anachronistic," said Malicious. "It hasn't happened yet."

"Everything is anachronistic," said Charming. "Time is personal, like a wart. Everyone carries their own time within the mysterious folds and crevices of their larger being."

"I do? If I carry around my own time, how come I grew old and crabby? I was much happier when I was young and crabby."

"Unfortunately, personal versions of time are influenced by each other in a peer-to-peer network, like an online game controlled by idiots. Eventually, one poor fool will open his eyes and discover the truth. He'll tell someone else, and the whole illusion will be exposed in a chain reaction. Then, of course, it will all vanish."

Malicious shuddered. "So none of it is real? It's all an illusion, and everyone influences it?"

"Emotion anchors it. Learn to treat other people kindly and with respect, and you'll never have to worry about the scenery disappearing."

Malicious tried to think about this, but his mind drew a blank.

"Tsk, tsks," said Charming. "I'm afraid you're going to have spend quite a bit of time in the Underworld, learning how to exist in a meaningful way."

Malicious withdrew into his prickly silence again.

The gondola floated past an array of typical renaissance signs:

FOR A SMOOTH,
CLOSE SHAVE,

GET BURMA SHAVE.

There was another one that said, PURINA CHOWS, and a nice one that showed a squid holding a lot of cigarettes. YOU CAN SMOKE AS MUCH AS YOU LIKE IN THE UNDERWORLD, it said.

Malicious was still trying to figure out what shaving was, when the gondola stopped at the obsidian gates to the Underworld proper.

Cerberus the wiener dog eyed them speculatively.

Charming helped Malicious out of the gondola and introduced them.

"How do you do," said Cerberus. "Nice to meet you.

"Nice to meet YOU," said Malicious, shaking hands with the famous dog. "Are you really the guardian of the Underworld?"

"Cerberus has an important job," said Charming. "He makes sure the Underworld doesn't vanish. As long as he watches it with at least one set of eyes, it continues to exist."

Cerberus smiled.

Charming gave him a doggy treat and he wagged his tail.

Disser had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 60: THE RIDE OF EMPATHY

You might be wondering how a radical priest like Malicious could possibly bring himself to shake hands with people and indulge in the little social graces that make civilizations possible

There's a complicated explanation for this.

In the first place, Cerberus the wiener dog isn't PEOPLE; he's a celebrity.

Radical priests are always polite to celebrities, on the off chance they could win an endorsement. One premium-quality celebrity in your fold is worth a million garden-variety believers.

I know, I know! Certified religions are supposed to incorporate the principle of equality among worshippers. Whoever you are, whatever your rank on Tockworld, you get the same nine square feet of fleecy cloud in Valhalla, along with your choice of bagpipe or lute, and a white, ever-clean sheet.

It's not like that other Valhalla, the one associated with Earth, in which cartoon gods cheat on each other and gang up on mortals, and in which certain crabby priests get special seating.

No siree Bob!

In the second place, Malicious didn't mean to be polite; he was dissimulating. The very next thing he said proved the pudding was in the pot, or in the eating.

"Why don't you close all of your eyes at the same time just to see what would happen?" he said.

"I've thought about that," said Cerberus. "I do get tired of this ever-vigilant thing, you know! I'd like to fall asleep just once. I'd love to have dreams. Nightmares, even. You never get surprised by dreams when you're an ever-vigilant guardian; the most you can hope for is a bit of flatulence now and then, and what good is THAT? I mean, what kind of a life is it when the most exciting thing that happens to you is an unexpected fart?"

"Ahem!" said Charming.

Cerberus chose to ignore this.

"I'll tell you what life as an ever-vigilant guardian is like," he said. "It's BORING!"

"Ahem!" said Charming.

"That's a nasty cough you've got there, my dear," said Cerberus.

"Some of us here are NOT alive," Charming said through clenched teeth. "Some of us might take offense at this continual harping on the living."

"Oh," said Cerberus. "Yes, of course!" He put a paw on Malicious's shoulder. "Believe

me, you're better off dead, old chum. Living's not what it's cracked up to be. Think of all the tax money you'll save as a life-challenged person! And you can still collect social insurance and unemployment checks from the government of your choice. Lots of dead people do. They use them to buy lottery tickets."

"I'm not dead," said Malicious. "The Supreme Being just THINKS I'm dead."

"I see," said Cerberus moving a little distance away and gazing anxiously up into the gloom. One never knew how the Supreme Being was going to react to a joke."

"So why don't you shut your eyes?" said Malicious. "What have you got to lose? If the Underworld disappears, you walk away and find something else to do. You could be an elevator operator in a ziggurat. Or you could become an associate member of the Camels of the Negev."

"I'm afraid I'm not a camel, old chap. Something to do with humps I believe, and the lack thereof."

"We accept the occasional cayman; why not a wiener dog?" said Malicious. "Close your eyes and walk away. I'll submit your name to the membership committee. You'll LIKE being a camel. You get to play Trivial Pursuit as often as you want. And you can tour the Land of Milk and Honey with fully qualified guides."

"It's tempting," said Cerberus, "But I'm afraid it's out of the question. Observation is a double-edged sword, you see. The Underworld depends on me. but I depend on the Underworld. if I slack off and it vanishes, I vanish too."

"Blasphemy!" said Malicious. "That's the Bishop of Cloyne's apostasy, which he got from drinking too much tar water. It's worse than Freddy Manichean Heresy, and it's WRONG. The Supreme Being made you; only the Supreme Being can make you disappear."

"I wish it were true, old chum, but it isn't, you see. Any number of things can make you disappear. If you lose your job, for instance, you vanish without a trace. Old friends simply overlook you. Store clerks can't even hear you. The same effect occurs if you happen to grow old. Anyone who commits the indiscretion of reaching the age of forty, for instance, becomes a sort of negative image, like a temporary blank space in an airbrushed photograph. Graphic artists, as you know, have been warned by marketing people about too much reality."

"That's nonsense," said Malicious. "The Supreme Being wants us to be charitable to EVERYONE. I, myself, have frequently indulged in charity."

Cerberus shook his heads.

"I know about the charity YOU practiced," he said. "No thanks! Slaughters and beheadings. Dismembering people just because they wore the wrong colors. We don't do that sort of thing in the modern world."

"It's called tough love," said Malicious. "It helps people see the error of their ways and focus on the important things."

"I can do without it," said Cerberus. "Besides, I'm happy here. I have an important job, and I get lots of doggy treats. The more important your job, the more visible you are."

"That's an illusion."

"It's absolute truth. Look at me; I shine as brightly as a platypus twinkling in the sky. Have you ever come across anything more important than a wiener dog?"

"I can barely see you," said Malicious. "Maybe it would be easier if you were a wiener CAMEL. You'd certainly learn to distinguish between truth and apostasy. You'd learn that the Supreme Being doesn't play tricks. Everything depends on HIM, not on a wiener dog."

At these words, Charming began to glow like a bit of phosphorus burning on a pool of water. "What makes you think the Supreme Being is male?" she demanded.

"Life began with males," said Malicious. "In THE GREAT BIG BOOK OF THINGS THAT REALLY HAPPENED, chapter three, verse 1, it says, 'After SB appointed the stars in their courses, he purchased a large quantity of scenic material from George's Trains and made a camel, in HIS image--'"

"Wait a minute!" said Cerberus. "Everybody knows the Supreme Being is a wiener dog. If you were made in HIS image, how come you have those humps."

"The Supreme Being is a bulldog," said Charming, who had her own prejudices. "SHE made female bulldogs in HER image; then, with a bunch of leftover dirt and scrapings, she made male bulldogs to serve the females."

Malicious swelled up like an angry cayman.

"Blasphemy!" he hissed.

There was a silence; then Cerberus pointed at Malicious and said in a very small voice, "He's not with me."

A pre-Raphaelite goddess appeared in the guise of an armadillo and examined Malicious.

"The Supreme Being believes in rough drafts," she said. "The male of the species was the first draft. The female of the species was the final version. Honk if you agree."

The armadillo was as big as a cement truck.

Malicious honked.

"Good," said the goddess. "Have fun in the Underworld. I'll be watching to make sure your re-education is complete."

The goddess left. Malicious deflated with a hiss of escaping terror.

Charming patted him on the head.

"Good luck," she said. "You'll need it."

Then she went back to her gondola, which had taken the opportunity to turn into a hydrofoil.

"Bye, bye," she waved.

Malicious watched her don a flashy pair of goggles and start her engine. The hydrofoil rose up on a column of turbulent air and roared away, leaving a trail of phosphorescent telemarketers in its wake.

Ancient Venice tumbled into nothing. There was only black water, vapor, mist, and silvery souls, as tenuous as philosophy.

"I hate it when she does that," said Cerberus. "My ears won't stop ringing for a week, and I've got three sets of ears."

Then he tapped the obsidian gates of the Underworld with his staff. They began to creak open, trailing spider webs like cheap cardboard props in a low-budget horror movie.

Cerberus gave them a swift kick and they settled down.

"The last one through was a Hollywood director," he said. "He had a magic wand that turned reality into trademarked Latex. We had to confiscate it."

Malicious stood at the threshold, peering into a maelstrom of flashing lights and noise.

It was a carnival.

"They don't call it a theme park for nothing," said Cerberus.

Malicious hesitated.

"I don't approve of theme parks," he said. "We're not supposed to have fun. Life is serious business."

"Relax. SB authorized this. Besides, you're dead. You get to do things you never dreamed of before."

"Like what?"

"Ever seen a Road Runner cartoon?"

Malicious shook his head.

"Somebody took me to see a cartoon once, but I closed my eyes. It's blasphemy to depict living creatures. Besides, it was an anachronism, and the Supreme Being doesn't like anachronisms."

There was a slight sound. Malicious looked around for Cerberus, but he had vanished.

After a moment's delay, the gates closed, and they, too, vanished.

Malicious found himself alone in a crowd. He looked for another exit, but there was only the carnival around him; a never-ending array of rides, as far as the eye could see.

Here and there, a few people were scanning the new arrivals and holding up signs: Mister Jones, Miss Axel. Acme Tours....

Voices boomed over a PA system: "Mister Tom Zonderby from Atlanta; please report to the information desk. Miss Vanessa Warburton from Omaha, Nebraska, please report to gate three. Attention please; Flight 9762547 to Denver has been cancelled again--"

Malicious took a step, and suddenly he was in the midst of it.

Then at last, the ultimate horror.

He began to notice a low, persistent sound beneath the clatter of rickety machinery and the roar and throb of diesel engines. It was barely perceptible at first, but it grew steadily in his mind until it became more penetrating than the shrieks and groans of terrified patrons, until it reached the intensity of audible treacle oozing out of a well clotted with dormice.

It was the sound of Easy-Listening Rock Music.

Malicious put his hands up to his ears and screamed.

Then a tour guide appeared.

She wore a cute armadillo mask and simulated scales, but Malicious could tell she was human because her ears were plugged with white iPod earbuds, and she was humming along to the music.

"Hello," she said brightly. "My name is Bobbi Bixby, and I'm going to be your tour guide today. It's my job to help you with your re-education program. Shall we begin?"

Malicious was shocked.

"Where's Disser? Don't I at least get torn to pieces by the god of the Underworld? It's my right!"

"Oh he never, ever did that!" said Bobbi, shocked. "That was just an advertising ploy to attract more visitors. Disser never wanted this job, you know. He always wanted to be a talk show host, but the networks wouldn't take him because he fogs their cameras. It makes the advertisers nervous."

"How did you get this job?"

"I'm not here permanently; I'm just a student racking up community service hours so I can graduate."

Malicious sighed. It was going to be a long eternity.

"You start with the Ride of Empathy," said Bobbi. "It teaches you how to empathize with others by scaring the daylight out of you."

She led him to a complicated apparatus that looked a bit like a giant roller coaster built on the side of a volcano. There was a very long line.

"Do we have to wait in line?" said Malicious.

"That's part of your re-education," said Bobbi. "It teaches you patience and tolerance. Besides, as you get closer, you realize the true nature of the ride, and that makes you reach out for your fellow camels in terror."

Malicious sighed again as he stood in line.

"If I'd known I was going to die and go to the Underworld, I'd have brought something to read," he said.

Bobbi handed him a Palm Pilot.

"It's loaded with a very long novel," she said. "It's called, 'Biography of a Man Who Never Did Anything At All'. The first volume is about a birthday party his mom planned for him when he was Six. She made all the plans and then forgot about it, so it never happened. It's very exciting."

Malicious began reading.

It was written in the first person.

"Hello. My name is Jon Jonsson and I'll be your fictional character today. I had a boring time of it in the womb. I was quite busy of course; my cells were undergoing mitosis at a regular intervals and...."

Malicious sighed. He could hear people chatting in line.

"What did you do to deserve this?"

"I killed some people because they were using up oxygen. What about you?"

"I pushed my mother into a mill pond because she wanted me to stop playing DOOM."

"I got a job phoning people at dinner time and asking for money."

"I played the guitar and sang very badly at family gatherings."

"So this is my punishment?" said Malicious. "A scary ride?"

"I'm sorry?"

Bobbi frowned and removed her headphones. "Sorry; I was listening to the music."

"This is my punishment?" Malicious waved in the direction of the roller coaster.

"Oh no! That's the fun part! The only real punishment is self knowledge. It's in here, in the FODOR'S GUIDE TO THE UNDERWORLD." She showed him a well-thumbed paperback.

"Go on the exciting rides and thrill to the sudden awareness of mistakes you made in life.

Learn how you could have helped others, but didn't."

Malicious had reached the entrance.

A boy scout offered to help him across the street into a waiting roller-coaster car.

"But I don't want to cross the street," said Malicious.

"Yes you do, sir or madam."

The boy scout bundled the protesting Malicious across the street and into a car.

Bobbi waved as the boy scout strapped Malicious in.

"I'll be waiting at the exit," she said. "Enjoy!"

Malicious settled back. There was only one other passenger in the car, a terrified little hippopotamus, cowering in the back.

The car swayed and rocked as it inched its way up an impossibly high incline.

At the very top, it paused.

Malicious could see much, but not all of the Underworld spread out around him. The rides went on forever. An enormous figure in a black suit watched over everything from a hovering chopper.

It was the god Disser.

So Disser is the man in the black suit who controls the aliens! thought Malicious. That explains everything!

The hippopotamus whimpered.

"I didn't mean to take over a major corporation and fire everyone who worked for it," he whimpered. "Ayn Rand made me do it."

Malicious ignored this lame excuse and gazed at the track in front of them.

It seemed to go straight down into the mouth of a volcano.

There was a certain amount of lava in the volcano.

Meanwhile, in another part of the forest, Hank of Ur and his chums had taken up residence in a cave that belonged to a tribe of vampire bats.

"We're camels," said Brubaker disgustedly. "We don't live in caves."

"You have a better place in mind?" said Hank. "Do you see a Holiday Inn around here?"

"Well no, but that's only to be expected. We could set up our tents out in the open, where there aren't any saber tooth bats."

"Saber tooth bats became extinct at the end of the last ice age. These are vampire bats."

"How do you know that? They might be survivors from the ice age. Besides, the reptilian part of my brain has a collective memory of being eaten by saber tooth bats."

"Relax. It's a nice cave. Look at the view."

"What view?" said Sari. "You call that a view! It's a hole in the rock. And where's the storage space? Where are we supposed to put our things?"

"We can make storage cabinets out of mud bricks," said Hank.

"Where are you going to get mud bricks? You need water to make mud bricks. You need alluvial dirt, not sand. Dry sand doesn't bind; it's full of silicates. All you can do with junk like that is make computer chips, or sell it to beach-front resorts."

Just then, the vampire bats swarmed them.

Hank had a bad feeling about this....
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