

THE DUCKS OF DOOM

Chapters 61-90

A WEEKLY SERIAL

With all of the Boring Bits Left Out

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CHAPTER 61: THE TWINKLING GOALIE

The bats went into a feeding frenzy, chasing Hank of Ur and his tribe out of the cave in which they'd taken refuge.

Half-blinded by the savage, squeaking horde, the Camels of the Negev didn't realize they were surrounded by Philistines until they heard the blare of a ram's horn announcing the forthcoming slaughter.

The bats dispersed a little, but they didn't wander very far from the flock of camels; they were just getting a bit of exercise before moving in for dessert.

During the momentary lull, Hank was able to survey the Philistine ranks drawn up around them.

"Welcome to our world," said Bronze Fillings, their leader. "We're Philistines, mind you."

"More pain and suffering!" grumbled Brubaker.

"Take heart, Brubaker," said Hank. "We'll confuse the Philistines by attacking them. They won't be expecting that."

"Of course not!" said Brubaker. "That's why they're carrying swords, shields, and spears--they're NOT expecting a battle."

There was a silence while everyone looked at the Philistines' weapons.

"The bats will follow us when we charge," said Hank. "They won't want to lose track of their food supply."

"This helps us?" said Brubaker.

"We'll pretend the bats work for us. We'll pretend to summon them."

"Groovy," said Odd Camel. "How do you summon bats?"

"You open a vein," said Brubaker. "Works every time."

Hank eyed Brubaker irritably. There were times he wished he could smite him, but he always restrained himself. Brubaker was like a weathervane blowing this way and that with the mood of the camels. When his complaining grew loud and bitter, it was a sure bet the other camels were restive.

"Ready?" yelled Hank. "On the count of three, we charge the Philistines."

There was a lot of mutinous grumbling and muttering among the camels.

Hank stepped forward like Christopher Plummer at Waterloo.

For a long moment, he was alone, glaring at the Philistines.

This is the nightmare of every great leader. You turn around, and your troops aren't there--they've punched out for a coffee break, leaving you to charge the machine gun nest all by yourself.

Fortunately, the camels respected and obeyed Hank. Anyone who had regular chat sessions with the Supreme Being deserved at least as much respect as a bolt of lightning zipping down from a black cloud.

Besides, if they didn't move up and support him right away, Sari would remove their important bits and replace them with Granny Smith apples.

"Attack!" yelled Hank.

The camels charged, yelling their blood-curdling battle cry, WHY ME?.

The Philistines lapsed into stunned silence for a moment; then a large number of them

fell on their backs on the sand, helpless with laughter.

The bats watched in shock and amazement as their dessert went haring off into the distance.

Then they charged, too.

"TO ME, MY LITTLE FRIENDS!" yelled Hank. "Attack the Philistines. Bite them. Drink their blood."

Philistine laughter quickly gave way to fear and amazement. Bronze Fillings had to act quickly, shoring up their courage with an impromptu speech:

"Stand heart not bolder the bravely here many mead halls feasting and crows eat doomed yes!" he boomed.

"Huh?" said Crystal Boulder, a Philistine general.

"I think he's trying to encourage us," said Granite Humps, another general.

"Run away, run away!" yelled the grunts in the ranks.

But it was too late to run away. The charging camels met the Philistines in a great shock of spear against spear, sword against sword. The bats didn't know what to make of this at first, accustomed as they were to a meager diet, however they soon joined in the fun.

In no time, Philistine and camel alike were slashing at the pesky bats, and the air was filled with curses.

The Philistines, inexperienced as they were with bats and their ilk, thought they'd been attacked by a bunch of crazed umbrellas.

"These camels have powerful magic," said Big Toe, the chief priest. "They can turn umbrellas into weapons of mass destruction."

"Those aren't umbrellas," said Bronze Fillings, "They're fresh-air sharks."

The bats, meanwhile, shocked by their reception among the clashing armies, withdrew to a quiet place and squeaked among themselves.

The Philistines eyed the bats warily. Spooked by this new threat, and bloody from myriad bites, they were slow to regroup.

"We can't go on like this," said Big Toe. "We must withdraw."

"Never!" said Bronze Fillings. "Heart shall be the feasts many in hall, wailing much those Valhalla who swords against."

"Would you settle for peace with honor? We could send out a delegation."

"Bold unto the chiefs, drinking much in feast hall."

"Right then," said Big Toe. "I'll find a delegate, shall I?"

The Philistines muttered among themselves.

"I don't like this," said Crystal Boulder. "It's probably going to cost a lot of money."

"Lo, up in the sky," said Granite Humps. "Behold, a twinkling platypus. "It is a sign! We must negotiate with these powerful foreign devils."

"A platypus? What kind of sign is that? It looks like a big duck to me."

"It's twinkling," said Big Toe.

"It's laughing at us," said Crystal Boulder.

"Oh that's bad! Never trust a laughing god," said Big Toe.

"Their god is a platypus?" said Granite Humps.

"What can you expect?" said Crystal Boulder. "They're foreigners."

"Be careful; don't do anything to cause offense or they'll send in more fresh-air sharks."

"Bold counting coup much we forth wandering frost-hard coast, far mead halls," yelled Bronze Fillings.

"Right!" said Big Toe. "Have we got any negotiators?"

"Clambake just got back from Assyria," said Crystal Boulder. "He traded five sheep for a map that shows where Gilgamesh parked his boat when the flood waters receded."

"Hmmm," said Big Toe. "Clambake will do nicely."

Clambake had other ideas, of course, but you don't argue with Bronze Fillings. He was given a little white flag to wave; then everyone hid behind a pile of rocks while he made his way into the kill zone.

Hank, watching the approaching Clambake, had no idea what the flag was for, but he did observe the telltale signs of the noncombatant: knocking knees, rolling eyes, and skin the color of goat cheese.

He met him alone, at the half-way point.

"How!" said Clambake. "Me Clambake. Big Philistine. Much power.

"Good afternoon," said Hank. "I'm Hank of Ur, leader of the Camels of the Negev, and I'm on a mission to take possession of the Land of Milk and Honey, from the Nile to the Euphrates, so that my people can build a mighty nation, as soon as we figure out what a nation is."

"You speak English?" said Clambake, pleasantly surprised.

"Not by choice. I'll never understand how the ravings of a barbaric tribe of Anglicized Germanic farmers and soccer fans could become the global language of commerce."

"People adopt it when they seek an escape from reality," said Clambake.

"You want to negotiate?" said Hank.

"Actually we were thinking of calling it a stalemate. Peace with honor and that sort of thing."

"You're free to withdraw," said Hank.

"Thank you. We want YOU to withdraw too. This is our land, after all. We went to all the trouble of taking it from the mysterious people who were here before us."

"Really? Who were they?"

"They came from Atlantis. They had all of these bright, shiny gadgets that were supposed to be powerful weapons. They told us they'd fry us as soon as they found some batteries. We had to kill them to make them shut up, and after that, we sacrificed their gadgets to Marvin."

"Wasn't that a bit excessive?" said Hank. "Why didn't you just cut off their thumbs and big toes?"

"We were on a tight schedule."

"I'm not passing judgment," said Hank. "We camels don't judge people by the abstract principles of the Justinian code. We prefer case law, which, as you know, is a lethal weapon based on precedent and random judicial opinions. So you'd better surrender."

"Oh yeah!" said Clambake. "You and whose army?"

Hank motioned to the bats, which were still flitting about in the distance.

"Oh, THAT army," said Clambake. "Right. Okay. We surrender. You win. How do we stop the bats?"

Hank wasn't prepared for this and hadn't worked out a contingency plan to deal with total victory. The camels weren't used to victory.

He went back to his tribe to discuss the problem.

By this time, there was a constant drumbeat of wings as the bats argued among themselves.

"What are we gonna do?" said Brubaker. "The bats are restless."

"We have to make them go away," said Hank. "We have to show the Philistines that we control them. Any ideas?"

"We could swell up like caymans and hiss at them," said Odd Camel. "It's very effective. I had this girlfriend once who did it whenever I asked her out for a date."

Everyone looked at Odd Camel for a moment.

"She didn't like me very much," he said.

Brubaker rolled his eyes.

"Enough small talk!" said Thunderbags, the new chief priest. "We can scare the bats away with preserved foreskins."

"Brilliant!" said Hank. "The ultimate weapon! All right everyone, fork over your preserved foreskins."

This command produced a certain amount of grumbling.

"But Hank, these are the only trade goods we have left. How will we buy vegetables to

supplement our diet?"

"Consider it a war bond," said Hank. "A grateful nation will salute you. The Philistines will leave us tribute when they withdraw. We can eat the tribute."

"I wish I knew what a nation was," said Crystal Boulder. "He still hasn't explained it to us. Is it like a Scottish clan?"

"Clans are real," said Brubaker. "Nations are wishful thinking, based on personality flaws held to be common within specific geographical areas."

The camels thought about this for awhile, but none of them could figure it out, so they gave Hank their preserved foreskins.

Hank arranged the collection in a mud-brick salad bowl and set it out for the bats.

The bats eyed this offering suspiciously for awhile, whispering among themselves. Then a bat by the name of Save Alice, flew a little closer and scrutinized one of the offending items.

"Run away, run away!" he yelled. "Those are bat corpses, shriveled up and bleached in the sun. Run while you have the chance!"

The bats needed no second warning; they took off as one, flew back to their cave, and hid behind a flying saucer.

At this, Clambake's eyes grew as big as doilies. He made his way back to the Philistines and reported to Bronze Fillings and Big Toe.

"We're doomed!" he said. "These camels have magic foreskins!"

Bronze Fillings shook his head. "Go and see the priest," he said. "You need analysis."

Then, after brief deliberation with Big Toe, he gathered tribute from among the Philistines, packed it into a number of Tupperware containers, and presented it to Hank.

"It's not much," he said. "Goat cheese, tomatoes, lettuce, olives and cucumbers. I'm afraid we don't have any salad dressing."

Hank contemplated the tribute wordlessly. This unexpected surrender had presented him with a new dilemma.

"What do we do now?" said Brubaker. "They weren't supposed to surrender. You guys were supposed to slaughter them while I witnessed everything for posterity."

"We can still slaughter them," said Thunderbags.

"Must you?" said Bronze Fillings. "It's been a hard day."

"Oh whine, whine, whine!" said Brubaker. "Look at us! I don't have feet any more; I just have blisters. Tell you what; we won't kill you. We'll just cut off your thumbs and your big toes so you can't make war no mo'."

"That's not very nice," said Bronze Fillings.

"It's the human condition in a fallen world," said Thunderbags. "Violent aggression is part of our nature now."

"Aggression is NOT natural to us," said Bronze Fillings. "We learn it from our nannies. We need it to help us purify our tribe by killing everyone who disagrees with us."

"Where exactly do you get your nannies?" said Brubaker.

"Everyone is violent, not just nannies," said Thunderbags. "Look at weevils, for example."

"I'd rather not," said Hank.

"Terrifying creatures, weevils," said Brubaker. "They kill each other at the drop of a hat. And we inherited this evil proclivity. It's biological."

"Speak for yourself!" said Bronze Fillings. "There aren't any weevils in my family. Besides, weevils don't kill each other."

"Yes they do."

"They're too busy eating and making more weevils. It takes a lot of energy and self-delusion to make a weevil. Have you ever seen what a weevil looks like? How would you like to mate with something like that?"

"Weevils don't mate," said Odd Camel. "They just materialize."

"Of course they mate!" said Bronze Fillings. "The randy little beasts do it all the time. It's

absolutely disgusting."

"Listen, Mister Cultural Tradition," said Brubaker, "If you only learn slaughter when your nanny teaches it to you as part of your cultural kit, what happens if she forgets to teach you?"

"You learn it from your peers, at soccer matches," said Bronze Fillings.

"Okay, we can live with that," said Hank. "You say nurture, we say nature. Nature, of course, was manufactured by the Supreme Being. So let's have a truce. We'll make a disarmament treaty and reduce our weapons stockpiles."

"Listen, we can't do that, Hank," said Thunderbags. "If we disarm first, they'll attack us and slaughter us."

"We could build a missile shield," said Thunderbags. "We could use very powerful torches and hold them up all the time, thereby blinding the Philistine spear throwers so they can't target us."

"In daylight?" said Hank.

"We tell them to postpone their attacks until nightfall," said Odd Camel.

There were snickers of laughter from various warriors; then the two sides got down to negotiating.

Just then, Demo's Leitmotiv materialized on the sand, all toggled-out in his Toronto Maple Leafs goalie costume.

"Anybody seen any pucks here?" he asked. "I'm filling in for Demo, while he larks about the countryside, raiding tombs. You can call me Demo's Leitmotiv."

Everyone stared at him.

Bronze Fillings was stupefied. First the bats, now a weirdo who looked like he'd just stepped out of a Pickard Trilobite of the gods!

Hank had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 62: CHESTER'S QUEST

Big Toe contemplated Demo's Leitmotiv for a long time.

"Are you a sign from the supreme being?" he asked.

"What kind of a sign would that be?" said Brubaker. "We've already agreed to forgo slaughtering each other, at least until the Reformation. So what does THIS mean? We're supposed to wear a new kind of helmet and carry a big stick in a bag? We don't even have bags yet; we have serviceable pouches."

"It's not just any old bag," said Thunderbags. "It has cuneiform script on it. That makes it official."

"B-A-G-U-E-T-T-E," said Brubaker. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's definitely not the Supreme Being."

"It's not any of our gods," said Bronze Fillings. "Maybe it's a foreign god, from Aberdeen."

"Dundee, you mean," said Brubaker. "Aberdeen is heartland."

"I wonder what he wants," said Hank.

"You mean you wonder what SHE wants," said Sari. "Women can be mysterious apparitions too, you know!"

"What kind of a god enjoys being carried around in a paper bag?" said Thunderbags. "It's not dignified. This proves the superiority of the Supreme Being."

"Good one!" said all of the subordinate Camels-of-the-Negev priests. "That showed HIM."

"Showed who?" said Bronze Fillings. Then he lapsed into silence, because the goalie was drawing near.

"Anyone seen any pucks around here?" asked Demo's Leitmotiv.

The camels and the Philistines examined this statement for hidden traps.

Then they tried to figure out what it meant.

"What's a puck?" said Thunderbags.

"It's a flat, hard disk that can be used for knocking out people's teeth," said Demo's Leitmotiv.

"Sounds like unleavened bread," said Hank. "But it's the wrong color. Do you suppose it rotted?"

"Why are you dressed up like this?" said Brubaker. "Are you an armadillo?"

"I'm disguised as a goalie. I have memories of being a seedy gangster trying to keep tabs on Macklin, the famous model railroader, but I think they belong to someone else. I don't think I'm actually me anymore, if I ever was. Anyway, I'm only a recurrent motif, so just ignore me and get on with your slaughter."

Everyone considered this new piece of information with puzzled brows.

"So the Supreme Being told you to be a goalie?" said Hank enviously.

"It wasn't the Supreme Being--"

"He told ME to trek across the waterless desert and be persecuted by hordes of enemies. I wonder why you get special treatment."

"It's got nothing to do with the Supreme Being. It MIGHT have something to do with Vlod Ironbeak, the powerful mayor of Toronto, but I can't be sure."

"Mayor?" said Hank.

"Must be one of the officials in ancient Babylon," said Brubaker. "Perhaps someone in charge of the fertility rites."

"Vlod is an enigmatic figure," said Demo's Leitmotiv. "He wants Macklin to build a perfect replica of a model railroad envisioned by Lenore McBeauty, lo these many centuries ago."

"Huh?" said Hank.

"I also have vague memories of being locked up in a dungeon for not paying taxes," said Demo's Leitmotiv. "I think I was let out in return for two hundred hours of community service, keeping an eye on Macklin. But I took a wrong turn on Mount Pleasant, near George's Trains, and I found myself in ancient Babylon, surrounded by a lot of Gothic ducks wearing horned helmets. When I explained what I was doing, the ducks gave me this map, but it's not a very good one."

"They were probably Nasties," said Brubaker. "Followers of Antler. They like to kill people to make room for more Goths. We don't get along with them, so we stay in the Fabulous Mists of Antiquity."

Demo's Leitmotiv showed Hank a cuneiform tablet.

Hank eyed it curiously.

"Here's your problem," he said. "This isn't a map of the ancient Near East; it's a map of the subway system in Toronto, showing the entrance to the Underworld."

"Drat!" said Demo's Leitmotiv. "Now I'll never get back home."

"Of course you will. Just follow the setting sun for several thousand miles. You'll probably need a boat of some sort when you come to the Pillars of Hercules, but I wouldn't worry about it just yet."

"Oh thank you!" said Demo's Leitmotiv. "How can I ever repay you?"

"You wouldn't happen to know of a land of milk and honey that was temporarily vacant and in need of a lot quiet and studious camels to look after it?" said Brubaker.

"Blasphemy!" said Thunderbags. "You dare trifle with the Supreme Being's explicit instructions? We were meant to enjoy suffering--"

"Yes, yes; I know," said Brubaker. "Sheesh!"

The argument went on for some time.

Demo's Leitmotiv, growing bored with these arcane theological matters, withdrew behind a convenient dune to consider who he was, where he was going, and what he could offer Hank in return for his kindness.

Meanwhile, taking advantage of the lull in boasting, cursing and general warlike carryings on, the Philistine warriors and the camel warriors were beginning to fraternize.

It started innocently enough.

The spears had fallen silent, and no one offered taunts or curses.

In the trenches you could hear plaintive voices here and there singing the famous soldiers' song: "How Much is That Doggie in the Window?"

More voices joined in, and soon a mighty chorus boomed out the words from both sides of No-Camel's-Land.

It no longer mattered whether you were Camel of the Negev or a Philistine. No one cared what you looked like, or what you believed in.

Peace descended on this little patch of inhospitable desert and for a brief moment in time, warriors on both sides were offered a hint of what life could be like if everyone was truly civilized and filled with empathy.

Birds tweeted, puppy dogs wagged their tails, sleigh bells tinkled.

One by one, the battle-weary warriors emerged from their trenches and crossed over into No-Camel's-Land.

"Curse all wars!" shouted a dazed camel.

"Peace, order and good government," shouted someone wearing a toque.

"Down with taxes!" yelled a Philistine.

"More chocolate."

"A haggis in every pot."

"Beer, beer, beer, beer!"

Then someone began singing the Jolly Fat Llama song, dear to the hearts of peace-loving shoppers everywhere:

For he's a jolly fat llama,

For he's a jolly fat llama

For he's a jolly fat llama

For he's a jolly fat llama.

After this, the erstwhile enemies exchanged dental chocolate.

The camels had little chocolate camels--with two humps, of course--and the Philistines had little chocolate Philistines with one hump.

Then they all stood around under the palm trees, showing each other pictures of their families, which really wasn't necessary, because all family members were present.

The Philistines had brought along their spouses and children to cheer them on while they slaughtered the camels, and the camels had brought their families along to help them build a mighty nation, as soon as they figured out what a nation was.

"I can't help thinking there's something wrong with this picture," said a Philistine warrior. "We weren't meant to have fun. Something terrible is going to happen very soon."

"Of course!" said a Camel of the Negev. "It's part of the camel condition. So enjoy."

The only discordant note came from the priests, who were upset by this unauthorized fraternization.

"Just a minute here," said Thunderbags. "What's this about the Jolly Fat Llama?. We're camels of the Negev. We worship facts, like the principle exports of Gabon, including cacao--"

"What's cacao?" asked a Philistine. "I've always been meaning to ask, but I keep forgetting."

"It's what you make dental chocolate out of. It grows on vines, like artificial crabs."

While the shrink priests quarreled, Hank and Bronze Fillings renewed their negotiations. If their warriors could get along so well, then they, too, should be able to get along.

Hank was especially subtle and polished at negotiations, having learned the art of diplomacy from his father, who was so good at it, he'd managed to avoid the long trek to the promised land.

"Listen, why can't we settle this peacefully?" said Hank. "The Supreme Being told us he was going to give us this waterless desert, complete with sand dunes and flesh-eating spiders, but we're quite willing to pay for it."

"Sounds good to me," said Bronze Fillings.

Then he turned to Abacus, his accountant.

"Psst, what should we charge them?" he demanded. "We haven't subdivided this place yet."

Abacus, was the accountant because he was the only Philistine who could count higher than 'many'.

"Umm, lots," he said. "They don't know about the freeway going through here from Memphis to Damascus, so we should be able to get a good price."

"The freeway is a feature," said Big Toe. "There'll be roadside fruit stands, gas stations and places where you can buy synthetic coffee and artificial food."

"It's what travels ON the freeway that counts," said Bronze Fillings. "Assyrian conquerors, Babylonian conquerors, Egyptian conquerors, Greek conquerors, Roman conquerors, roving bands of telemarketers."

"Shhh," said Big Toe. "What they don't know won't hurt them."

This, by the way, proves once and for all the venal nature of the Philistine priests. Unlike other flavors of priests, these priests were only interested in money, power, personal gain, nice robes, large retinues, flashy rings, eternal life and persistent and unwarranted happiness.

"How much should we charge?" said Bronze Fillings.

Abacus shrugged. "Umm, thirteen dollars, some beads, some copper pots."

Bronze Fillings turned to Hank and relayed this information.

Hank gloated inwardly for a time, then his good nature got the better of him. Although he was a sharp trader, he was an honest camel, and it didn't sit well with him to cheat anyone.

"That's a VERY good price," he said meaningfully.

Then he said "Ouch!" as Thunderbags kicked him in the shins.

"You should think about it a little--Ouch!"

Hank glared at Thunderbags, who was so agitated he was hopping up and down.

"It is a good price, for a lovely patch of desert with amazing potential," said Bronze Fillings. "We are, however, a simple people, with no talent for trade. Friendship and good neighbors are more important to us than gold heaped up in useless mounds."

Big Toe groaned and rolled his eyes. Both priests were now commiserating with each other.

"Can you believe these guys?" said Thunderbags.

"Tell me about it!" said Big Toe. "You try so hard to create a theocratic state, and they go and ruin it with good will and kindness."

"Charity and good deeds are okay in their place, but you need balance," said Thunderbags. "The troops have to be fed."

"If people start being nice to each other, we'll be out of a job very soon," said Big Toe.

"Not really," said Hank. "People still die. They need to be told about the biting, stinging things waiting in the afterlife for anyone who ignored priests."

"Yes, there's that," said Thunderbags. "But is it enough? It's a well known fact that when people are feeling happy and prosperous, religion drops off their radar screen and they take up unhealthy pursuits."

"Yes, they behave very oddly, with various unlikely implements," said Big Toe.

The two priests wandered off to a convenient temple bar and drank each other's health over a barrel of the finest Scotch whiskey.

Some things are more important than petty theological differences.

Meanwhile, Hank, troubled by his conscience, made Bronze Fillings a wonderful offer.

"Why don't you join our tribe?" he said. "You'd like it. You get hundreds of new enemies all in one go. You get to wander around in the desert because the Supreme Being has something really painful in mind for you as a special treat."

"Sounds good to me," said Bronze Fillings. "How does it work? Is there an initiation rite?"

"Well, you need extra humps. You people only seem to have one each."

"Where do we get them?"

"We could make you some out of mud bricks. They're quite useful, actually, because you can store extra chocolate in them. And they're very fashionable; everybody wants two humps now. People go to great lengths to acquire them. They pay fortunes to surgeons to open them up and stuff humpy things inside their skin."

The Philistine thought about this.

"Let me get this straight," he said. "We get extra humps, we get pain and suffering, we get famine."

"I think that about sums it up."

"Hmm... I don't see any downside."

"There is one other thing," Hank said. Then he whispered in the Philistine's ear.

The Philistine listened with growing horror.

"You're kidding me," he said, covering the threatened part of his anatomy. "You want to snip THAT!"

"It's only a little thing," said Hank.

"Speak for yourself! Mine is quite large."

"I meant the protective covering. Anyway, it's not the size that counts, it's the preparation, the ritual. That's what Sari always tells me, before she kicks me out of the tent."

"It's dangerous going around without the covering. Spiders might eat it."

"You could make special outerwear for it if you like."

"What kind of outerwear?"

"Toques, for instance."

"You mean like the Canadians wear on their heads? Where do we get them? What do you make them out of?"

"Mud bricks, I think."

"Oooh, that would be itchy."

"You could use papyrus. You could fold it into little paper toques and stick them on with double-sided Pictish tape. You could even write little messages on each toque and give them out at parties, or in Llama's Eve crackers."

"What sort of messages?"

"Oh things like, 'Good fortune comes your way if you give your money to the camels'."

Bronze Fillings eyed Hank suspiciously, wondering if he was being tricked.

"Hmmm. Can we have a time out?" he asked.

"Of course."

The Philistines whispered among themselves.

"Why don't we just slaughter them?" said Thunderbags.

"We can't. There are 14 of us and 27 of them," said Abacus.

"That can't be right," said Bronze Fillings. "Count again."

"Okay, there are a few of us and a lot of them."

"That's better."

"If we fight them, they'll send in more bats, and then they'll cut off our thumbs and big toes."

"So? If we join them, they'll cut off our protective coverings and make us wear toques on the exposed parts."

"But we can write little messages on the toques."

The Philistines thought about this for awhile. They liked the idea of joining Hank's tribe and submitting to his authority.

It's a well-known principle of psychology that people under great stress will seek a leader to whom they can turn over all responsibility for thinking and moral judgment. It's like handing over a pile of old, dead rutabagas that wasn't much good to anyone anyway.

They didn't like the part about the snipping, but they did like the idea of the little messages they could write on their new protective coverings, and they immediately began discussing this.

"I'm going to write all of the cheat codes for FINAL FANTASY on mine," said Brubaker.

"That could be embarrassing if you decide to have a look at them while you're playing in an arcade," said Bronze Fillings.

"I'm going to write the words to 'How Much is That Doggie in the Window?' on mine," said Big Toe.

So the Philistines agreed to become Camels of the Negev, and they were initiated in the usual fashion, at a joyful ceremony.

Well it was joyful for the original Camels of the Negev, the ones who didn't have to go through the snipping.

Other Philistines heard the lamentations of their buddies and said among themselves, "Lo, behold what it means to join the Camels of the Negev. Pain even unto the smallest part of your being."

"Speak for yourself! Mine is quite large."

"We shall not easily yield that which we have nurtured for so many years. Let us prepare for sustained and bitter warfare."

"Even so shall it be, as it should, therefore verily."

"Yea verily."

"Death to all telemarketers!"

These other Philistines girded their loins for battle.

Some of the Philistines were a bit behind the others, because they had to look up 'girding your loins' in Clauswitz to find out what it meant.

Clauswitz proved unhelpful, so they peeked while the other guys were doing it.

Demo's Leitmotiv, who had been observing this initiation ceremony for a time, fainted.

When he woke up, the ceremony was over and the Philistines were immersing themselves in barrels of Scotch whiskey to drown their pain.

Their new chums, meanwhile, were regaling them with humorous stories about the great privations and suffering they could now look forward to.

"Everyone on Tockworld will hate you," they said. "They will all secretly wish for your destruction even as they pretend to be nice to you."

"Hmmm," said Bronze Fillings, who had absorbed an entire barrel of whiskey into his hair follicles and was almost back to normal. "That was fun! Let's try it on someone else!"

Demo's Leitmotiv, fearing for his bodily integrity, fainted again.

The next time he woke up, he was being licked by a dragon. A big green dragon with red wings.

There was a huge parrot beak tied to the dragon's forehead.

"You're a dragon!" said Demo's Leitmotiv.

"No I'm not," said the dragon. "I'm a parrot."

"You're not a parrot!" snorted Demo's Leitmotiv. "I know what a parrot looks like. It's a small, cuddly Australian creature that lives in trees and looks like a teddy bear."

"That's a koala bear, you idiot! Do I look like a koala bear? I'm a parrot. Can't you see my beak?"

"You tied that beak to your nose. It doesn't belong to you. You're a dragon."

"I'm a parrot, I tell you! My name is Chester. Chester the parrot. What kind of a dragon has a name like that? Real dragons are called Tiamat, or Miss Grimes, the grammar teacher."

Demo's Leitmotiv eyed Chester suspiciously.

"If you're a parrot, what are you doing in the waterless desert, where there aren't any crackers; there aren't any pirates, and there is a complete absence of pieces of eight?"

"I'm looking for the lost city of Camelot. Want to help me find it?"

Demo's Leitmotiv pondered this for a moment; then he said. "Why not? If I hang around this place any longer, the guys with scissors might take an interest in me."

Chester knelt down and Demo's Leitmotiv climbed up on his back.

"Comfy?" said Chester.

"Just don't hit any sudden updrafts; I'll impale myself on your spines."
Chester laughed and shot straight up into the air like a Harrier.
Demo's Leitmotiv decided to stand tall in the saddle.
Abacus had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 63: THE ALIEN HANDCAR

"Did you see that dragon take off with the duck in the funny costume?" said Bronze Fillings. "Did that really happen?"

"Maybe it's something from big league wrestling," said Thunderbags. "You know how those guys like to dress up in weird costumes and sacrifice each other to the ratings gods."

"I prefer watching the women wrestle, actually," said Big Toe.

Everyone stared at him for a long time.

Big Toe blushed furiously. "I find it strangely soothing and oceanic, like shopping festivals," he said.

Just then, Loopy flew down from the sky in an Orient Express handcar.

He was still wearing green face paint and a green, trademarked Spandex alien costume.

Exhausted after pumping the handcar all the way from Constantinople, he jumped down from the handcar and staggered over to the watching camels and Philistines.

"Have you guys seen any aliens around here?" he asked.

Hank peered at him, wondering if this was some new type of exercise machine sent by the Supreme Being to keep his camels from getting too fat.

A quick inspection failed to uncover any dongles or jacks, however, which meant the creature was just another weirdo.

"You look like a rutabaga with a bill," he said, not unkindly.

"Nice talk!" said Loopy. "Is this any way to handle First Contact? How would you like me to play the first four notes of 'How Much is That Doggie in the Window?' very loudly on my alien sound system?"

There was a silence.

The Philistines went into a huddle.

Bronze Fillings held up his hand.

"Normally we'd have slaughtered you by now, rutabaga person," he said. "But we're part of Hank's tribe now, and so we have to be nice. We're going to share our famines, boils, plagues, locusts, earthquakes, fires, floods, volcanic eruptions, and wars with you."

Loopy tried to make sense out of this, but it was hopeless. The modern mind simply cannot comprehend the simple pleasures of the ancients.

"Okay," he sighed. "Bad start. Let's try this again. Greetings, ancient people. I come in peace. Anyone seen any aliens around here?"

"Aliens?" said Hank. "You mean ducks from Aberdeen?"

"Dundee," said Bronze Fillings. "Aberdeen is foreign."

"I meant aliens from outer space," said Loopy. "Where no boldly go there we before went."

"Huh?" said the camels.

"I think he's been listening to Bronze Fillings," said Big Toe. "It must be a speech to encourage his troops."

"What troops? All I see is a handcar."

"Maybe the handcar is an army in disguise."

"Pretty small army."

"It could be a magic army."

"Armies aren't magic; they're made up of hundreds of guys marching around with sixty-pound packs, while a bunch of old farts in the government try to figure out how to pay for them."

"Some countries have magic armies," said Big Toe. "They're bigger on the inside than they are on the outside."

Everyone stared at Big Toe.

"It's okay," said Bronze Fillings. "His mind has been deranged by pain and suffering."

"Oh, right!" said Loopy. "That explains everything."

Other Philistines and camels made a circle around the handcar, trying to spot secret weapons.

A camel by the name of Ratchet climbed into the handcar and began fooling with the controls.

Technically handcars don't have controls. You push the handle down and that makes the wheels turn.

Flying handcars, however, are a little different.

Ratchet accidentally touched a special, magic control, and the handcar shot up into the air.

"Help, it's abducting me!" he yelled. "I want my mommy!"

"Good riddance!" said a female camel. "He's fifty-seven years old and he's still a graduate student, living at home. He won't even clean up his room. Honest to Pete--"

"Help, mommy!"

The female camel sighed.

"Would you mind getting him down," she said to Loopy. "He is my son, after all, though I don't know where he got the gene for incompetence. Probably from his father."

"Help!"

"Press control-alt-delete!" yelled Loopy.

"Which one is delete?" yelled Ratchet. "I can't find it!"

"Bottom right of the keyboard, near the number pad."

"Oh, I see it."

Ratchet performed the three-finger-salute.

The handcar turned blue, then it crashed.

"Ouch, ow!" yelled Ratchet. "What kind of tech support is that?"

Loopy helped him climb out of the handcar and he made the sign to ward off evil and limped away.

His mom put down her spear, her shield, her battle axe and her scalp belt, and tended his wounds.

"Poor baby," she said. "You got a bruise."

"IT HURTS MOMMY!" wailed Ratchet. "IT REALLY, REALLY HURTS. I BANGED MY HEAD ON THE NASTY HANDCAR. NOW I WON'T BE ABLE TO HELP WITH THE DISHES."

"Here you go, pretty baby. Here's the Bobo Bunny."

His mom took a frosty camel toy out of her hump and pressed it to his forehead.

Ratchet stopped sniffing.

His mom shook her head.

"Males!" she snorted. "They think they're so brave, then a little bump comes along and they all moan and wail. Look at those big Philistines, crying over a little thing that got snipped off."

"Mine is quite big," said Big Toe.

"WAS quite big."

"That was just the protective covering. I still have a rather big--"

Suddenly Big Toe realized all of the female warriors were looking at him and snickering.

He crossed his knees and blushed.

"Nice weather we're having, as long as it doesn't rain," he said.

Loopy, meanwhile, had made an alarming discovery.

"Ratchet broke my handcar," he yelled. "It doesn't work anymore. How am I going to get

back to Toronto--ummm--I mean, the ALIEN PLANET?"

"Relax," said Hank. "You can stay with us and share the pain and suffering."

"That's very kind of you, but I already have lots."

"Are you sure? We're settling in the Land of Milk and Honey so we can start a great nation, have a famine, and exile ourselves to Egypt, where they have bigger storage containers."

"I need another UFO. Maybe I could use that big mouse thing up in the sky; the one that's covered with tin foil."

"That's not a big mouse; it's the platypus in the sky. And it isn't tin foil; it's glitter dust."

"Whatever. Maybe I can use it."

"You can't have that!" said Thunderbags. "It's a symbol. Haven't you read Jung on the collective unconscious?"

Loopy peered at the twinkling platypus.

The platypus looked at Loopy.

"What does mean?" demanded Loopy. "No one who isn't a platypus is allowed to stay here?"

"We don't know what it means," said Thunderbags. "That's the beauty of symbols; they can mean anything you like."

"Who decides?"

Thunderbags and Big Toe put their arms around each other's shoulders and puffed out their chests.

"Behold," they said as one. "Deciding what symbols mean is what priests do best."

"Well, ONE of the things they do best," said Hank. "Telling other people to go out and slaughter enemies is another thing they do best."

"Yeah, and guess who decides who the enemy is?" said Bronze Fillings.

"ANYWAY," said the two priests, "It's important to get it right when you decide what a symbol means. One mistake and POOF! No more camels or Philistines."

"So what does the platypus mean?" said Loopy.

"It means, give lots of cattle, sheep and goats to Thunderbags," said Thunderbags."

"Yeah!" said Big Toe.

Then he looked at Thunderbags. "Hey!"

"What?"

There was an argument about this, of course.

If you bring up the subject of symbols among a lot of camels, you can expect a certain amount of debate about what they mean.

Meanwhile, in another part of the desert, but higher up, Demo's Leitmotiv was busy holding onto Chester the dragon as they winged their way towards Camelot, which lies in yet ANOTHER part of the desert.

A short time later, they landed in Wales, and discovered Welsh road signs.

"I can't make any sense out of these signs," said Demo's Leitmotiv. "They have too many syllables."

"Don't give up so easily," said Chester. "Try again."

"I'm not a linguist! I just want my own identity."

"Asking rather a lot, aren't you?" said Chester.

"No I'm not. I'm tired of being a leitmotiv. I want to BE someone for a change. I want to be a duck among ducks. I don't want signs that can only be pronounced by twelve people singing in a choir."

"You're not meant to read the signs," said Chester. "The Welsh invented this language to discourage the Saxons."

Just then, a party of Welsh miners popped out from behind a rampart of dirt and empty ammunition cases.

A sign on one of the cases said 'The Real Roark's Drift'.

The miners approached, singing 'Ducks of Harlem'."

"Those are ducks," said Demo's Leitmotiv. "Leave the talking to me."

"How," said Digger Jones, the chief miner. "Me Jones. Seen any Zulus around?"

"How do you do?" said Demo's Leitmotiv. "I'm Demo's Leitmotiv, and this is Chester, the simulated parrot. No Zulus here, just a hockey goalie and his dragon. Are you Richard Burton?"

"Never heard of him. What can we do for you?"

"Well, I'd like a new identity, and Chester wants to be a real parrot, with feathers and everything."

"I AM a real parrot," said Chester, miffed. "I just haven't had the operation yet."

Digger and his friends gave them some Welsh Rarebit."

"What's this?" said Demo's Leitmotiv suspiciously.

"Welsh rarebit."

"Oh, that's all right then. As long as it isn't quince."

"I can't eat cheese," said Chester. "It makes me fart."

"None of that now," said Digger. "We have quite enough methane as it is. Now tell us what you're REALLY here for."

"I'm looking for Camelot," said Chester. "Demo's Leitmotiv is just tagging along because he can't find any pucks."

"I want to become real," said Demo's Leitmotiv. "I'm sick and tired of being a leitmotiv. I want a fresh start; I want to be rich, powerful, and loved by all."

"You can order a new identity from the department of agriculture," said Digger. "It's covered under Medicare; you get to choose between a chicken and a cow. Or you can come along with me and look for Cleopatra. I'm going to ask her to join our union. It's always good to have celebrity backing."

"Merlin will help all of us," said Chester. "We just have to find Camelot."

There was a snicker of laughter from somewhere among the group of miners, then a scream.

Chester had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 64: TROLL GAS

There was a silence while everyone checked to see who had screamed and why.

Then a miner dressed in Edwardian plus fours strode into view.

"I hate scoffers," he said. "I tried to read one of my poems to him and he ran away screaming. My name is Edwardian Jones, by the way."

"Have you seen any pucks around here?" Demo's Leitmotiv asked.

"What's a puck?" said Edwardian. "Is it something rude?"

"Depends what you do with it," said Demo's Leitmotiv.

"Ah; it's like spaghetti, then."

Demo's Leitmotiv fell silent, wondering what you could do with spaghetti that would be considered rude.

"And what do YOU want from Merlin, little fellow?" said Chester.

"I want to be a popular Edwardian poet," said Edwardian. "I tried mining, but I don't like it. I want everyone to buy my poems about the trams in Tewksbury, in the rain."

"Hmmm," said everyone else.

There was a snicker of laughter from a portly miner leaning against a mine cart.

Digger smiled encouragingly at him. "And what about you?" he said "Who are you, and what do YOU want from Merlin?"

"Neville is the name," the strange miner said. "I'm an academic, from the University of Strange Thoughts. I blundered into the mines while I was thinking about Anaximander, and I haven't been able to get back to my office."

"You don't look like an academic," said Edwardian. "An academic always carries the scalps of his colleagues in a belt around his waist."

"I don't need those things; I have tenure."

"Tell you what," said Digger. "Seeing as how we're all going off to meet Cleopatra--"

"Merlin!" said Demo's Leitmotiv.

"Whatever. Anyway, seeing as how we're all leaving the mines, why don't you come with us? Merlin will help you get back to your life of ease and luxury."

"Do you think so?" said Neville. "I'm beginning to think my students cast a spell on me to get out of writing a term paper. Can Merlin put a stop to this?"

"Merlin can do ANYTHING," said Edwardian. "Haven't you read Tennyson?"

And so the little band of merry companions set off on the yellow brick road to Camelot.

Moments later, a troll attacked them.

It was a sneak attack, and it happened this way:

The troll had cunningly disguised himself as a heap of rocks. As Demo's Leitmotiv and his chums approached, the troll began inching towards them.

Demo's Leitmotiv was the first to notice it.

"Don't look now, but I think that heap of rocks is attacking us," he said.

Digger glanced at the troll and laughed.

"That?" he said. "That's not a heap of rocks; it's a slag heap. They don't attack unless you encroach on their land. They don't like anyone living near them."

"This one is attacking," said Demo's Leitmotiv. "We should run away."

Everyone turned to look.

The troll, being a cunning sort, went perfectly still.

"It's got a funny way of attacking," said Neville. "It just sort of stands there."

"Yes, but it's standing in an aggressive way," said Demo's Leitmotiv. "It's going to attack us when it thinks we aren't looking."

"Are you feeling quite all right, old fellow?" said Neville. "Perhaps you should have a session with Doctor Philip Napoleon, the famous shrink."

"He's too far away," said Demo's Leitmotiv. "He lives in Toronto."

"He offers extension therapy, you know. He has a long-distance analyzer."

"There; it moved again!" said Demo's Leitmotiv.

This time they all saw it.

"It's very slow," said Edwardian.

All at once there was a deep, rumbling sound that made the earth move.

"Oh, oh; what was that?" said Chester.

"It came from the troll," said Demo's Leitmotiv.

Digger handed out gas masks.

"What are these for?" said Demo's Leitmotiv. "Are we going on a space ship?"

"You'll see," said Digger. "Tell your dragon not to breathe any fire."

"I'm not a dragon; I'm a parrot."

The noise grew louder. Everyone clapped their hands over their ears.

At last the rumbling faded away and there was a long sigh of contentment.

Then a vast, horrible stench rose up, like the putrescent miasma arising from Victorian moral sincerity. It was so powerful it seeped right through the gas masks.

Chester panicked, and a flame started in the back of his throat.

"Oh, oh!" he said. "I think I'm going to scorch something."

"No Chester!" everyone yelled. "You're a parrot, not a dragon!"

"I can't help it! I'm not just any old parrot; I'm a fire parrot. Fire parrots are hot, hot, hot!"

The flame reached out from the pilot light in the back of his throat.

"Run away, run away!" yelled Digger.

Then a ribbon of fire whipped out from Chester's open mouth. Demo's Leitmotiv watched with fascinated attention as the air around the troll seemed to crackle and glow.

The explosion that followed blew him off his feet.

When he picked himself up, he could see the troll lying flat on his back, looking like an arrangement of scorched stones.

"Och!" he rumbled. "That was a powerful one! I feel much better now."

Chester was hanging upside down from a niche in the slag.

The miners were sitting behind a protective overhang, pouring a cup of tea.

"Pardon me," rumbled the troll. "I tried to hold it in, but nature will have her way. It's the methane, you know. Coal is famous for it."

"Are you okay?" asked Demo's Leitmotiv.

"I'm fine, NOW. The scorch marks will wash away when it rains. The name is Sweet Gas, by the way. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Do you know the way to Camelot?" said Edwardian.

"Sure; it's right next to San Jose. You can't miss it."

"But--" said Edwardian.

"The Welsh San Jose; not the one near Toronto."

"Oh, I see," said Edwardian, not really seeing anything at all."

Demo's Leitmotiv had a bad feeling about this--

CHAPTER 65: MAGIC BOWELS

"I'll take you to Camelot," said Sweet Gas. "I've been thinking of going to see the wizard myself."

"Whatever for?" said Edwardian. "You're a troll. You have everything you could possibly want. You're big and um...BIG, and if anybody tries to mug you, all you have to do is start a rockslide and fall down on them."

"A lot you know!" said Sweet Gas.

"What could you possibly want?"

"I want a bowel."

"You do? Whatever for? You can have mine if you want; all it ever does is twitch around like an electric eel, rejecting everything I try to feed it. What do you want a bowel for?"

"You shouldn't make fun of bowels," said Neville. "They're very important, and when they don't work properly, they make you suffer."

"Tell me about it," said Edwardian. "We Edwardian poets have always wondered why people were created and released into the universe with so many unreliable accessories. I mean, we don't even come with warranties. There's no telling when some vital part is going to break down and play havoc with your system."

"It's the duck condition," said Neville. "We were meant to suffer. It's because of the Great Dropping, when Jill dropped the pail."

"How do you know it was Jill?" said Edwardian. "It could have been Jack, or even the snake in the pail."

"It doesn't matter," said Digger. "There was a hole in the bucket."

"Well Jack should have fixed it, dear Digger," said Neville.

"With what should he have fixed it?" dear Neville?" said Digger.

"ANYWAY," said Sweet Gas, "I want a bowel so I won't blow myself up every time I pass gas."

"He has a point," said Neville. "That could be embarrassing, you know."

"You don't know the half of it!" said Sweet Gas. "Just once, I'd like to be able to fart silently and blame the efflorescence on the person beside me, like everyone else in the world does. That way, I might get more than one date with a girl."

"Some people are never satisfied," muttered Digger.

"How do you blame it on the person beside you?" asked Chester. "Do you tell everyone?"

"You look significantly at the person beside you and proffer a furrowed brow," said Sweet Gas. "Like someone suffering in silence."

"I can't believe you don't have a bowel," said Demo's Leitmotiv. "How do you manage to create such thunderous ovations? Do you have gas heating?"

"I have microorganisms like everybody else," said Sweet Gas indignantly. "They're very good at turning food into socially unacceptable byproducts."

"But what do you keep them in if you don't have a bowel?" said Demo's Leitmotiv, glancing nervously around. "Surely you don't let them run wild! Microorganisms are supposed to be on leashes."

A sudden, itchy feeling came over him, and he began scratching frantically at his goalie pads.

"There are other means of containment," said Sweet Gas. "You can use theatres, office cubicles, and salad bars."

"You have a salad bar in there?" said Jones, pointing at Sweet Gas's craggy midsection.

"You'd be surprised what I keep in there! Haven't you ever heard of Fort Knox?"

"That's for gold," said Neville. "I read about it in BEOWULF."

"The government would certainly like you to THINK it's for gold," said Sweet Gas.

"I suppose you're going to tell me the government really uses it for storing old farts, in case we ever need them again?" said Digger.

Sweet Gas offered a knowing smile, but said nothing.

"What about fossils?" said Edwardian. "Have you got any fossils?"

"Only high-class fossils," said Sweet Gas. "Trolls are nothing, if not discriminating."

Edwardian grew excited and began fingering his tungsten carbide drill. "Do you mind if I extract a few," he said. "For my collection."

"I have a lot of fossilized spam artists," said Sweet Gas. "People come out and embed them in solid rock as a reward for their many gifts to living creatures."

Edwardian put his drill back in his miner's briefcase.

"Crumbs!" he said. "Spam artists are as common as hairballs. I thought you meant something interesting, like a fossilized nudist colony."

"I'm not hearing you!" yelled Chester, covering his ears. "I don't like naughty things; they make you go blind."

"What about toxic waste?" said Neville. "I bet you don't have any of that!"

"Of course I do!" said Sweet Gas. "I have a whole box of medical waste, and a rusty drum of mercury from a major corporation whose name I dare not mention for fear of a lawsuit."

"Isn't that a bit wimpy?" said Neville.

"You can't be too careful," said Sweet Gas. "The Serengeti is a dangerous place. Behind every bush there lurks a savage, duck-eating lawyer, wirelessly integrated into a major corporation."

"This isn't the Serengeti," said Neville. "The Serengeti is southeast of Toronto."

"I'm not talking about THAT Serengeti," said Sweet Gas. "I'm talking about the WELSH Serengeti. Wales has a bit of everything, you know, including lots of Welsh people. It's a magical place."

"Anyway, you should write poetry," said Edwardian. "Become an Edwardian poet and girls will flock to you."

"They will?" said Sweet Gas.

"Of course. Masses of them. It says so in the brochure I got from the Edwardian Poets' Book Club."

"Don't believe everything you read," said Neville, suspiciously.

Neville, being an academic, often came into contact with poets, but he was always careful to wash his hands afterwards.

"Anyway, it doesn't matter," said Edwardian. "The wizard will take care of me, and he'll take care of YOU, too. Why don't you come along with me and be an Edwardian poet, sitting in the grapefruit trees in lovely California, watching all the girls go by."

"Grapefruit trees?" said Neville. "Is that really necessary?"

"Hmmm," said Sweet Gas. "Do you think I can ask for TWO things? I do have to ask the

wizard to help me stop farting, you know. I would like a more discreet internal mechanism."

Then he burst into tears, which, in a troll, is really a sort of grinding and cracking process.

"There, there, old chap!" said Chester. "The thing about gas is it always passes in the end."

"So what about it?" said Edwardian. "Do you want to be an Edwardian poet?"

"I think it might be fun," said Sweet Gas. "Could I write poems about igneous rocks? They're my favorite kind."

"Of course. Anything you like, as long as it rhymes and it has a nice tum-te-tum-te-tum rhythm to it. That's how we recognize poetry, you know."

"I'm your troll!" said Sweet Gas.

Fortunately, Edwardian had the presence of mind to duck the impending backslap, so he was relatively intact when they set out on their quest for the wizard of Camelot, otherwise known as Merlin, or 'M', for short.

Five minutes later, Sweet Gas said, "Are we there yet?"

"Soon," said Edwardian. "Have some Welsh Rarebit."

"I told you, it makes me fart."

"This is special Welsh Rarebit, made with Scotch whiskey and a plum."

Sweet Gas thought about this.

"Okay," he said, "If you say so."

Meanwhile, in another part of the Serengeti, the real Demo was beginning to feel a little odd.

"I think I'm coming down with multiple personality disorder," he said. "I have this feeling there's another version of me running around in a hockey goalie's outfit."

"That's a relief!" said Sally Popoff. "We thought you were doing something literary. You were raving about Camelot and epic farts."

Hanging Gardens made a 'tsk, tsk' sound. "I should consult Doctor Philip Napoleon if I was you," he said. "Can't have multiple personality disorder when you're off raiding tombs. It upsets the archaeologists. They'll make you pay for more than one admission ticket."

"Philip Napoleon is in Toronto," said Demo. "He can't analyze me until I get back."

"You could appoint one of your personalities as a sort of king and send him back to speak for the rest," said Hammurabi.

"He does have a long-distance analyzer," said Sally. "Why don't you ask him to hook it up?"

Just then, Philip Napoleon called, and Demo answered him on his cell phone.

"Is this the Pizza Hut?" said Philip.

"Ummm, no...."

"I want two pepperonis, two bottles of Perrier, and an assortment of whips and chains."

"This isn't the Pizza Hut," said Demo. "It's a multiple personality disorder and we want analysis."

"You do? I wonder why. Can't you all just get along?"

"We don't sleep together anymore."

"Really? I'm afraid you can't be punished for that. You have to do something naughty before you can be spanked."

"Are you interested in therapizing us? We pay well."

"I should warn you that you don't own therapy," said Philip. "You lease it. You sign a lease for a specified term and at the end of the term you get a certificate for perfect attendance."

"Will that help us?"

"You can use it to get a driving license and social security number. Give me your credit card number and I'll set things in motion. You can trust me, by the way; I'm authentic."

Demo recited his Visa number and expiry date.

"When can we start?" he said.

"As soon as the transaction is approved. There we go; I'm all ears."

This took Demo by surprise. He was hesitant at first, reluctant to discuss intimate matters while everyone in the palace was eavesdropping, but at length he got into the swing of things and invented a lot of exciting quirks that had everyone listening with baited breath.

Then he told Philip all about Demo's Leitmotiv, his leitmotiv.

"Aha!" said Philip. "Imaginary companion disorder."

"But he's not imaginary; he's real. Other people can see him. He goes around in a hockey goalie's outfit."

"How long have you hated hockey goalies?"

"I don't--"

"Was your mother a goalie? Did she often trek off to foreign lands to play hockey?"

"My mother was an accountant. She added things up and subtracted things from other things."

"I see. An accountant AND a goalie. How do you feel about that?"

"She WASN'T a goalie!"

"Are you sure? Are you absolutely positive. Can you say with complete certainty that she never, never sneaked out in the middle of the night to play in the NHL? Perhaps for the New York Yankees?"

"The Toronto Maple Leafs," said Demo.

"The who?"

"If she played hockey, which she didn't, she would have played for the Toronto Maple Leafs."

"Ah, I see. You resent her because her team hardly ever won the Stanley Cup."

"I don't care about the Stanley cup."

"How long have you resented the Stanley Cup?"

"I don't hate the Stanley Cup. I hate my other personalities. Is there any hope for me?"

"Of course, of course! Treatment for multiple personality disorder begins with violent confrontation. The surviving personality gets to decide who you REALLY are."

"So you think I should find the other personality?"

"Find it and kill it before it kills you. Fight dirty. I can lend you a copy of 'Career Advancement in the Professions', if you like."

"This will solve the problem?"

"It's a start. No problem is ever completely solved without a long and expensive program of therapy. We have to treat your past life too, you know."

"I don't have a past life."

"Oh yes you do. I can spot it from here. In a past life you were an ape."

"You mean one of those things with a big red bum."

"Some of them have blue bums. It depends on your party affiliation. How long have you hated your big red bum?"

"I don't HAVE a big red bum; I'm not an ape."

"Are you sure? Have you checked recently?"

Demo grew anxious. He checked his reflection in a convenient reflecting pool. He could just make out a vaguely duck-like shape, but what if it was only a delusion? What if he was really an ape?

"How do you feel now?" asked Philip.

"Like an ape."

"Good, good. We're making progress. This was your way of getting back at your mother. You grew an enormous red bum. And you ate TV dinners, without microwaving them. It's a wonder you didn't get liver flukes. You should examine yourself to make sure you don't have any of those things."

"What do they look like?"

"Little crawling things that look like ship's anchors. Sometimes when you have a lot of turbulent gas, they drag the bottom. Have you noticed any unusual itching lately?"

Demo developed a sudden itch in the hind quarters. He felt movement deep within his stomach and bowel.

"How do you feel?" asked Philip.

"Much worse since I talked to you, thank you," said Demo.

"Good, good. This is how therapy works. First we make you feel terrible. When you are ready to commit suicide, we tell you it was all a delusion. You'll be so relieved to find out none of it was true, you'll immediately get over your psychosis and adopt a new one."

"What new one?"

"The feeling that everything is okay, and you'll be fine. That's a delusion. In the meantime, I'll make up some prescription health food for you, using organic weeds I harvest in my backyard. I can FedEx them to you this afternoon."

"I don't like health food," said Demo. "It makes me want to kill my therapist."

"This is special health food," said Philip. "It makes you want to kill YOURSELF."

Demo had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 66: BABY HAGGIS

The little band of heroes marched along the yellow brick road towards Camelot, goaded on through the forest primeval and various daunting dangers by dreams of passion and romance.

Actually it wasn't a yellow brick road; it was an old Roman road that wandered in and out of the mysterious megaliths.

Some people say there'd be a lot more megaliths in present day Wales if the Sassenachs hadn't come over and pilfered them, the way they pilfered the Elgin marbles.

Practically everyone in England has a megalith--the place is crawling with them.

In Wales, however, there is a plethora of bare spots, all that remains of wonderful megaliths that have been lifted out in their entirety and carried away in Zeppelins to England, a country full of people who like very short names.

No grass will grow in these bare places, of course, because the ancient megalith builders always selected sacred ground for their erections.

I know, I know!

Anyway, they built on bare, windswept plains, on the ruins of much earlier erections. These were the long-lost artifacts of ancient Babylonians, who had buried all trace of their early explorations and settlements in Wales.

Before the Babylonians, of course, were emissaries from Atlantis, who had been looking for the Picts. Foiled by an error in geography, they had given up their search for the Picts in despair, had buried their machines for making crop circles, and had departed in their black helicopters, empty handed.

What goes 'round comes 'round.

The time is fast approaching, however, when a young Welsh child, guided by a vision sent by the Speaking Hippopotamus, will unlock the secret code that reveals everything--who really built the pyramids and what they're for; what to do with a crop circle when it shows up in the north forty; why the men in black helicopters will have nothing to do with Technicolor, and why aliens can't stop abducting people.

In the meantime, Demo's Leitmotiv and his new chums trudged wearily along the road and o'er the lea, eating Welsh Rarebit and drinking lime fizzers.

"I'm getting awfully tired of Welsh Rarebit," said Demo's Leitmotiv. "Don't we have anything else?"

"There's some cracker crumbs," said Chester. "They're quite tasty if you don't mind the dead flies."

"No thanks," said Demo's Leitmotiv "I gave at the office."

"It's an acquired taste," said Edwardian. "Like maggots."

"Maggots don't stick to your ribs," said Chester. "Ten minutes after you've eaten them,

you're hungry again."

"Do you chaps like haggis?" said Sweet Gas. "There's one up the road."

"Where?" squawked Neville, jumping a foot off the ground. "Where is it? Kill it before it strikes!"

"Eat it first, then kill it," said Digger. "I'm so hungry, I could eat something cooked by an English chef."

"I saw it running into the trees across the road," said Chester.

"After it!" shouted Digger. Then he gave a war whoop and charged up the road.

Demo's Leitmotiv followed. It was a measure of his hunger for anything but Welsh Rarebit that he'd risk life and limb for a bit of haggis.

Haggis, as you know, is a wily and dangerous predator, though not quite as dangerous as drunken ducks armed with shotguns and hunting licenses.

"Wait!" shouted Neville. "Haggises are dangerous when they're cornered. You have to sneak up on them and catch them by surprise."

"Nonsense!" said Digger. "They don't have any teeth! What do you think they'll do-- gum you?"

"They swell up and hiss," said Neville. "If you get too close, they spit venom at you."

"They only do that when they're defending their little ones," said Edwardian. "Usually they just curl up and feign death until you go away."

"How do you know they're just feigning?" said Chester. "What if they're really dead? What if they're road kill? You could get a disgusting disease that would make you turn green and swell up like a balloon filled with noxious matter."

"You'll never make an Edwardian poet if you talk like that, my friend," said Edwardian.

"Noxious matter isn't so bad," said Sweet Gas. "Anything's better than flatulence from rotting coal."

"Feigning death implies intelligence and forethought," said Demo's Leitmotiv. "I wonder if haggises have read Beatrice Potter on the art of war."

"Stop it!" said Neville. "You're making me feel sorry for them."

"Don't you like Beatrice Potter?" said Demo's Leitmotiv.

"Of course I do," said Neville. "But I prefer Mister Rogers."

"You'll have to toughen up if you want to be a Welsh miner," said Digger. "I, myself, prefer Husserl."

"Husserl had an exaggerated respect for mathematics," said Neville. "Math isn't everything. It doesn't explain the Canadian government, for instance."

"Have you ever heard of Chaos Theory?" said Demo's Leitmotiv.

What if the haggis is somebody's mother?" said Edwardian. "I should write a poem about it. Something about haggises glistening in the rains of Tewksbury, with the trams."

"Don't start feeling sorry for haggises," said Digger. "We have to cull the herds from time to time or they get completely out of control."

"Even Edwardian poets know that," said Edwardian. "We did support World War I, you know."

"Rather bloodthirsty of you, I should think," said Neville.

"We supported the IDEA of World War I," said Edwardian. "Patriotism and all that. Some of us went off to contribute our body parts to the mud and decay, but generally speaking, Edwardian poets avoid reality as much as possible. It smells bad and besides, it bites."

"Especially in the trenches," said Neville.

"Somebody should tell the haggises to use family planning, like everyone else," said Demo's Leitmotiv. I disapprove of excessive breeding. A little bit of forethought and there'd be room for everyone."

"What's family planning?" said Digger.

"You count the storks," said Neville. "After you get to a certain number, you send the rest of them back where they came from."

"Back where?" said Digger. "Where do storks come from?"

"How should I know, old fellow!" said Neville, embarrassed. "Office parties, I suppose. Student orgies. Faculty picnics."

"I can't hear you!" yelled Chester, covering his ears. "I'm not listening to this!"

"Does anyone know for certain?" said Digger. "This could be important. If we don't get control of the haggis population, we could all be swept away in a tidal wave of immigration."

"They come from Amsterdam, I think," said Neville.

"The Goths have an aircraft called the Stork," said Demo's Leitmotiv.

"What's so special about Amsterdam?" said Jones.

"It has canals, like Venice, only they make beer instead of wine," said Neville.

"I don't think it's the same kind of canal," said Demo's Leitmotiv. "The canals in Amsterdam don't have gondoliers."

"I didn't know you made wine out of canals," said Digger.

"Not as such," said Neville. "You tend to use grapes. It gives the wine a certain wine-like quality."

"You grow the grapes in the canals?" said Digger. "Like water lilies? I never!"

"Umm, I think the grapes like the IDEA of the canals," said Neville. "They like to think about canals while they're growing in their vineyards, high in the fiords of Tuscany."

"So what's wrong with Amsterdam?" said Digger. "Why can't the grapes dream of canals on the hills of Amsterdam?"

"Amsterdam doesn't have any hills," said Neville. "It's flat. This is one of the features of Amsterdam."

"Like Winnipeg," said Demo's Leitmotiv.

"Sort of," said Neville, who had only the vaguest idea of where Winnipeg was. Somewhere in the British Commonwealth--Nigeria, perhaps, or South Africa.

"Does Winnipeg have canals?" said Digger.

"I don't think so," said Demo's Leitmotiv. "I think it has a Doge."

"And gondolas?" said Digger. "Does it have real gondolas that ply the canals, singing beautiful love songs: Oh, when the moon's in the sky like a big pizza pie, that's Amore--"

"No, no; I think--"

"So that's where the storks go?" said Digger.

"Well, some of them," said Demo's Leitmotiv, who wasn't quite sure what a stork was. "The storks of Winnipeg admire themselves in the moonlit canals while the grapes dream in their hillside vineyards above the city."

"So how does this family planning thing work?" said Digger. "The storks eat the grapes and forget how to fly?"

"Well," said Demo's Leitmotiv, "You hand out special calendars to the storks so they can calculate which days--"

"I'm covering my ears," said Chester. "I can't hear this."

"WRONG!" yelled Neville. "You count the storks."

"Whatever for?" said Edwardian. "One haggis is too many; that's all the counting you need to do."

"The HAGGISES are supposed to count the storks," said Neville. "That's how they stop having so many babies."

"Huh?" said several voices.

"When you get to a certain number, you cut them off," said Neville. "You send the extra storks back where they came from."

"But if you send back a lot of storks with baby haggises, what will happen to the babies?" said Digger, who was nearly weeping now. Digger, like all Welsh miners, had a tender heart.

"Ummm," said Neville thoughtfully. Actually, he had no idea. Academics frequently lack experience in important areas of human activity. That's why no academic should ever be allowed anywhere near the red button attached to the nuclear device that will put an end to

war and everything else on Tockworld.

"You could start an adopt-a-haggis program," said Demo's Leitmotiv.

"Is that like an adopt-a-highway program," said Edwardian. "My old ma adopted a highway last year. It's no end of trouble, patching it in the spring, sprinkling it to keep the dust down--"

"I can't stand this!" said Demo's Leitmotiv. "I'm never going to be able to eat another haggis again!"

"Good gracious me; a fate worse than death!" said Neville.

"Shhh!" said Edwardian. "I saw movement in the underbrush; I think it's hiding in the trees, like a partridge."

"Partridges hide in pear trees and bite anyone who tries to decorate the tree for Llama's Eve," said Demo's Leitmotiv. "Everyone knows that. There's even a song about it. Partridges, pear trees, and maids leaping around in agony from partridge bites."

"Careful; it might be a woolly mammoth," said Sweet Gas.

"Where have you been for the last ten thousand years?" said Chester. "There aren't anymore mammoths. They went south."

"Says who?" growled Sweet Gas.

"The ornithologists; that's who, smarty pants!" said Chester. "We parrots chased them away because they took up too much room. No one should be allowed to grow that large. Present company excepted, of course."

"Thank you," said Sweet Gas. "You're pretty large yourself."

"Parrots are allowed a certain latitude in the girth department. It's a defense mechanism, to protect us from predatory armadillos."

"Shhh!" said Edwardian, creeping up on the ditch beside the road. "There it goes again, rustling in the undergrowth."

"Maybe it's rubbing its legs together," said Chester.

"Haggises don't have legs!" said Digger. "They communicate by spitting venom."

Everyone gathered around the rustling undergrowth.

"No way I'm going to eat that poor haggis," said Demo's Leitmotiv. "I never knew about the storks with baby haggises. We should help them. There must be millions of people just itching to adopt a haggis."

"You think so?" said Neville.

"Of course. They're cute and loveable, and you can teach them tricks."

"How do you raise a haggis?" said Neville.

"The same way you raise a sirloin steak or a blood pudding," said Digger. "With a frying pan and a bit of oregano."

Demo's Leitmotiv gasped in horror.

"I should say not!" he exclaimed. "Haggises are very sensitive."

"I had a haggis once," said Neville. "It died."

"It was probably depressed," said Demo's Leitmotiv. "Haggises can't stand rejection. They curl up into a ball and withdraw into themselves."

"If you ask me, they should toughen up," said Digger. "They could learn something from Welsh miners. There's no room for depression down in the mines."

"You can't use tough love on a haggis," said Demo's Leitmotiv. "They like to be stroked and you should read stories to them every night at bed time. They like Snow White and the Seven Haggises."

"It's moving again!" said Edwardian.

"Careful!" said Demo's Leitmotiv. "Don't upset him; you'll make him cry." He inched closer and said in a gentle voice, "Come on out, sweetheart. No one's going to hurt you. We're all friends here; we love you."

"Especially with a bit of tomato ketchup," said Digger, pushing past Demo's Leitmotiv and thrusting his face into the tall grass.

Suddenly he screamed.

"Ow, ouch, ow! Mommy! It hurts; it hurts! Get it off!"

When he straightened up, everyone could see an enormous haggis dangling from his beak. The cunning beast had fooled everyone into thinking it was a helpless, loveable infant, and then it had leaped, clamping onto Digger's beak with the ferocity of an enraged octopus.

"Get it off, get it off!" he screamed.

"Oooh, that looks bad!" said Edwardian.

"Do you think he'll have a beak left after this?" said Sweet Gas.

"It's bound to be dented and twisted," said Edwardian.

"So how do we get the creature from darkest Edinburgh off?" said Chester.

"Don't blame it on Edinburgh, man," said Edwardian. "Haggises are a worldwide phenomenon, like plankton. No city in the world is entirely free of them."

"I'm not touching it!" said Neville.

"We could yank it off," said Demo's Leitmotiv.

Digger screamed in rage and shook his fists at Demo's Leitmotiv.

"We might pull his beak off," said Edwardian. "He'd never forgive us."

"What's it doing NOW?" said Chester, alarmed. "Oh my gosh! It's opening its jaws wider. LOOK AT THE SIZE OF THE THING. IT'S GOT HINGED JAWS, LIKE A SNAKE! IT'S SUCKING HIM IN. OOOOH! I CAN'T WATCH!"

"The Haggis from the Black Lagoon," said Demo's Leitmotiv, fascinated.

"The Godzilla of haggises," said Neville.

"Maybe it came from Tokyo Bay," said Edwardian. "It might have been something the Japanese were experimenting with in the forties--a new kind of torpedo."

"We could sprinkle salt on it," said Demo's Leitmotiv.

"What if it came from the canals of Winnipeg?" said Edwardian. "I've heard Winnipeg is an exotic locale. Anything could happen there!"

"Help me!" screamed Digger, who was slowly, inexorably, being sucked into the dark maw of the haggis.

"I know how to stop it!" said Sweet Gas. "I'll fart!"

And he did just that. Before anyone had a chance to scream and run away, he fired off a volley of ripping tales.

Chester, meanwhile, by mere coincidence, had been playing with a box of matches. The inevitable happened. A match flared, the bluish flame danced and sniffed the air. Once it caught a whiff of Sweet Gas's handiwork, it hesitated, as though not quite believing its luck, then it got down to work.

There was a loud bang that knocked everyone flat on their backs.

The haggis limped away screaming. Digger was left whimpering and sobbing as he gently massaged his beak.

"Ooh, look at the dent!" said Edwardian.

"Look at the fang marks," said Neville.

"Haggises don't have fangs," said Demo's Leitmotiv.

"This one did," said Edwardian.

"Oh, oh!" said Demo's Leitmotiv. "I wonder if the haggises are mutating."

"Maybe the storks are experimenting on them," said Neville.

"You mean inserting recombinant DNA?" said Demo's Leitmotiv. "That's against the Geneva Convention."

"Nobody pays the slightest bit of attention to the Geneva Convention," said Neville.

"We're doomed," said Edwardian. "I must write a poem about it. The rain in Tewksbury and the beauty of public works."

"Maybe it was an alien haggis," said MO. "We'll have to warn people."

"No one will believe us!" said Neville.

"They believed Orson Welles," said MO.

"That was in the days of radio," said Sweet Gas. "People are more ironic now; if you

told them Tockworld was being invaded by alien haggises, they'd just put out bowls of milk for the aliens and go back to their TV's."

Digger had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 67:JOHNNY RUTABAGA SEED

"The haggis is gone," said Neville. "We should have examined it properly while we had the chance."

"YOU examine it!" said Digger grumpily. "I need a beak transplant. What if that monster gave me tetanus?"

"Where do you suppose it went?" said Edwardian.

"It probably ran off to get reinforcements," said Digger. "Tonight, when we're sleeping on the cold, cold ground, a war party of evil haggises will sneak up on us, tear off our beaks, and steal our rutabagas."

"Trolls don't HAVE beaks," said Sweet Gas.

"Learn to live with it!" said Digger. "We can't all be ducks."

"I'm not asking for much," said Sweet Gas. "I can do without a beak, but a bowel would be appreciated."

"Are you saying a bowel is more significant than a BEAK?" yelled Digger. "What are they teaching kids in school these days?"

"Beaks aren't very good at digesting things," said Sweet Gas milMoy.

"So? Does a bowel make you look cool and handsome? Does a bowel help you get a date?"

"When I want a date, I just perform the troll courtship ritual," said Sweet Gas. "Have you ever seen it? The troll courtship ritual is very interesting."

"So is the duck courtship ritual," said Digger.

"All of the male trolls get together and have rockslides," said Sweet Gas. "It impresses the females. The troll who makes the biggest rock slide gets the prettiest female."

"That's not as exciting as sticking your neck out and wiggling your bottom," said Digger, sticking his neck out and wiggling his bottom.

"About the haggis," said Chester. "I wonder if it's still dangerous."

"Of course it is," said Neville. "It can't have gone far. It was obviously famished or it wouldn't have attacked Digger's beak. It will probably find another ditch and lie in wait for some unsuspecting traveler. Haggises have to consume enormous quantities of beaks to maintain their body temperature."

"You mean they're reptilian?" said Edwardian. "Like spam artists?"

"That is incorrect," said Neville. "They're warm blooded, like sloths. I'm surprised at you, Edwardian; I thought Edwardian poets were sticklers for detail and research."

"You're thinking of the Victorians," said Edwardian. "They wrote a lot of stuff about Arthurian and Homeric haggises. We Edwardians are more interested in pre-Raphaelite haggises in diaphanous dresses."

"If that evil haggis is lying in wait, somebody should warn people," said Chester.

"Somebody already thought of that," said Digger. "There's a sign at the edge of the road."

"I see it," said Neville, pointing to a yellow caution sign that said, 'Danger! Watch for Falling Haggises, Next Ten Miles'."

"What good is that?" said Digger. "Are we supposed to walk along the road looking up to make sure we're not bonked on the head by falling haggises?"

"I wonder what they fall out of," said Sweet Gas. "zeppelins, perhaps? There aren't any mountains around here."

"They fall out of the sky sometimes," said Edwardian. "This is their migration route. In winter, the haggises leave Edinburgh and begin the long trek south to Leicestershire where they bask in the balmy air. They always return to the same nest in the haggisery, on the cliffs

of Leicestershire. They don't bother anyone. They cling to the rocks and use photosynthesis."

"I didn't know haggises could fly."

"I suppose haggises can do anything, once they set their minds to it," said Neville.

"It's just like Hegel said," proclaimed Edwardian. "Reality is what you get when you aren't looking'."

"Did Hegel say that?" said Neville. "I thought it was Groucho Marx."

"About photosynthesis," said Digger. "It requires sunlight, doesn't it?"

"Generally speaking, yes," said Neville.

"In Wales, in the winter?" said Digger.

"They supplement it with crumbs from little old ladies who come by in their mine carts and give them scraps of coal," said Neville. "It gets them through the winter."

"The haggises of Leicestershire are an endangered species," said Chester. "Their habitat is threatened by cliff-dwelling Jersey cows that have been genetically modified to cling to the crags like mountain goats. It's a World Bank project, to variegate the Welsh economy."

"Wales is a highly industrialized country with crime and soap operas!" said Digger, offended. "We don't need the World Bank." "

"There's always room for improvement," said Sweet Gas. "Look at Argentina!"

"The Jerseys were mixed with DNA from the last woodpecker, for the clinging part you know," said Chester. "I warned them to use parrots instead, but what can you do!"

"Woodpeckers aren't extinct," said Edwardian. "I saw one last year in the House of Commons, debating an MP."

"That was probably the last woodpecker," said Chester. "They're all gone now. They couldn't peck their way through the bark on the genetically modified trees. Mysterious people in green helicopters went around drilling little holes for them so they wouldn't starve, but it was useless. The creepy crawlies who normally live in tree bark had mutated."

"Into what?" said Digger, not liking the sound of this.

"Subliminal ads," said Chester. "They lie in wait on the branches now, and when some unsuspecting ornithologist passes beneath, looking for lost woodpeckers, they leap onto his unprotected scalp and burrow into the soft brain parts, where they secrete ads. They make deals with powerful ad agencies to determine which products get special treatment. That's why you should always wear a hat when you go into the forest."

"Dear me!" said Neville.

"Yes, I know," said Chester. "Anyway, the cliff-dwelling haggises of Leicestershire peck their way through the cliffs, looking for rock beetles. That of course has threatened the chalk excreting cliff beetles."

"I know about them," said Neville. "They're like coral reefs; they build chalk cliffs all over the world."

"You mean to say all of our gorgeous, picturesque chalk cliffs are nothing more than beetle dung!" said Digger, scandalized. "I thought they were greatly compressed ancient marine life."

"SOME chalk cliffs are like that," said Neville. "The Supreme Being made lots of different kinds so that taxonomists would have something to do. "

"What a world!" said Chester. "The chalk cliffs are endangered, and now the chalk-excreting beetles are being consumed by greedy cliff-dwelling haggises. Oh woe!"

"What about the fossils?" said Edwardian. "Are they excreted along with the chalk?"

"Some fossils were deposited by marine creatures who got tired of dragging enormous shells and exoskeletons around. Others were glued to the chalk by fundamentalists. "

"Egads! Will they stop at nothing!" exclaimed Neville.

"It's a little private joke," said Edwardian. "People think fundamentalists have no sense of humor, but they do enjoy a good laugh."

"You mean it's all false, about the dinosaurs and such?" said Neville. "It's all a hoax

perpetrated by villainous fundamentalists?"

"Some fossils are genuine," said Edwardian. "People don't realize the real dinosaurs were all very big ducks. Rumor has it there's a lost world somewhere in Wales where they all survived. They lived 2,000 years ago, by the way."

"What happened to them?" said Digger suspiciously. "They didn't go down into the mines did they? I'd hate to meet some outrageously large monster while I'm drilling through the coal face."

"They got tired of being enormous," said Edwardian. "What could they do?"

"I'm tired of walking," said Sweet Gas. "Can't we call a cab?"

"That's what you get for not being a parrot," said Chester. "If you were a parrot like me, you could flit about in the trees and take lots of breaks while you twitter on a branch."

With that, he flew up to a convenient branch and settled himself, offering all and sundry a supercilious grin.

This idyllic scene was interrupted by an ominous cracking noise; then the bough shook, and down plummeted baby.

"I meant to do that," said Chester.

"You broke that tree," said Digger. "It's not as if we have a surfeit of trees in Wales."

"No I didn't."

"Yes you did! The branch snapped. Look, it's on the ground."

"Branches fall down all the time," said Chester. "The trees get tired of sticking them out all the time."

"Trees are endangered," said Digger.

"Relax!" said Chester. "I'll glue the branch back onto the tree, okay! Anybody got any masking tape?"

"I've got some," said Edwardian, and he rummaged through his poetry repair kit.

Everyone crowded around, because you don't often get to see the secrets of the poetry trade.

Edwardian, conscious of his new-found celebrity status, produced a small, puce box with a flourish.

"What's all this?" said Neville.

There was an eraser for rubbing out doodles and pizza stains, a pair of scissors for cutting out extremely bad lines of verse, some thread for sewing in allusions to other poems, an aerosol spray can of whiteout, and some masking tape to mask off a few good lines while spraying the others with the whiteout.

Chester took the masking tape and picked up the broken branch.

Then he noticed something written on the broken end.

"Hey, it's a secret message!" he said. "It says, 'Made in China by the New Bright Toy Company.'"

Just then there was a tremendous yell.

"Hey, you broke my rutabaga tree!"

Everyone looked around as a strange looking duck in ragged denims and a blue shirt emerged from the undergrowth. He was pushing a wheelbarrow loaded with a sack of seeds.

"Who are you?" said Chester.

"Don't you recognize me? I'm Johnny Rutabaga Seed. Surely you've heard of me! I spend my days tramping through Wales, sowing rutabaga seeds."

"There aren't any rutabaga trees in Wales," said Digger. "The climate's all wrong."

"What do you mean there aren't!" said Johnny. "What do you call this?" He pointed to the tree with the broken branch.

"That!" snorted Chester. "That tree is a fake! It was made by the New Bright Toy Company, in China."

"Of course it's a fake," said Johnny. "It's a decoy."

"Why on Tockworld would you want a decoy?" said Chester. "Who are you trying to lure

with a fake rutabaga tree, and are you quite sure you really want to meet the sort of person who would be attracted by a fake rutabaga tree?"

"A lot you know, smarty pants!" said Johnny. "Rutabaga trees are very shy. They won't come to you unless you put out decoys to make them feel safe."

"Don't you PLANT the rutabaga trees?"

"I plant decoy rutabaga trees."

"But those are seeds," said Neville.

"That's the beauty of it! They look like seeds, but once you put them in the ground and add water to them, they turn into rutabaga tree decoys."

"Well they don't work, do they!" said Chester. "I don't see any real rutabaga trees around here. I don't think there's a rutabaga tree in the whole of Wales, outside of a few exotic tree zoos."

"They don't call them zoos; they call them office towers," said Digger.

"Do you mean to say I've been doing all this work for nothing?" said Johnny. "Thirty years of planting decoy rutabaga tree seeds from the New Bright Toy Company, and not a single real rutabaga tree has taken the bait?"

"Not one," said Chester, smirking.

Johnny rutabaga seed pulled an enormous rutabaga out of his wheelbarrow. "There's nothing left for me," he said, weeping. "I shall kill myself."

"What; with that?" said Chester.

"I shall brain myself."

Before anyone could stop him, he smacked himself on the side of the head with the big rutabaga. There was a splatting noise. It had been a very old rutabaga, and it split like a pomegranate, dribbling rutabaga matter down his face.

After a moment, Johnny looked at his hands.

"I'm afraid it's past its prime," he said. "I kept it a bit too long."

"Thirty years?" said Chester. "No wonder it smells."

"I suppose I always knew I'd fail," said Johnny. "My old ma warned me I was no good. She told me to stick to dandelions. You always know where you are with dandelions; they multiply like rabbits."

"People will thank you for what you'd done," said Edwardian. "It's a beautiful gesture."

"Are you by any chance one of Philip Napoleon's clients?" said Neville.

Suddenly Johnny was suspicious; his brows beetled over like a big Danish. "How did you know?" he said. "That's supposed to be privileged information. Are you the people who make crop circles?"

"We're not aliens," said Digger. "We're Welsh coal miners."

"Speak for yourself," said Chester. "I'm a parrot."

"And I'm an Edwardian poet from Tewksbury," said Edwardian. "Have you read my poem about the beauty of trams in the rain? It won the Tewksbury poetry festival prize."

Johnny looked at them from under his eyebrows. Then he produced a cell phone and called Philip Napoleon.

"Is that a Nokia?" said Sweet Gas. "Can you play Final Fantasy XV on it?"

"It's a magic cell phone," said Johnny. "It actually works."

"Oh good, you're with friends," said Philip. "We can schedule group therapy."

"We're not in therapy," yelled Digger. "We don't need therapy. We're Welsh miners."

"All the best people are in therapy," said Philip Napoleon. "How else will you ever know who you are? Is Demo's Leitmotiv there by the way? I have a special offer for him. Joint therapy with Demo. Winner takes all."

"I suppose we could sign up for it," said Edwardian. "We can't start right away, though; we're looking for the Wizard of Camelot."

"That's okay; we can do long-distance therapy," said Philip. "It costs more, so you get bragging rights."

"I'm game," said Digger.

"Will that be separate checks, or do you want to fight over the bill?" said Philip Napoleon.

"Umm, separate checks, I think," said Sweet Gas. "Do you take igneous rocks?"

"I'll ask my secretary.

There was a shouted, "Josephine?", then a thump, and a sharp voice snapped: "Not now! I'm busy."

"I have a group therapy session set up. There'll be a bonus and an extra gift in your Llama's Eve stocking."

"You have too many patients already."

"I know, I know. I've been very bad. Punishment would be richly deserved."

"Not now! I'm uploading our patient records into the NATIOANAL GEOGRAPHIC server."

"I'll get on with it, then, shall I?"

"Get out!"

"Yes, right, good, good."

There were various sound effects after this, including footsteps, a creaking noise, the crackling of static electricity, and an organ.

"Shall we commence?" said Philip.

"Can we sit down?" said Digger. "My feet hurt."

Just then, Edwardian noticed movement in the undergrowth.

"What was that?" he said. "Another haggis?"

"How long have you hated haggises," said Philip.

"No, it couldn't be a haggis!" said Digger. "It was too big."

"I don't hate haggises," said Edwardian. "I've known several haggises. They're always polite and quiet."

"Unless they're tearing off your beak," said Digger.

"Some people are difficult. What can I say?"

There was movement again, then a huge beak poked through a gap in the trees.

"Oh my gosh! It's a duck-billed Tokyosaurus!" yelled Neville. "What's it doing here? They're extinct."

"Can such things be?" said Digger.

"Look; there's an enormous penguin!" screamed Edwardian.

"Egads!" said Neville. "We've stumbled into the Lost, Lost World."

"You mean the one that doesn't have any roadside hamburger chains?" said Chester. "Let's leave this place."

"We can't!" said Neville. "We have to go through it to get to Camelot."

"How do you feel about lost, lost worlds?" said Philip.

Suddenly a tyrannosaurus canard stuck its head above the trees. Its beak gaped open, exposing ranks of carious teeth.

"Oh, oh!" said Neville. "Stand perfectly still, stop breathing, and pretend you're an academic. Maybe it will leave us alone."

But it wasn't to be. The tyrannosaurus had spotted them. It threw back its head, opened its cavernous jaws even wider, and uttered an ear-splitting QUACK!

"Mooooooo!" yelled Digger.

"How do you feel about cows?" said Philip Napoleon, but no one was listening.

Meanwhile, back in ancient Babylon, Demo felt a tremor go through him. "My leitmotiv is in trouble, he said.

"I'm glad you're back," said Philip Napoleon. "I've got him on the other line, in group therapy."

"Is that ethical, doing two therapies at once?"

"Of course it's ethical. We all have to make as much money as we can or the communists will win."

CHAPTER 68:MANICHEAN STICK HANDEMO'S LEITMOTIVR

Meanwhile, on the Orient Express, Polydoor was making his way to the front of the train to do battle with the good and evil Freddy Manichean Heresy.

The cunning Freddy had uncoupled the passenger cars from the engine, as you know, they were racing out of control down a mountain side, keeping pace with the engine.

The engineer had died.

The Hippopotamus of Fate, in keeping with the gravity of the situation, hung in the balance as the acolyte made his way through a carload of Scottish art historians who were on their way to view a recently discovered Carl Barks original.

In case you're wondering, it was a painting of the duck family on an expedition to find the origins of the Burma Shave road signs.

Anyway, Polydoor was in serious trouble.

The train, racing out of control down the mountain, closely following the hapless engine, rocked wildly. The driver, unable to forestall tragedy on account of his recent demise, could only wait helplessly for Polydoor to revivify him.

The mere thought of such a challenge would have driven a lesser being to drink. Polydoor, however was made of sterner stuff.

Polydoor girded his loins, but his heart wasn't in it. Love and lust were at war inside him, sapping his strength and undermining his will.

On the one hand, there was his lovely Babette, the most exquisite, thoughtful and tender spider an acolyte could possibly want. Polydoor kept seeing her in his mind's eye, a gorgeous creature feeding liquefied dead things to her little ones.

So deeply in love was Polydoor, he kept some dead flies in his pocket and stroked them from time to time to remind himself of his sweetheart.

On the other hand, there was the seductive Lucy Borden. Polydoor had never met anyone before who burned with a fiery desire to caress his hump. He felt empowered, as though his hump had become an important votive object.

He wanted to...he wanted....

NO! he told himself. If you are in love with a spider, you stick to that spider and you do not cheat on her!

But in his mind's eye he saw Lucy in nothing but feathers, stroking his hump and making little quacking noises. He was desperate. How could he do battle with Freddy in this state! He needed advice.

But who could he talk to? Who among his new chums cared about the inner Polydoor as opposed to the celebrity acolyte?

Then an image flashed through his mind, a remembered face.

RatDuck! He thought. Of course! Who else should I consult but my best friend?

Actually he was only an acquaintance, but extreme danger leads to quick promotion as we all know.

Polydoor turned to gaze out the window at crags zipping merrily by while he dialed RatDuck's office, a tiny den of iniquity above a shop devoted to the sale of wholesome religious artifacts and enlightening tracts.

At this time of day, RatDuck would be sitting in a comfy chair in front of an artificial fire, reading investigative reports on important politicians and business people.

Unfortunately, RatDuck was little help.

"Pick the lady with strange desires," he said. "You can't go wrong with depravity."

"But I love Babette!" wailed Polydoor.

"And that, my friend, is the source of your problem. Love interferes with secret and unnatural desires; it makes you boring."

"I don't care! I want to marry Babette. I want to put temptation out of my mind forever."

"Now that is a perversion!" said RatDuck.

"You think I'm doomed?" said Polydoor.

"There's nothing wrong with marriage, old chap, but it does play the devil with the acolyting business. It's very difficult helping your boss take over the world when you have to keep checking in with your spouse and arranging to pick up milk or potatoes on your way home. I think you'd better give Philip Napoleon a call. Maybe he can help you. He's good at long-distance analysis, you know."

Polydoor was taken aback.

"Philip Napoleon? The lunatic?"

"Experienced lunatics make the best shrinks. They know when you're cheating."

"I suppose I could give it a shot."

Polydoor thanked his friend and dialed Philip Napoleon. He felt unaccountably nervous. What if Philip actually answered? What if he could sense abnormal virtue like cheap perfume?"

"The meter's running," said a voice. "Nothing personal, mind you; I need all the money I can get to raise a new army. It costs a lot more to fight those English piggdogs today than it did the first time around. Wellington is going to pay--"

"Can you help me?" said Polydoor.

"Depends. How much money have you got?"

"As much as you need."

"I have a special rate on group therapy now. You might find it helpful."

"Ummm...."

"That's a good start."

"I'm in love. It's interfering with my work."

"How long have you hated work?"

"I don't."

"There's your problem, you see. A warped sense of values."

"Can you help me or are you just going to stand around pretending?"

"Ooh, hostility. I like that in a patient. How long have you hated your mother?"

"I don't HAVE a mother," snapped Polydoor. "I was grown in an artificial hump implanted in a genetically modified cow."

"This is not the time to criticize modern science; I'm supposed to listen to your boring dreams, your pitiful fantasies, your imagined slights."

"Yes doctor," said Polydoor submissively. If Polydoor had one failing, it was an exaggerated respect for authority figures. What greater authority figure than Napoleon?

"Now, back to work!" said Philip. "You're in love with a spider. That's good. That's very good. I admire your creative approach to cross-dressing. Most acolytes settle for rotting simulacrum of themselves, or they dig something up. This is very imaginative. I envy you!"

"You do? But what about my conflict? What about my secret desires for the seductive Lucy Borden and forbidden passions involving lots of hump stroking etc."

"Dispense with your guilt by setting aside a little quiet time when you can think about nice things you'll do for Babette. Buy her some thistles, or chocolate-covered dung beetles. Take her out to the garbage dump and watch the flies."

"But--"

"Time's up!" shouted Philip. "Next session in three hours. Do you have air miles?"

Polydoor grew red in the face and yelled insults into his cell phone, but Philip had already hung up.

Polydoor ground his teeth. He felt terrible, but at the same time, he felt marvelous. Acolytes love being in a rage.

"That Philip Napoleon is a genius," he said to himself. "I must pay him a visit, strangle him, remove his body parts, and give them to Cuther's Lath Thand."

"Polydoor, baby! I never knew!" quoth Cuther.

"Where have you been?" Polydoor demanded. "I missed your goading and trash talk."

"Goth, thankth! The engineer died and I wath about to partake of hith rotting corpth."

"Who's driving the train?"

"The engineer."

"That's all right then," said Polydoor, relieved.

"It alwayth ith."

"I'm ready to do battle. I feel powerful and decayed."

Just then, a shadow loomed over them.

"Oh, oh!" said Cuther. "Heeeeeth baaaaaack. Freddy ith here. And gueth what hith choice of weaponth ith?"

Polydoor shook his head. Was there no end to the humiliation in his life. NOW he had to do battle with a super villain armed with a HOCKEY STICK!

CHAPTER 69:DOMESTICATED DINOSAURS

Meanwhile, Johnny Rutabaga Seed was about to get eaten by a Tyrannosaurus Canard when an odd looking duck in a floppy hat, a Hawaiian shirt and puce shorts beckoned them.

"Hsst!" he said. "This way!"

Demo's Leitmotiv, who had had quite enough of surprises and strangers with odd habits, peered suspiciously at him.

"Walk this way," said the stranger. "There's no need to panic."

"How can we walk THAT way when you aren't even walking?" demanded Chester. "If you want us to walk THAT way, you have to give us a demonstration."

Demo's Leitmotiv ignored this terrible joke as best he could.

Then the floppy duck went straight up to the quacking tyrannosaurus.

There was a stunned silence. Everyone held their breath.

They weren't all holding the same breath, of course; each one had his own breath.

"Down boy!" yelled the strange duck. "Down I say!"

"QUAAAAACK!" said the big lizard duck.

"Shoo, shoo, bad, bad!" said the floppy duck. "Down I say! Down boy!"

Demo's Leitmotiv got ready to shout a heroic warning and then run away, but there was no need. The big canard looked at the floppy duck with loving eyes. It was very excited; it wagged its tail, jumped up and down, and made happy little quacking noises, like a rotweiler.

"I love you too, Humbert," said the floppy duck. "Down boy, DOWN!"

The big canard gave the floppy duck a sappy grin and wiggled its bottom. Then it sat down on a passing Land Rover full of spam artists looking for new email addresses, and squashed it.

"Extraordinary," said Neville. "That duck must be an academic!"

"I'm going to write a poem about this," said Edwardian. "The beauty of dinosaurs, like trams in the rain, makes the heart beat like a fleet-footed vole."

"I think it's a disgusting and humiliating way to treat dinosaurs," said Sweet Gas. "It's wrong to domesticate them. You should either let them run free in theme parks, or kill them and eat them. I wonder if it would mind very much if I ate it."

"Trolls eat dinosaurs?" said Johnny Rutabaga Seed, scandalized.

Johnny, as you've probably guessed by now, was a Vegetarian; he only ate Vegans.

"Of course we eat dinosaurs," said Sweet Gas. "They're considered a delicacy. They're getting hard to find now, because of globalization, so we have to settle for paleontologists."

"You don't eat Welsh miners?" said Digger, offended. "What's wrong with Welsh miners?"

"Welsh miners are much too valuable to be eaten by trolls," said Sweet Gas.

"Edwardian poets and academics, however, are fair game. There's a surfeit."

"Hey!" said Neville and Edwardian, as they surreptitiously tried to hide behind each other.

"Not to worry," said Sweet Gas. "I'm on a diet--I don't eat anymore; I accrete."

"That's a very sad story," said Edwardian, weeping. "I've just written an Edwardian

poem about it. Would you like to hear it?"

"No! Never! Stop!" everyone yelled.

"Felicitous and happy, the fleet-footed volosaur flitted through the plashy fens...." began Edwardian.

"I shall be forced to dismember you on the rack if you continue," said Neville. "And don't think I don't have one; I use it in faculty meetings when my colleagues ramble off the topic."

"I hate sad stories," said MO. "I like to laugh, preferably at other people."

The floppy duck, meanwhile, was showing off by issuing a new set of orders to the big canard.

"Good boy!" he said. "Now, Lie down! Lie down on your back and play dead."

The canard obediently rolled over on its back, crushing a Land Rover full of sadistic managers who had taken a wrong turn while driving to the Serengeti.

"Good boy!" said the floppy duck.

The big canard wiggled its feet and grinned.

"How did you do that?" asked Digger. "I can't even get my marmot to sit down."

"Oh that's Humbert for you!" said the floppy duck. "He's a real ham actor. He loves attention. He especially loves it when you scratch him under the chin. Anyone happen to have a garden rake on them?"

"How about a hockey stick?" said Demo's Leitmotiv.

"I suppose it will have to do."

The floppy duck took the stick, examined it carefully for blood, and scratched Humbert under the chin. Humber purred like a diesel locomotive.

Here's a treat for you," said Floppy Duck, and tossed him a spam artist.

Then he handed Demo's Leitmotiv his hockey stick, but Demo's Leitmotiv shook his head.

"Keep it!" he said. "I hereby bequeath you The Curse of the Hockey Stick. I'm free now. FREE AT LAST! HA, HA, HA, HA, HA! All I have to do is get rid of this stupid costume, and I'll be a happy leitmotiv. Well, sort of happy. ALMOST happy."

"Thank you for this curse," said Floppy Duck. "My name is Time Zone, by the way. I'm the curator of the Last, Lost World."

"Great creaking codpieces!" said Demo's Leitmotiv. "Is that the famous Last, Lost World, lost somewhere in mysterious Wales?"

Time Zone examined him carefully, taking in the goalie's outfit, the pads, and the various mysterious appurtenances of the priests of the hockey religion.

"You aren't in Wales anymore, Dorothy," he said.

"My name isn't Dorothy. It's...um...." Demo's Leitmotiv hesitated. He hated his name. Now was his chance to insert an alternate moniker into the collective memory of his new chums. "You can call me MO," he said.

"Oh that's an interesting name. I suppose you think you're significant just because you spell it with two capitals."

"Leave my friend alone," said Chester. "He's a lonely boy and he wants someone to love."

"Sorry," said Time Zone. "It's just that I've always wanted to be the tin duck. Tell you what; I'll do a costume exchange."

MO, aka Demo's Leitmotiv, was speechless.

"Oh alright!" said Time Zone. "I'll throw in my floppy hat too."

"DEAL!" gasped MO.

The exchange was carried out in no time, with the two principals retiring behind convenient bushes while their seconds, keeping their eyes firmly shut and holding their noses, bore away various outer garments.

When they had finished, the two ducks admired themselves in convenient bronze mirrors.

Then Time Zone wobbled about, getting used to the skates, and MO skipped about like

a gazelle being chased by a cheetah.

"This is wonderful!" he said. "Now if I can only find the wizard of Camelot and get my name changed and a few other details taken care of, my makeover will be complete.

"Not quite," said a voice on his cell phone. "No makeovers are finalized until you've paid your shrink. Remember, I have your identity on my server, and I can quite easily modify it to include the lustful thoughts of a mating weevil.

"Fear not!" said MO. "As soon as I get my new name and become the NEW ME, I'll give you your just desserts."

"Hmmm," said Philip Napoleon.

"Enough small talk!" said Time Zone. "Here's my office, by the way. It was made this morning, but it's already a complete ruin, so there you have it."

He pushed aside some bushes and the little group of adventurers looked down upon an array of concrete structures.

A stegosaurus eyed them warily from behind a fence.

There were enormous gaps in the fence, but stegosauruses are not noted for their intelligence.

MO was stunned.

"Quack," he said.

"How long have you hated dinosaurs?" said a tiny voice on his cell phone.

CHAPTER 70:McVLOD'S HAGGIS

Neville ignored the stegosauruses and looked at MO.

"I've been thinking about your name," he said. "I've got some ideas...."

"Forget about names!" said Digger, keeping a wary eye on the stegosauruses in case they suddenly realized that a hole in a fence is not, in fact, part of the fence, and can be used as an exit. "The wizard of Camelot will give him a name. The wizard helps everyone who has been exploited by the system."

"What system is that?" said Edwardian. "Is it like the International Conspiracy of Publishers Who Only Like Novels About Bitter, Ironic Victims?"

"How long have you been a victim?" said Philip Napoleon, who was still conducting long-distance group therapy from his office in Toronto.

"How does that shrink know what everybody's doing?" said Sweet Gas. "Have you got a web cam on your cell phone, MO?"

"Not to my knowledge," said MO, examining his cell phone.

"We shrinks are sensitive," said Philip. "We care about our paying clients."

"Anyway, I'm not a victim," said Edwardian. "I was speaking figuratively, using the inward eye of memory."

"Inward eye of memory?" said Neville. "Is that like the oracular ear of delusion?"

"Academics take everything too literally," said Edwardian. "It's a disease."

"It's the barter economy," said Neville. "We academics get paid in Canadian loonies, so we have to supplement our wages by amassing trade goods."

"We could all use more money," said Chester. "Maybe we should start a company. Do you think Merlin would help us?"

"He helps all downtrodden and oppressed people," said Digger.

"Of course he does!" said Neville. "That's why he lives in a castle with a lot of primitive aristocrats who spend their time bashing and hacking people into little bits."

"You can't judge primitive aristocrats by the standards of our modern age," said Digger. "They haven't read Melissa Manners."

"Primitive aristocrats aren't responsible for their actions," said Philip Napoleon, who hadn't read Melissa Manners either. "They bash and kill people because they don't have modern dentistry."

"I've never been to a dentist," said Sweet Gas. "Maybe I should have some teeth

installed. Do you think it would make me more socially acceptable?"

"Possibly," said Digger. "If you chewed your food properly, it might cut down on your truly spectacular flatulence."

"You don't get flatulence from hastily gobbled food when you don't have a bowel!" sniffed Sweet Gas. "You get it from the slow decay, compression, and transformation of organic matter trapped in your crevices."

"Perhaps if you checked your crevices more often...." said Digger.

"I'm not hearing this!" yelled Chester. "No soft porn, please."

"I MEANT his fissures!" said Digger. "His strata. The empty places left by dissolved mineral matter."

"I can't hear you! I'm pure in heart."

"ANYWAY," said Edwardian, "about money and starting a company. How does it work? Is it like a church bazaar?"

"You need something to sell, I think," said Neville. "Books on critical theory, perhaps."

"It always comes down to exploiting the workers," said Digger sourly.

"Wrong!" said Neville. "Its comes down to exploiting EVERYONE. You hire a marketing team, find out what you want people to need, design the campaign, get someone to build it for you, and send out your sales team."

Digger was horrified. "We Welsh miners hate greedy and cynical ducks who rake in all the money and leave everyone else with scraps and leftovers," he said.

"What do we have a lot of that we could create a need for?" said Edwardian, ignoring this outburst.

"Flatulence?" said Sweet Gas.

"People who AREN'T parrots," said Chester.

"Haggis?" said Digger, getting caught up in this game in spite of his pesky ideals.

"Hmmm," said Neville. "I wonder if we could create a need for haggis."

"Well the Scots already need haggis," said MO.

"I mean in the general population," said Neville.

"Haggis?" said Sweet Gas. "Ummm....."

"It might work if you gave away a dram of scotch with every haggis," said Edwardian. "We Edwardian poets make use of it all the time, for inspirational purposes of course."

"Perfect!" said Neville. "We can build a campaign around the slogan: 'Buy a haggis today; a dram of scotch in every box.'"

"Well, SPECIALLY MARKED boxes," said Edwardian. "You don't want to get carried away here. People have to buy two or three boxes, to get the dram of scotch. We can use special old scotch, from the Punjab."

"I think we're on to something," said Neville.

"Haggis, the food of the gods!" said Edwardian. "A dram of Punjabi single malt in every box!"

"We could have vegetarian haggises too," said Johnny Rutabaga Seed. "I could make a line of haggises out of rutabagas."

"Umm, I don't think...." said Neville.

"We need a celebrity to endorse our haggis," said Edwardian.

"Who would endorse a haggis?" said Time Zone.

"A cartoonist?" said MO.

"A famous porn star," said Sweet Gas.

"I'M NOT HEARING THIS!" yelled Chester.

"That's a thought," said Neville. "You could work up a slogan like, 'I eat a haggis a day and look what big things I've got!'"

"Males might not identify with that," said Digger.

"Some would," said Chester.

"We could ask Hammurabi," said MO.

"How about Tiamat the primal dragon, destroyer of worlds?" said Chester.

"What's this about dragons?" said Neville. "I thought you were a parrot."

"Sometimes. Not always. I have dragon connections, you know."

"I think we need somebody with more impact," said Neville. "Somebody from Toronto. The world would sit up and take notice of a person from Toronto."

There was a long silence while everyone thought very carefully about this.

"How about Sally Popoff, the action artist?" said MO. "We could have haggis action art contests. The winner gets a free shower to wash off the haggis, and an all expenses paid trip to Lighter Than Air, California, to see the stars."

"I don't know about this," said Edwardian. "Lighter Than Air is an odd place. How about Polydoor the acolyte? Lots of people would like to be famous repulsive acolytes, shedding bits of fungus and mold as they go about their dirty work. It's the dark underside of Edwardian poetry."

"How much clout does Polydoor have?" Neville asked.

"Ah, if it's clout you want, then you should go straight to the fountainhead and get Vlod himself to endorse the product," said MO.

"Vlod doesn't eat things; he just sucks the blood out of them," said Neville. "Is there any blood in a haggis?"

"What about Macklin, the famous model railroader?" said Johnny Rutabaga Seed. "He has tech skills males can identify with, and females wouldn't feel threatened by him."

"Don't mention Macklin to me!" said MO. "I'm supposed to be keeping an eye on that wretch, to make sure he builds a perfect replica of a model railroad featured in a vision by a long-dead Scottish beauty. The fate of Tockworld depends on it. I hate him! Besides, he's busy flashbacking."

"Not to mention the fact that lots of females have tech skills, and some males prefer wimps," said Edwardian. "It's a mixed-up world, you know!"

"Well we could use someone like Mister Potato Head," said Chester. "He could talk about using leftover haggis to design your own face."

"I think we're talking about a whole chain of fast-food haggis eateries," said Sweet Gas. "We'll need a name and a corporate logo."

"McHaggis?" said Neville.

"Um...." said MO.

"For the logo, how about bronze double axes making a sort of arch?" said Time Zone. "We could put bull's horns beneath the arch, and a sacrificial altar in front, so people could sacrifice an ox or whatever before they went in."

"Whatever for?" Johnny Rutabaga Seed, who, as a vegetarian, abhorred unnecessary sacrifices.

"To ward off Flusher, the god of food poisoning," said Time Zone.

"We shrinks refer to this as anal retentive thinking," said Philip. "You should ask yourself; why do I want to hold everything in when Flusher wants to clean out my system? Am I, by any chance, afraid of losing my identity?"

Everyone tried to figure out what anal retentive meant, then they went on with their own ideas.

"We could include kiddy playground areas with colorful tubes and a thumbscrew to keep the bullies in line," said Edwardian, who, as possessor of his very own nephew, was the group's authority on children.

"Let's call it McVlod's," said Neville. "That way, he won't tax us to death, and we can get him to endorse the product."

"McVlod's!" everyone shouted. "We like it!"

"With tartan bronze double axes," said Time Zone.

"I think we'll have to forget about the double axes business," said Neville. "It's been done. The Minoans will sue us."

"Hmmm," everyone said.

"How about giant canopic jars on either side of the entrance," said Time Zone.

"Perfect!" said Neville. "The ancient Egyptians like to remove the internal organs from corpses and put them in canopic jars to keep them safe, in case the corpse needs them again. It's a fitting symbolic device."

"So you want our customers to remove their internal organs before they go into a McVlod's?" said Johnny Rutabaga Seed. "Is this a new trend in fast food?"

"Our customers can do that if they like," said Neville, "and I'm sure some trendy ducks will try it, but really, what better place to put your take-out haggis than in a canopic jar that was designed for internal organs?"

"Precisely!" said Edwardian. "We'll call it haggis in a jar. We can order millions of cheap plastic canopic jars from some factory in Mississauga--the Canadian government will give us a grant for this, so it won't cost anything--and we can put every haggis we make into a canopic jar. The kids will love it!"

"We can hand out canopic jars with common names on them, like Digger or Chester."

"Digger is not a common name!" said Digger, offended. "Smith is common. Digger is unique."

"We could do a whole line of action toys," said Edwardian. "We could make up plastic replicas of ancient Egyptian embalming tools."

"Certainly," said Neville. "Collect them all, until you get the complete kit."

"We can put cheap plastic linen bandages and real naphtha in the kit," said Edwardian."

"And we can find some hack writer to do up a handbook of embalming," said Neville.

"Perfect, baby!" said Edwardian, donning a pair of sunglasses. "I can see it now: 'Kids! Embalm Your Sister or Your Brother, or Even Your Parents. Here's How....'"

"We could make it bilingual, in ancient Egyptian and English," said Neville, ignoring Digger the Tenth's lapse into stereotypical costume.

"You have to release the French version simultaneously or they'll sue you, burn down your McVlod's outlets, and send an aircraft carrier up the Saint Lawrence river," said Digger.

"Okay, okay, one of us can translate the handbook into French," said Time Zone. "How hard can it be? You get a dictionary, look up the words, and just sort of put them together. Or we could turn it over to the guy who translates Korean into English for certain technical devices."

"That's actually a Canadian company that farms out production and technical writing to a Pashtun tribe," said Edwardian.

"Whatever," said Time Zone. "Anyway, we can develop sidelines, like ancient Egyptian ice cream."

"Do the ancient Egyptians make ice cream?" said Digger.

"I don't know, but we can make something up. We can say they do it with goat's milk and honey."

"I'M WARNING YOU," said Chester. "IF I HEAR ANY MORE SOFT PORN--"

"We can say they feed the goats a lot of honey and then they get two big guys from Gath to shake up them," said Time Zone. "Presto, ice cream!"

Everybody was caught up in the excitement now.

"We need another cell phone," said Sweet Gas. "Philip is still on MO's."

"Use Sweet Gas's," said Chester.

"Anyone got a portable fax?" said Sweet Gas. "We can draw up some documents. How about your office, Time Zone? Is it powered up?"

"I had a fax, but a dinosaur ate it," said Time Zone.

"I have a portable printer in my Edwardian Poet's kit," said Edwardian. "We can pull the forms off the Internet, sign them, and fax them to Vlod."

"As long as the dinosaurs don't eat them," said MO.

"They won't, but we should keep that excuse in mind, in case anything goes wrong with our financial statements. We can tell the feds the dinosaurs ate our documents."

Thus it was, the little band of heroes downloaded the requisite forms of incorporation from the Internet, and gazed, aghast, at the flood of lawyer-speak.

"This is an entirely new language," said Edwardian in wonderment. "No wonder our civilization collapsed."

"It hasn't collapsed yet," said Neville. "We still have the Discovery Channel."

"It goes on forever!" moaned MO. "We'll never be able to get all of this stuff signed and initialed; the battery will run out."

"Wait, there's a shortcut!" said Neville. "There's a little pop-up ad that says, 'Vlod's consulting. For a fee we will expedite your papers.'"

"How much?" asked Edwardian suspiciously.

"Ten thousand dollars," said Neville. "In New York dollars."

Digger passed out.

"That's a lot of money for a poem," said Edwardian.

"But it's an epic poem," said Neville. "Lawyers wrote it."

"Count your change," said Time Zone.

"Nineteen groats," said Chester.

"Two shillings," said Edwardian.

"Sixty loonies," said MO.

"That's funny money," said Edwardian.

"We're nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-seven dollars short," said Neville.

"We could sell the canard," said Chester.

"Don't even think about it!" said Time Zone.

"We could sell Chester," said Neville.

"Hey watch it; we dragons are an endangered species," said Chester.

"I thought you were a parrot."

"Sometimes."

Digger shook his head. "Look at you; you've all been seduced by money. Even you, Time Zone!"

"Hey, I need money to keep this place running. Dinosaur food costs a lot of money, and you should see how much kitty litter they use!"

The bickering might have continued, but Sweet Gas produced a fabulous treasure that had been secreted in one of his crevices by a man in a black helicopter. It was a document proving that the pyramids were built by aliens pretending to be ancient Egyptians.

Edwardian sold the document on eBay for a princely sum, and in a trice the data was emailed to Vlod.

Seconds later, an email from Vlod popped up on Digger's screen.

"Congratulations," it said. "You are now the principals of a promising new company, and a promising new taxable item. Good luck to you. Tax installments are due quarterly, based on a profit plan I have drawn up for you (see enclosure). I shall expect an initial payment of ten thousand and further payments of one million per quarter. Remember, death is unpredictable, taxes are fixed."

Everyone was happy and excited. Even Digger began to thaw out.

"I want this to benefit Welsh miners," he said. "I want better medical programs, support for single mothers, and hot lunches for every school child. I want adequate support for public education, too."

"Ah yes, the trickle-down theory," said Neville. "One of the great religions, designed like all religions as a kind of opiate to keep the masses from looking up."

"It's not a trickle-down theory!" said Digger. "If you want everyone to benefit in a community, then you have to rule people with good government and honest politicians."

Everyone turned to stare at Digger.

"How long have you been down in the mines?" demanded Edwardian.

"Well, ever since Ramsay Macdonald--"

"I suppose if you wait long enough, everything comes back into fashion," said Neville.

"All things return."

"That's horrible, awful blasphemy from the primitive Marvinite religion of ancient Babylon," said Digger. "Are you a Marvin worshipper? Has his cult emerged in modern times to pollute the minds of our youth?"

"You mean heavy metal?" said Edwardian.

"We don't have time for theological wars," said MO. "We still have to see the wizard. I need a better name than MO before our business takes off."

"Off to see the wizard!" said Neville. "I still want to be a Welsh miner, but a wealthy Welsh miner. You've heard of the Wealthy barber? I'm going to be the Wealthy miner. It's a lot more fun than being an academic."

CHAPTER 71:MUSICAL BAGGISES

"It's a done deal, my friends," said Neville. "Soon there'll be a McVlod's on every corner. We'll take over the world and make everyone do exactly what we want them to do."

"Is that how academics think?" said Digger scandalized. "I never knew."

Neville laughed. "We academics may seem exalted, but we share many features with ordinary people," he said.

"We're going to take over the world with fast-food outlets?" said Edwardian. "Isn't that a bit unorthodox?"

"That's what fast-food outlets are for!" said Neville. "Didn't you know?"

"Actually, I thought they were for making money so the owners could retire and devote their time to reading Edwardian poetry," said Edwardian.

"That's what the Ducks in Black Helicopters WANT you to think," said Neville. "In reality, fast-food outlets have a more sinister purpose. They lure innocent people into their bowels--"

"There you go again with the bowels thing!" said Sweet Gas. "Are you mocking me because I don't have a bowel?"

"Present company excepted," said Neville. "Anyway, they lure innocent people into their depths. The moment you cross the threshold you're doomed, of course. You may look the same when you emerge, but in fact, you're completely different."

Chester was fascinated. "Fast changes you?" he said. "How does it work? Can it turn you into a desirable fashion model?"

"It makes you larger," said Neville. "Like Alice's mushroom."

"That seems harmless enough," said Sweet Gas.

"Only if you're a balloon," said Neville. "Anyway, these outlets work by stimulating irresistible cravings that will drive you back again and again to fast-food outlets for a fix. Eventually, of course, you'll eat so much, you'll burst."

"Gosh!" said Johnny Rutabaga Seed, peering into his wheelbarrow in case a villainous fast-food outlet had taken up residence among the bags of rutabaga seeds.

"Do you see how fiendish this is?" said Neville. "Fast-food outlets are taking over the world, and NOBODY knows about it."

"It's like my old ma always said," muttered Digger. "Give a chap a fish-and-chips shop and he'll soon lord it over everyone else."

"Yes, well now we'll have our own fast-food outlets," said Neville gleefully.

"Good on us!" said Edwardian. "I've always wanted to be part of a mysterious cabal bent on taking over the world."

"You too?" said Digger. "I thought you were an Edwardian poet!"

"We Edwardian poets may seem exalted, but we share many features with ordinary people," said Edwardian.

"Does Vlod know about this?" said Digger. "Has anyone told him about the dark underside of the fast-food business?"

"Vlod likes to keep a number of plots hatching," said Neville. "It's called convergence."

Besides, if it's taxable, it's good."

"But isn't this a conflict of interest?" said Digger. "I mean, he IS the mayor of Toronto. What if he has to choose which fast-food outlet gets a license to set up in city hall?"

Everyone stared at Digger again. Sweet Gas was getting a crick in his neck from turning to stare at him so many times.

I know, I know! Technically it wasn't a crick in the neck; it was plate tectonics.

"Amazing!" said Neville, shaking his head. "You've been down in the mines since Ramsay Macdonald! Think of it!"

"Vlod is a vampire of integrity," said Edwardian, smirking. "I'm sure he won't be influenced by his own financial interests. We can trust him."

"Hmmm...." said Neville.

"Wait a minute," said Digger, who had begun looking over the fine print in the articles of incorporation to distract himself from the mockery of his corrupt friends. "Doesn't this mean we have to pay taxes even if we don't make any money?"

"Taxes are fixed, death is unpredictable," said Time Zone.

"Speaking as a Welsh miner, I regard taxes as a means to an end," said Digger. "The end, of course, is social justice."

"There's one born every minute," whispered Edwardian.

"I think it's sweet," said Time Zone. "Besides, it keeps him out of trouble. Do you have any idea how much damage a lot of angry Welsh miners can do when they feel aggrieved? You should see what they did to my headquarters!"

"You can't blame this wreck on Welsh miners," said Digger. "It was Welsh carpenters."

"Hey, what happened to solidarity?" said Johnny Rutabaga Seed. "I used to be a Welsh carpenter myself, before I saw the light and became a mythical figure."

"Anyway, I don't like all this talk about food and money," said Digger. "It distracts people from the principles of social justice. We must all work to reduce wretchedness and misery in the world."

"Digger, my friend; misery is infinite," said Neville. "It's a structural principle of the universe, like the speed of light."

"That's depressing," said MO. I think I'll call myself Demo's Leitmotiv again."

Everyone stared at him for a long time.

"It's not depressing if you believe in the Supreme Being," said Sweet Gas.

"YOU believe in the Supreme Being?" said Digger. "After He left you without a bowel?"

"Of course I do," said Sweet Gas, carefully distancing himself from Digger. "Have you ever seen what happens to a rock that's been struck by lightning?"

"That's not religion," said Digger. "That's fear and superstition. Haven't you read Diderot?"

"Wasn't the Supreme Being the chap who drowned everybody in a deluge?" said Time Zone.

"He left some of us alive or we wouldn't be here," said Sweet Gas.

"Oh that's nice for the people who drowned!" said Digger.

"They were all wicked," said Sweet Gas.

"How do you know?" said Digger. "Maybe they were just British soccer fans. Mind you, British soccer fans could use a bit of chastisement."

"I rest my case," said Sweet Gas.

"Not all soccer fans are corporate hooligans and globalizers," said Digger. "Some of us just like the sport."

"That's enough about theology," said Neville. "We have important work to do."

"First we figure out how to get my ruined headquarters on line before we get eaten by dinosaurs," said Time Zone.

Everyone looked around at the unpromising interior of the ruined headquarters building..

"How did you get here, anyway?" said Demo's Leitmotiv. "I don't see any Land Rovers

or black helicopters."

"I came through a magic tent (It used to be a shop)," said Time Zone. "I was watching the Highland games when some silly duck threw herself in front of a flying haggis and ruined everything."

"HMMMM..." Said Demo's Leitmotiv, backing away from the blasphemer. There was no telling when Vlod might be eavesdropping. If he heard this....

"You mean the radiant Lenore?" said Neville. "She of the big webs?"

"None other," said Time Zone.

"Was she really done in by a haggis?" said Sweet Gas. "That's pathetic."

"She wouldn't be the first one, you know," said Edwardian. "You should never turn your back on those little devils; they're very cunning."

"No they aren't," said Neville. "They're nourishing and soon-to-be the Next Big Thing."

Edwardian looked at him in surprise. Then he bethought himself of the articles of incorporation and the new profit plan.

"Of course!" he said. "How silly of me!"

"Anyway, I left in disgust to go to the privy," said Time Zone, still absorbed in his own narrative. "But while I was sitting on the throne, it turned into a tent. The privy, I mean, not the toilet. There I was out in the open with a bunch of Scottish elementary school teachers looking at me as if I were an exhibit in a museum. I ask you!

"You should have pretended you were a copy of Rodin's 'Thinker'," said Demo's Leitmotiv, who'd learned a thing or two about art from Sally Popoff.

"That's been done," said Time Zone. "I had a better plan; I told the wizard to do something about it, and he sent me here."

"With or without your external wrappings?" said Sweet Gas.

"Fully dressed and ready to do battle with all peeping Janes. Anyway, I checked everything out in a trice and found what you see here. I must say it was in pretty miserable shape."

"Compared to what it is now?" said Neville.

"Do I look like a janitor? I'm not going to fix this place up. I did what anyone else in my position would do. I claimed everything in the name of Edward VII, including the ancient ruins in the back yard."

"Ancient ruins?" said Demo's Leitmotiv. "How did THEY get here?"

"They were inhabited by a race of alien surgeons who enjoyed abducting people, examining their internal organs, and writing up their findings in crop circles."

"What happened to them?" asked Demo's Leitmotiv.

"They died out because their religion took up too much time. They had to grow huge crop circles, search for people to abduct, take out their organs etc."

"What happened to the internal organs?" asked Sweet Gas, pretending nonchalance.

"They mutated. The aliens threw them all into illegal dumps."

Sweet Gas was very interested now.

"Where is this illegal dump?" he asked. "I don't suppose there were any leftover bowels?"

"There were but they gradually hardened as they petrified."

"Petrified bowels?" said Neville, putting a protective hand over his midsection. "Doesn't that process take a little longer? Millions of years, for instance?"

"It depends on what the original owner used his bowel for," said Time Zone.

"Surely only the one thing!" said Neville. "It's in the specs. Part number 67239-B, bowel, organic, threaded for number 765-B joint, capacity: 12 pounds cooked haggis."

"Yes, but some people used them as data bases," said Time Zone.

"That's not very practical," said Johnny Rutabaga Seed, who had been lost in thought until this moment. "I'm interested in data banks, you know, because I like to keep a record of where I've planted my rutabaga seeds. Data banks are useful for storing recipes, too."

"You'd be amazed at the amount of data that can be stored in your average bowel," said

Time Zone. "And it's a perfect place for most of the information we receive on a daily basis from mutual fund companies and corporate auditors."

"Not very secure, I should think," said Neville. "One false move, and BLAM; you've flushed your cache."

"Speak for yourself," said Sweet Gas. "I've been forced to make use of crevices."

"I'm not hearing this!" yelled Chester.

"Nothing is perfect," said Time Zone. "Anyway, the leftover bowels petrified. Alien musicians were fascinated, of course. Musicians, as you know, are always looking for new ways of making various noises. They immediately cut holes for stops, fashioned buttons and inserted mouthpieces. All wasted effort, unfortunately. Once a bowel, always a bowel."

"Imagine making a musical instrument out of sheep's intestines!" said Demo's Leitmotiv.

"That's a bagpipe," said Digger.

"No it isn't; it's haggis," said Neville.

"No it isn't; haggis is made out the stomach, not the bowel," said Digger.

"That was the problem, you see," said Time Zone. "As soon as they blew on one end, they got this long, puffed-up, snake-like thing that made a noise like water being sucked down a drain."

"You said it was petrified," said Sweet Gas.

"You'd be petrified too, if someone tried to play 'How Much is That Doggie in the Window?' on your bowel," said Time Zone.

"Do aliens know that song?" said Edwardian.

"Everyone does," said Neville. "It originated with the big bang."

"If you keep this up, I'm going to report you to the censors!" yelled Chester, covering his ears.

"But we're talking millions of years here!" said Edwardian.

"Tockworld history began this morning, as you know," said Time Zone.

"Yes, yes; I know--when an alien opened the wrong door in the Grand Imperial Chinese restaurant," said Edwardian. "How convenient!"

"Anyway, they called it a baggis," said Time Zone.

"I don't suppose there are any of these baggises left?" said Sweet Gas.

"They wouldn't be much use to you; they'd have holes in them," said Time Zone.

"I could patch them up with inner tube patches from my bicycle repair kit," said Sweet Gas.

"I didn't know trolls rode bicycles," said Neville.

"Only when our skateboards aren't working."

"Anyway, the baggises mutated," said Time Zone. "They're kazoos now."

"Still, I'd like to see," said Sweet Gas.

"It's an archaeological site now," said Time Zone. "It's jammed with archaeologists from the Royal Ontario Museum."

He took them out back, just as a gang of raptors broke down the front door.

Fortunately, Demo's Leitmotiv remembered to close the back door behind him.

Time Zone led the way to a big hole in the ground, where hordes of archaeologists from the Royal Ontario Museum were busy excavating alien body parts.

"Was this a sacrificial altar?" said Neville.

"The aliens called it an archaeological site, but it was really an illegal dump filled with medical supplies and body parts."

It was an awesome dig; an enormous pit marked off in a grid. Archaeologists were removing alien dentures, alien artificial knee joints and hip joints, and fossilized video game consoles.

"I don't see any baggisses," said Sweet Gas.

"The dinosaurs ate them," said an archaeologist.

"This is all very exciting, but we have to get to Merlin's workshop in Camelot," said

Demo's Leitmotiv.

Just then, the raptors attacked.

CHAPTER 72:THE POE BALLOON

We shall pause now, while the raptors are attacking Demo's Leitmotiv and his friends, and cast our gaze upon Fluffy and his new squeeze, Clydette, as they enter the Royal Ontario Museum.

They were trying to book passage to ancient Babylon, as you know, and they needed a conveyance--something a little more interesting than the Orient Express.

It's important to choose the right sort of vehicle when you're contemplating a trip to the ancient world. If you show up in an Orient Express passenger car, the other archaeologists will laugh at you.

Real archaeologists sleep in tents.

Actually, in most cases, it's because the hotels are located in inconvenient places, far away from the digs, and anyway, stingy donors won't shell out for the Ritz.

ANYONE can buy a ticket to the past; it takes a professional to arrive in style.

"The Scots invented museums," said Clydette, as Fluffy showed his membership card to Cerberus II, the guardian of the gate.

"I expected nothing less of the Scots," Fluffy said. "This is a particularly good museum, by the way; it's got FOUR gift shops."

Then he gave Clydette a little squeeze. He was deeply in love with her now, and that meant he loved all things Scottish.

Fluffy had always loved haggis, of course; especially McBowel's Exploding Haggis, with the extra hot chili peppers. But there were many other wonderful Scottish things to learn about.

Sheep, for instance. Scottish sheep differ subtly from their English colleagues; they are less likely to seek elected office, and as a consequence, retain their youthful ideals until advanced age burdens them with infirmities.

The Scots don't have the heart to put their old sheep into homes, so they clone them.

The English, a more heartless tribe, expect their old sheep to work for a living; so they appoint them to various committees, boards, and Royal Commissions.

Anyway, Fluffy was also developing an interest in bagpipes. He'd never really come to grips with bagpipes before, and he made a mental note to buy a book on the subject as soon as he finished tomb raiding in ancient Babylon.

He also meant to devote time to the study of porridge and thistles.

So much to learn, so little time!

Anyway, the Royal Ontario Museum was nearly empty that morning because the exhibit of very naughty activities had just closed, and the new exhibit of devices had not yet been set up.

The early Pickard Trilobite models had drawn a few old crocks out of their boardrooms and condos, but they were quiet people, only whining occasionally when the guard wouldn't let them get behind the wheel.

"The Scots invented cars," said Clydette.

Fluffy squeezed her biceps affectionately.

"We could fly back to ancient Babylon in a Pickard Trilobite," he said, "but I've got something much more interesting in mind."

"An Edsel?" said Clydette; then she guffawed thrice, very loudly, and punched him on the arm.

Fluffy led the way into a secret part of the museum, where the curators kept their stash of special things that they didn't want the public to see.

Curators are just like everyone else; they like to gloat over their treasures, secure in the knowledge no one else has them.

Not anyone that counts.

Among the ancient action figures and wind-up toys was an enormous hot air balloon lying forlorn and deflated in a little courtyard, in front of a giant statue of Marvin.

"This is the Edgar Allan Poe Balloon," said Fluffy. "Named after a famous Victorian romance novelist."

"The Scots invented Poe," said Clydette. "Why is the museum giving us a balloon? Do they expect something in return?"

"They want the Ishtar gate," said Fluffy.

"You mean the one in Edinburgh?"

"I think they had the one in Babylon in mind. The board wants it for the rotunda."

"Are you sure that's ALL they want, Fluffy? It doesn't seem like much."

"It's a fair trade," my dear. "After all, this isn't the original balloon; it's only a backup. Poe had it made in case the original suffered a premature burial."

Just then, a curator spotted them. He put down the Ninja turtles he'd been examining and came out of his tiny office to greet them.

You might think the curator was not quite up to snuff if he was playing with Ninja turtles during office hours.

You'd be wrong. Ordinary people play with Ninja turtles; curators EXAMINE them.

"Is everything ready?" Fluffy asked.

"It's in good shape," said the curator. "All you have to do is blow it up. If you happen to see any Ninja turtles on your travels, by the way, I'd be very interested...."

"Of course," said Fluffy.

"The Scots invented turtles," said Clydette.

"I know, I know," said the curator. "Without the Scots, we'd all be living in caves, watching Ed Sullivan by candlelight."

"Ed Sullivan?" said Clydette.

"Never mind."

Fluffy and Clydette took turns blowing up the balloon, and in short order, it was billowing over their heads, tugging fretfully at the mooring ropes.

Fluffy and Clydette had a lot of hot air in their lungs; that's what happens when you fall in love, or get elected to some sort of political office.

Clydette peered doubtfully at the balloon; then she climbed into the wicker basket with Fluffy.

"I like my Harrier better," she said. "It's not as drafty."

"I brought a blanket," said Fluffy. "We can snuggle under it."

"Oh you! Haw, haw haw!" Clydette thumped him on the back and ruffled his scales.

Fluffy picked himself up and gave a thumbs-up to the curator.

The curator cut the ropes and the balloon leaped into the air like an octopus, rising over the museum and drifting across the leafy campus of the University of Strange Thoughts.

The pilot of a traffic spotter plane thought he was being attacked by a Green Peace sausage and landed on the roof of a Pizza Hut.

After that it was smooth sailing, drifting along in the jet stream at two hundred miles an hour, on their way to ancient Babylon.

Fluffy produced a large afghan--not THAT kind of Afghan--and the two lovebirds snuggled under it, cuddling as they worked out problems in arithmetic together.

Then the balloon fell apart....

At that very moment, outside Time Zone's ruined headquarters, in the Last, Lost World, a gang of savage raptors attacked.

"Run away; run away!" yelled Time Zone, and he raced for the headquarters building, hoping the raptors would be distracted by the archaeologists from the Royal Ontario Museum, and eat THEM instead.

ROM archaeologists are a match for any predator, however, and the raptors knew this. They didn't waste time leaping into the dig; they went straight after Time Zone.

Unfortunately, Demo's Leitmotiv and his new friends followed Time Zone instead of hiding out with the ROM archaeologists. This was a fateful error that was to cause them much anxiety.

The Hippopotamus of Fate hung in the balance.

The little band of heroes leaped through a door in the ruined building, slammed it shut, and made their way down a corridor, gasping and panting.

Then the raptors smashed down the door.

"Run away; run away!" yelled Johnny Rutabaga Seed.

"Relax; those raptors are vegetarians," said Time Zone, who was unaccustomed to violent effort, and wanted to rest for awhile.

"What big teeth they have for vegetarians!" said Demo's Leitmotiv.

"Hmm," said Time Zone. "There's a secret elevator just down the hall; let's leave this place."

"Can it take trolls?" asked Sweet Gas.

"The troll booth is on the highway to Tewksbury," said Time Zone.

Everyone stared at Time Zone, but there wasn't enough time to dismember him because the raptors were beginning to understand the directional signs.

In a matter of moments, they'd come to the one that showed the way to the secret elevator.

Everyone piled into the elevator. Time Zone jabbed a button, and the doors began to squeal shut.

The first raptor made a leap, but Sweet Gas threw Johnny Rutabaga Seed's wheelbarrow at him. The raptor twisted around, snatching it out of the air, and ate it.

Then the door slid shut and the elevator creaked its way down the shaft.

Demo's Leitmotiv could hear the raptors thundering down the stairs, but the terrified heroes reached the basement well ahead of their pursuers.

All around them now were metal shelves loaded with stacks and stacks of printout--hundreds of thick reports, each carefully arranged in pastel covers with gilt lettering.

"Whoever built this place keeps good records," said MO. "They must have been doing something a lot more important than cloning dinosaurs."

"Those are novels I've written," said Time Zone. "They're amazing tales of adventure combined with product manuals and pithy asides on various interesting topics. I'm hoping to strike it rich soon, but there's a conspiracy of New York publishers working against me, stealing my ideas and keeping me out of the club."

Everyone stared at Time Zone again, until the first raptor leaped into the basement.

"This way!" yelled Time Zone. "To the Secret Tunnel."

MO was beginning to despair, thinking he'd entrusted his life to a mad novelist, but he followed the others, running as fast as he could.

Sweet Gas tossed a bottle at the lead raptor and there was an explosion. The other raptors hung back, staring with fascinated attention as their colleague screamed and writhed on the floor.

"McBowel's Inflammable Porridge," said Time Zone. "Concentrated and mixed with aviation fuel."

The raptors were beginning to recover from the shock of watching their leader die in agony. Quickly they tore him to pieces and ate him; then they raced for the tunnel.

The heroes plunged into the dark hole. Sweet Gas tossed a dozen more bottles of Time Zone's porridge at the next raptor. The force of the explosion blew out the tunnel entrance, and the roof collapsed in a shower of toxic lumps.

"I think we're safe for a moment or two," said Time Zone.

Then they came out on a river bank.

"Hurry!" said Time Zone. "We don't have much time. It won't be long before the raptors discover the porridge is edible."

"It is?" said Edwardian.

"Hmmm," said MO. "This river has a certain watery quality. Are we meant to swim across?"

"We can use these dinghies," said Time Zone.

There were in fact, several war surplus inflatable dinghies on shore.

"Where did you get these?" said Chester. "They look like rubber duckies after a day in a wading pool with a lot of ruthless children."

"They dropped out of passing flock of Sea King helicopters," said Time Zone.

I know, I know. You don't often see inflatable dinghies that have dropped out of Sea King helicopters. That's because you don't often see this type of helicopter anymore--most of them have fallen apart, embarrassing their pilots and disturbing many of their passengers.

Demo's Leitmotiv and his friends took turns blowing up the dinghies, each member of the party puffing away until he passed out.

They were still at it when the raptors emerged from the wreckage of the tunnel like a flock of angry bagpipes.

"Hurry, hurry!" yelled Chester. "The raptors are restless!"

"How long have you hated raptors?" said a small voice.

"Is Philip Napoleon still on the phone?" yelled Digger. "Tell him to analyze the raptors! Better yet, tell the raptors to go and see him."

"Hostility is good," said Philip. "It's one of the seven warning signs that a patient is still alive."

At last the dinghies were ready.

Everyone jumped in and pushed off.

Sweet Gas, who would have gone straight through a dinghy and dropped like a stone to the bottom of the river, tore up a convenient oak tree and floated away on that.

Actually it was a dead oak tree, so, technically, he hadn't committed a crime.

Anyway, the raptors thundered down the path to the beach, emitting ear-splitting screams of frustration as their prey eluded them.

Raptors, like witches and demons, are often stymied by running water. It's a feature.

The screams and roars echoed up and down the river.

"Good one!" said Philip. "A nice, primal scream is often the first step to recovery."

"It was the raptors," said Time Zone.

"Raptors need therapy too," said Philip.

"Did anyone think to bring paddles, by the way?" said MO.

"I was too busy thinking about agonizing death in the jaws of a raptor to worry about paddles," said Digger.

"Who knew we were going for a picnic on the river?" said Edwardian. "I'm going to write a poem about this."

"Keep it to yourself," said Chester. "We've had troubles enough today."

"We don't need paddles; we need a light," said Sweet Gas. "I can't see a thing in all this mist and fog."

That was when everyone noticed the fog thickening around them.

"Good gosh; it's foggy!" said Chester.

"Where are we, anyway?" said Sweet Gas.

"The Thames," said Time Zone.

"Don't be absurd!" said Edwardian. "This isn't the Thames. Where's Alexander Pope's house? Where's Joseph Conrad?"

"It can't be the Thames," said Chester. "The Thames doesn't visit Wales."

"We aren't in Wales anymore, Chester," said Time Zone.

"I thought Merlin lived in Wales!" said Demo's Leitmotiv. Isn't that where we're going?"

"England is part of Wales now," said Digger."

"When did that happen?"

"Well, it was supposed to be a secret. We Welsh took a vote and decided it would be

better that way."

"What's that noise?"

"Yoo-hoo," said a voice.

"Look! It's a bird!"

"It's a plane!"

"It's a bulldog!"

"Oh my gosh; it's Charming, the ferrywoman who takes dead souls to the underworld," said Demo's Leitmotiv. "We must be dead! We must be close to Yorkville and the entrance to the Underworld."

"Not necessarily," said Neville. "All roads lead to Yorkville, you know."

"But this is a river!" said Edwardian.

"Whatever."

"Let's leave this place," said Demo's Leitmotiv. "What if she decides to invite us for ride?"

"It's not our time," said Neville.

"How do you know?"

"Have you seen Death in his little van?"

They all looked around very carefully.

"I don't see him," said Demo's Leitmotiv nervously.

"There he is, outside that big gate!" yelled Digger.

"That's not Death; that's a wiener dog," said Time Zone.

"Oh my gosh; it's Cerberus!" said Demo's Leitmotiv. "Run away, run away!"

But Cerberus hadn't seen them; he was too busy presiding over an interfaith dialog that had gotten out of hand.

Interfaith dialogs often get out of hand.

Charming drifted closer.

"Shhh; don't make any noise and maybe she won't see us," said Edwardian.

"Who's that in the gondola with her?" asked Digger.

"Looks like a bunch of Nards."

"Hush, can you hear them singing?"

The Nards were indeed singing. It was an odious song that went like this:

Who the man? Who the man?

Antler the man; Antler the man!

"Isn't that a bit anachronistic?" said Demo's Leitmotiv.

"Antler takes what he can get," said Neville. "He had an unhappy childhood, you know. A camel of the Negev tried to save his mom's life when she got cancer."

"So that's why he wants to kill all of the camels!" said Demo's Leitmotiv.

"So now you know why Antler started World War II and killed as many people as he could!" said Philip. "Let that be a lesson to you; sign up for therapy as quickly as possible, and be careful who you do a kindness to--some people take it as an offense."

"That's enough about political science," said Time Zone. "We have business to attend to."

After many a long and weary hour, the heroes grew very hungry.

"I never knew a parrot could look so good," said Edwardian.

"I hear they taste like chicken," said Neville.

"I wouldn't know; I only eat rutabagas," said Johnny Rutabaga Seed. "Care for some seeds?"

"Speaking as one who doesn't have a bowel; we trolls accrete; we don't eat."

"I'm a dragon. If you get any funny ideas I'll carbonize you."

"I thought you wanted to be a parrot," said Neville.

"I do, but only among civilized people."

"Civilized people eat all kinds of things," said Edwardian, licking his lips.

"Speak for yourself; I like a bit of bangers and mash," said Demo's Leitmotiv.

"England is part of Wales now; you'll have to eat Welsh rarebit," said Digger. Hunger was beginning to gnaw at the bonds of affection and civility that bound them together.

Just when all seemed lost, the river flowed past an enormous castle.

Sweet Gas managed to grab a ring bolt and pull them into a dock beneath the curtain wall.

They looked around in awe.

"It's Atlantis!" breathed Edwardian.

"No it isn't, you idiot!" said Neville. "It's Camelot!"

"It doesn't look like Camelot; it looks like a parking garage."

"Well what do you expect?" said Neville. "It's the basement. They have to park their cars somewhere."

"I thought they rode horses."

"Do themselves well, don't they?" said Digger. "That must be King Arthur's horse; it's got a round saddle."

"Is this a Jaguar I see before me?" said Edwardian, impressed.

It was in fact a fire-engine red Jaguar with vanity license plates that said: 'Top Wizard'.

Digger sucked in his cheeks. "Merlin certainly likes his comforts," he said. "I wonder how many serfs worked themselves to the bone so he could ride around in this piece of luxury--the vicious exploiter!"

Just then, a door opened beside the parked jag. A shadow loomed on the walls....

CHAPTER 73:THE WHEELBARROW OF LOVE

"There he is!" said Digger. "There's the Capitalist Mining Consortium Exploiter! The Running Dog of an Imperialist Thug, smashing innocent young serfs with its Boots of Wealth."

"Hmmm," said Neville. "I wonder if you can buy boots like that at Honest Ed's."

Everyone stepped carefully away from Digger, who was just beginning to warm up, carried away by the force of his diatribe.

"As I was saying, that Merlin sure knows how to do it up right," said Edwardian. "Some wizards just stand around waving a magic wand at you--"

"STAFFS, you mean," said Neville. "Fairy godmothers wave magic wands. It's a feature."

"Whatever," said Edwardian. "We Edwardian poets prefer magic wands. "

Sweet Gas ignored this conversation because trolls, as you know, don't use magic wands or staffs. When they want something, they just crush it, fossilize it, and stuff it into their crevices.

Sweet Gas had other things on his mind; he was annoyed by the snooty wizard.

"Don't get funny ideas, wizard, or I'll scratch the paint off your Jag," he said.

The shadow loomed larger.

"Keep your distance," warned Sweet Gas, who was doing some of his own looming, spreading his arms theatrically over the hood of the Jag. "Watch for falling rocks!"

The shadow darkened and condensed, and for an instant, it looked as though there would be a war, with exciting flashes of magic, and terrifying rock slides.

Then the shadow drew back a little.

"Do you know who I am?" it roared.

"A lawyer?" said Time Zone.

"Sidney Greenstreet," said Demo's Leitmotiv.

"The ghost of Christmas Past," said Neville.

"Come on, give us a hint!" said Johnny Rutabaga Seed.

"I know!" said Sweet Gas. "It's wearing a robe; it must be Lenore McBeauty."

There was a sharp exclamation, then the shadow began to glow.

Everyone stepped back from Sweet Gas.

Sweet Gas, however, was unconcerned. "Oh, I feel faint!" he said. "I hope I don't fall down on somebody's car. Life's sharp thorns are too much for me!"

The shadow slid a little closer along the wall. A narrow flash of white appeared where its teeth gleamed through its beard. "I see we have more than one Edwardian poet with us today. Welcome to my humble abode."

Then it began moving away again, gliding along the wall.

The others followed, not quite so smoothly.

"Ouch; there's sharp stones on these walls," said Edwardian. "Oh cruel life; I bleed, I faint on your thorns!"

"That's repetitive," said Neville. "Besides, it's a bit romantic for an Edwardian poet, don't you think?"

"What's wrong with stones?" said Sweet Gas indignantly. "I suppose you wimpy poets think picturesque grottos should be made out of kapok!"

"We Edwardian poets don't use grottos," said Edwardian. "We can't afford special effects. Anyway, I know my poetry isn't to everybody's taste, but mummy likes it."

Sweet Gas, who couldn't bear to hurt anyone unless he really wanted to, softened immediately.

"I didn't mean to offend you," he said. "I plan on reading your poetry as soon as the wizard gives me a new bowel."

"Really?" said Edwardian. "Gosh! Super! TWO readers." He went skipping after the shadow, his face shining so brightly with joy, everyone could see quite clearly.

Demo's Leitmotiv, meanwhile, had begun to regret the hockey stick he had given away. It would have been a useful weapon against Edwardian poets and wizards.

"I wish I had my hockey stick," he said.

"Indian giver," said Time Zone.

"That's a pejorative term," said Johnny Rutabaga Seed. "It was actually the Europeans who gave things and then took them back. Reserved land, for instance--"

"What good is a hockey stick against a wizard?" said Chester.

"Have you ever seen a bunch of hockey players at the end of a game?" said MO. "Blood all over the ice, body bags, grieving hockey widows...."

"That's nothing!" said Neville. "You should come to an Academic Committee Meeting. The janitor has a terrible time finding enough remains to fill even one body bag. He just comes in with his cleaning machine, sucks it all up and mixes it in with the illegal medical waste."

"Don't the students complain?" said Edwardian. "All that tuition money paid, and their professor is dead?"

"We make new professors with body parts stolen from graves," said Neville. "We reanimate them with McBowel's Exploding Haggis, a dram of scotch, and publication in an online journal of their choice. The students never notice the difference."

"I seem to know something about that," said Demo's Leitmotiv. "My alter ego has memories, but I can't access them; they're locked for editing."

"Try rebooting," said Neville. "I find a swift kick in the CPU most satisfactory."

"That won't fix computer problems," said Sweet Gas. "When something goes wrong with your computer, you should fart on it, squeeze it into a thin strata of carbonized rubble, and stuff it into your crevices."

"I'm not hearing this!" yelled Chester.

"Anyway," said Demo's Leitmotiv, "We need weapons."

"How long have you hated computers?" said Philip.

"Are you STILL on the phone?" yelled Digger. "What good are you? I suppose you're an Opiate For The Masses. They listen to you to distract themselves from the depressing fact that they will never be important and famous like Burt and Ernie."

"Many people have severe psychological problems," said Philip. "It's my job to help

them."

"You couldn't make a spider feel better about a fly!"

"Who said anything about making them feel better? My patients' feelings are private. My job is to make them look up and see the Hippopotamus of Fate hanging over their heads."

"Anybody can do that!" said Neville. "I do it all the time."

"Does it help you accept your lot in life?" said Philip.

"Certainly not. It reminds me of the brevity of life, of the futility of poverty, and of the pressing need for sudden wealth, luxury, and the adulation of the masses."

"I knew it!" muttered Digger darkly. "Give them a PhD and they think they're lords of the manor!"

"You don't seem to need analysis," said Philip. "Those are quite normal desires. Appearances, however, can be deceiving."

"I think we should paper over our differences and concentrate on the task at hand," said Johnny Rutabaga Seed. "I'm very unhappy; I miss my wheelbarrow. She was pretty and graceful, like a rutabaga. She carried all my seeds without ever complaining, and she was always kind to me. I was going to ask her to marry me."

There was a long silence.

"I always wondered about chaps who went around planting seeds," said Neville. "Now I know."

Time Zone patted Johnny on the shoulder. "Why don't you ask the wizard for a new wheelbarrow?" he said. "I'm sure he'll oblige."

"It wouldn't be the same," sniffed Johnny. "Beatrice was special. She had milk bottle caps on her spokes."

"Beatrice?" said Neville, stifling his mirth.

"I called her Bee, but her real name was Beatrice. I fell in love with her the moment I saw her. It was at Canadian Tire, in the gardening section, on a wonderful morning in April...."

"This mine shaft is very long," said Digger grimly. "I don't see any supports for the roof. It's just like Jaguar-Owning, Running Camel Imperialist Capitalist Joint-Stock Mining Companies to exploit the workers by skimping on important safety devices."

"What kind of a wizard has a Jaguar but no elevator?" said Demo's Leitmotiv. "I'm getting tired. I'm a hockey player, not an athlete."

"Elevators are good," said Edwardian. "Would you like to hear my poem about elevators in the rain, in Tewksbury?"

"NO!" said the shadow.

"Well I never! I shall tell my old aunty about this. She loves my poetry."

"I thought you only had one reader," said Demo's Leitmotiv.

"I forgot about my old auntie. She hides in her room most of the time, smoking pot."

"Doesn't have much choice, does she!" said the shadow. "She lives in YOUR house. One false word and she's out in the street with a sheet of cardboard for a roof."

"That's not true," said Edwardian. "Besides, I already know my auntie is only pretending to like my poetry. I asked her once which poem she liked best and she said the one about that chap in the chain mail who dived into a lake and fought a monster. She liked the gooshy bits, and she has a soft spot for beasts that come in the night, drag warriors away from the mead hall, tear them to shreds, and eat them."

"Now there's a sensible woman!" said Chester.

"I thought you wanted to be a parrot," said Demo's Leitmotiv.

"Parrots enjoy dismembering people too!"

"Anyway," said Edwardian. "As soon as the words were out of my old auntie's mouth, she realized she'd made a mistake, and she had the good grace to blush. Then she patted me on the arm and told me I'd be a good poet some day, as soon as I got over my squeamishness about blood and guts. So now she pretends to like my poems and I pretend not to know she hasn't read them, and we get along very well together."

"Smoking pot together?" said Neville.

"I disapprove of artificial aids to inspiration. We have breakfast together. She reads me bits from the morgue reports every morning while we have our McBowel's Inflammable Porridge and our crumpets."

"You have crumpets for breakfast?" said Digger. "Oh la dee da! Aren't we the bourgeois lords of the manor! I suppose you spread marmalade on them with a silver spoon."

"A bayonet, actually," said Edwardian. "Auntie gave it to me; it's a souvenir of World War I."

"What kind of marmalade?" asked Demo's Leitmotiv suspiciously. "Not the infamous marmalade of existence, is it?"

"Of course not. It's ordinary orange marmalade with a bit of scotch in it."

Everyone focused on the shadow again, as it glided along the wall ahead of them, looking back occasionally to menace them.

They skirted pools of water, patches of toxic waste, discarded dragon parts, dismembered knights, etc.

There were ancient pictures on the walls--saber tooth tigers, horses, telemarketers.

"Cro-Magnon," said Neville importantly. "Thirty thousand years old," I should say. "Probably a secret rite designed to aid early hunters find and kill their supper. See the handprints?"

"That's Arthur's kids," said the shadow. "They get sent down here for misbehaving. They invaded Ireland last week and lost an entire army. Arthur flew off the handle. If I've told them once, I've told them a thousand times not to scribble on the walls."

At last they came to an old freight elevator.

"This isn't an ordinary elevator," whispered the shadowy Merlin. "It's a MAGIC elevator."

"Don't go there!" whispered a voice.

So everyone trooped inside.

Demo's Leitmotiv had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 74:WIZARDS'R'US

Once everyone was inside the elevator, the shadow detached itself from the walls and became a three-dimensional wizard, with a staff, a cell phone and a briefcase.

He looked like every other wizard you've ever seen, with piercing black eyes, a hawk nose, unkempt hair, and a bristling beard.

"Merlin's the name, in case you forgot," he said.

"Aren't you supposed to be hiding behind a curtain, turning a crank to make thunder and lightning, and speaking into a microphone?" said Johnny Rutabaga Seed.

Everyone looked at Johnny Rutabaga Seed for a long time.

"That's how I would do it if I were a wizard," he said sheepishly. "And I'd make people plant one rutabaga seed for every rutabaga they dug up."

"Are the rest of you like this, or is there only one idiot per questing group?" snapped Merlin. "Because if I have to deal with more than one lunatic a day, I lose control...."

"He's with the wheelbarrow," said Chester quickly.

"What wheelbarrow?"

"Umm, the dinosaurs ate it."

Merlin stared at Chester.

"I see." Then he looked at Demo's Leitmotiv. "And what about you? Do you have a wheelbarrow too?"

"I'm a hockey goalie," said Demo's Leitmotiv. "But I lost my puck, and anyway, I gave away my goalie's outfit and hockey stick."

Merlin stared at Demo's Leitmotiv for a time. The others started to speak, but he silenced them with a wave of his hand.

"I should warn you, once you've entered my world, you change forever," said Merlin.

"You become a completely different person."

"I don't feel any different," said Edwardian.

"Of course you don't. It's like aging; you don't know it's happened until someone calls you granddad."

"I wonder if I can still write Edwardian poetry," said Edwardian. "Perhaps I've become a cowboy poet. I wonder if I'll start writing about beans and saddles now."

"That's not a proper test," said Neville. "ANYONE can write Edwardian poetry. There's a trick to it. You have to squint your eyes and look off into the distance."

"Is that so!" said Edwardian. "I'll have you know, it's not as easy as it looks! YOU try and find rhymes for Tewksbury."

"You could rhyme something with bowel," said Sweet Gas. "My kingdom for a bowel, for instance."

"I think it was a llama he wanted, not a bowel," said Digger.

"If you can't find a rhyme for Tewksbury, move to a different city," said Neville. "Try the Bronx, or Tucumcari."

"Has this got anything to do with globalization?" asked Digger. "I warned you, Edwardian; if you don't write serviceable rhymes about Running Dog Imperialist Joint-Stock Mining Companies, you won't be relevant."

"Relax!" said Time Zone. "We're all perfectly safe. I've been through this sort of thing before. It doesn't matter if the temporal structure changes, because we'll come out in a parallel world."

"I don't like long voyages," said Johnny Rutabaga Seed. "I don't have enough seeds."

I imagine it will be exactly the same, only different," said Time Zone. "That's how these things work."

Neville eyed Merlin.

"YOU don't look any different," he said. "How come it doesn't work on you?"

"It does. I'm not the same wizard I was before I took the elevator. I'm different now."

"In what way?" said Digger suspiciously.

"I'm surrounded by idiots."

There was an awkward silence.

Then the elevator stopped and the door slid open on a modern office suite in a glass and steel tower.

It was all high-tech steel and battleship gray. A receptionist smiled and nodded. Several ducks in pinstripe suits looked up hopefully from leather seats, but Merlin ignored them.

Merlin had a corner office with a view of a harbor area and a lot of office towers. The air was gray and sooty. Airliners plowed through the smog from time to time, and ships and trains chuffed about, pouring out more smoke.

A sign on the desk said Wizards'R'Us. There was a chart on the wall that seemed to indicate some sort of disaster.

A fax machine whirled quietly in a corner. Computer monitors showed views of the stock markets around the world, and of a duck sunbathing on a roof.

"This can't be Camelot!" gasped Edwardian. "Where's the poetry? Where's the gauzy, pre-Raphaelite medievalism?"

"We keep that in a special theme park for New-Age mystics," said Merlin. "We're not primitive savages, you know. We have financial derivatives and creative accounting."

"You're not a wizard!" said Edwardian, scandalized. "You're a corporate executive."

"Times have changed. Do you think I'm going to live in a drafty, humid old cave, collecting arthritis and doing magic tricks for a lot of Anglo Saxon yokels when I could be taking over the world?"

"You too?" groaned Demo's Leitmotiv.

Neville was impressed.

"Are you hiring?" he said. "I do consulting, you know. All of the wealthiest people would hire me if they knew about me. You never know when you might need someone to help you

find images of heroic endeavor in a modern novel."

"Perhaps," said Merlin. "Pleasure first, business later."

"What pleasure?" said Chester. "Are you going to give us the things we came questing for?"

"I think we can do a deal."

"How much do you charge for your services?" said Digger. "You must rake in quite a lot if you can pay for all of this. All great wealth is built on crime."

"I see you've memorized the handbook on social justice," said Merlin. "Do your friends show up for the lectures?"

"They're busy gambling on soccer games," said Digger. "When I need their support, they'll show up."

"Of course they will," said Merlin.

Digger reddened. "This is a serious topic; it's not some silly joke. People are suffering. Have you no shame?"

"My grandfather tried to eliminate suffering. He advocated education, hot lunches for children, a bill of rights, and equal treatment for all under the law."

"He was a good wizard," said Digger.

"He was burnt at the stake for wearing a pointy hat. Shame is for people who haven't made it to the top."

"So you've given up?"

"Appearances can be deceiving. Tell me why I should grant you your wishes."

"Because, being a ruthless captain of industry isn't enough," said Edwardian. "Like all successful CEO's, you want to be admired as a patron of the arts."

"Hmmm," said Merlin.

Meanwhile, a scantily feathered bunny in a duck costume came in to the room with little platters of Welsh Rarebit and lime fizzers.

Digger, meanwhile, was prowling the room, peering into corners.

"Are you looking for a booth, a curtain, a sound machine, or a microphone?" said Merlin.

"I'm looking for your financial statements," said Digger. "Wizards have a way of tricking investors."

"I'm not that kind of wizard. Tell me why I should help you?"

"If you help us, we'll go and look for the Power of Durable Evil, and we'll give you an equal share when we find it," said Demo's Leitmotiv.

"We will?" said Chester.

"Of course; he'll deserve it."

"I mean, we will really go looking for the Power of Durable Evil?"

"EVERYONE does that!" said Neville.

"But there be monsters!" said Johnny Rutabaga Seed.

"It's a feature," said Neville.

"I think something can be arranged," said Merlin. "You'll have to earn your prizes of course."

"How do we do that?" said Digger. "I suppose you want us to toil in one of your sweatshops for nothing at all, tormented by evil overlords, and wracked by disease."

"Something like that. I own a television network. My game show has suffered a decline in ratings. I need new guests to spice it up."

"What was wrong with the old ones?" asked Digger.

"They died."

"How does it work?"

"We strap you into terrifying rides and ask you certain questions. If you get the answers wrong, the host tortures you."

"That sounds reasonable," said Edwardian.

"It's a very popular format, but people want to see new and intriguing varieties of

punishment every week."

"People are funny that way," said Neville.

"You agree to this, then?"

"I will not countenance exploitation," said Digger.

"Contestants are well paid. You can donate your winnings to charity."

"I intend to."

Merlin made a gesture. A bunny duck smiled at the heroes and motioned to a door.

"Good luck," said Merlin. "If you survive the game show, I shall grant your wishes. Then, of course, you need only go out and search for the Power of Durable Evil. What is a quest without a little suffering?"

"But we've already had that part," said Chester.

"This isn't about you," said Merlin. "It's about our audience. If people didn't want you to suffer, you wouldn't."

Digger had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 75:THE GOD OF HATS

Meanwhile, Fluffy and Clydette tumbled out of the sky with the remnants of their balloon, splashing down in a warm, tropical sea in the midst of a lot of very hungry sharks.

Clydette gave Fluffy a reproachful look as they bobbed to the surface.

"This isn't ancient Babylon," she said.

Fluffy grinned sheepishly. "We must have passed through a door into a parallel world," he said. "They don't show up on maps."

"I didn't see any door," said Clydette. "You're just making it up."

Fluffy blushed a vivid pink. "Doors into parallel worlds are tricky things," he said. "Not everyone can see them."

Clydette turned to stare at him. She was never quite sure when he was joking and when he was being serious.

"You're putting me on!" she said. "There are no such things!"

"Of course there are, my dear," said Fluffy. "You Scots invented them."

"We did?"

"Indeed. It happened when a lot of elementary school teachers from Edinburgh got together and decided the standard textbooks were all wrong because they interpreted various Scottish tactical withdrawals as Sassenach victories. So they invented doors into parallel worlds, where the Sassenachs lost."

Clydette splashed Fluffy with a small tidal wave.

"Oh you!" she said. "It's true about the history books, but I don't believe the bit about the door. Even if it does exist, how are we supposed to get back through it?"

"We can't. We have to make a new one."

"And how do we do that?"

"The same way we made the old one. By smooching a lot."

"Oh you!"

Fluffy ducked away, expecting another tidal wave, but Clydette grabbed him and squeezed him tightly until his ribs cracked like ancient trees bending stiffly in a wind.

The two lovebirds smooched for awhile as they trod water.

After a moment, Clydette broke off.

"I still don't see a door," she said.

"It takes a lot more smooching," said Fluffy.

"You're just making it up because you don't want to admit we're lost. You males are all the same; it would kill you to ask directions!"

"Asking directions is dangerous," said Fluffy. "You could be exposing yourself to humiliating sneers and ridicule."

Clydette shook her head. "That's nonsense, Fluffy! Anyway, the balloon wasn't very

good. It must have been a Sassenach balloon."

"It was a classic. You have to treat the classics with respect, or someone will make you read them."

"We should have taken my Harrier."

"I don't think it has the range. Three thousand years is a lot of flying time."

The two lovebirds smooched a little more while they thought about what to do. Then they spotted a tropical shoreline in the distance.

"We're in luck," said Fluffy. "A convenient shoreline."

"I didn't know Babylon was tropical."

"Cities are like people; they get bored and try new things."

The shoreline was quite far away, but it wasn't much of a challenge for Clydette and Fluffy. An hour later, they waded onto a sandy beach, looking for daiquiris.

There were no pool-side bars, unfortunately, but there WAS a well-trodden path starting at the edge of the beach, where a dark and mysterious jungle began.

Above the jungle, a volcano belched and flared.

"I suppose that volcano is going to blow up with terrific force soon, and destroy everything for hundreds of miles around," said Fluffy.

Just then, they spotted a young person a little distance away, fighting off a lot of masked warriors with spears.

The young person was dressed in loincloth and a very odd hat,, which was at least four feet tall, and consisted of a lot of colorful feathers radiating out from a column of masks, like candy floss stuck to a totem pole.

"I hate playground bullies!" yelled Clydette, and she waded into battle, swinging both fists.

The warriors thought they had easy pickings and laughed hysterically, but they settled down after Clydette brained them and Fluffy ate them.

The young duck with the hat peered at the strangers through a mask that covered the top half of his face.

"My name is Little Big Serpent," he said.

"Charmed," said Clydette. "I'm Clydette and that's my sweetheart, Fluffy."

"Fluffy? This is a name?"

Fluffy swelled up a little and hissed in a dignified manner to show that he wasn't a cayman to be trifled with.

"I'm very glad to meet you, Lord Fluffy," said Little Big Serpent. "I'm sorry you had to see this carnage and bloodshed. I know it's upsetting to people of different cultures, but it's necessary."

"That's all right; don't you worry!" said Clydette. "We Scots invented bloodshed, you know."

"Please come to my humble village. We are a poor people, but what we have is yours."

The young warrior plunged into the shrubbery, and immediately vanished.

His hat, however, remained clearly visible, bobbing above leafy tangles like a lot of feather dusters sticking out of a pile of masks.

Clydette and Fluffy followed the hat, mesmerized.

It was a long trek through gloomy jungle and the two heroes fought many a dreary battle against pitiless hordes of mosquitoes before emerging on the edge of a swamp.

Fluffy peered wistfully into the turbid water.

"Thirsty?" said Clydette.

"I'm looking for my colleagues," he said. "This is home for many of us, you know. We caymans are experts in swamp water."

Clydette put an arm through his and drew him away.

"I don't think you have much in common with swamp caymans," she said. "After all, you've read Jean-Paul Sartre."

"That's true," said Fluffy, brightening a little. "Swamp caymans don't read; they just

watch the soaps."

"I wonder what kind of a village Little Big Serpent lives in," said Clydette.

"Probably some piddling collection of huts by a pond. The head duck will be a primitive savage who eats with his fingers."

They slipped under a tangle of low-hanging branches, plunged through a tunnel, and came out in a narrow, steep-walled valley.

Before them, as far as the eye could see, extended a vast stone city, complete with temples, palaces, villas, farmer's markets, taverns, and fast-food places. It was immense, crowded with life, and presided over by a sixty-foot pyramid.

"Like I said, a primitive village," muttered Fluffy.

"This is awesome," said Clydette. "They must have hired a Scottish architect."

Little Big Serpent took them directly to a stone palace, where a pair of guards clacked their spears to their stone foreheads in salute.

Inside the palace, warriors came and went, talking of pre-Columbian art.

A long corridor led to the throne room, where a more corpulent edition of Little Big Serpent sat on a carved mahogany throne. He was dressed in a maroon, floor-length robe, and his head was crowned with a feathered hat that rose to even greater heights than Little Big Serpent's hat.

"That is my father, Big Angry Serpent," said Little Big Serpent. My mom is Mrs. Angry Serpent. She's out in the jungle, killing things. Don't even think about calling her Mrs. Big Angry Serpent, or she'll sacrifice you to the god of diets."

Fluffy glanced out a window and saw a lot of Royal Ontario Museum archaeologists poking around in a dig.

"Welcome," said Big Angry Serpent, otherwise known as BAS. "Thank you for saving my son's worthless life."

"Hey!" said Little Big Serpent. "That's not very nice."

BAS silenced him with a wave of his hand. "What can I sacrifice for you?" he asked.

"Um, a rutabaga," said Fluffy.

"Good choice. Is there anything else?"

"Do you know the way to ancient Babylon?" asked Clydette.

Just then, Fluffy's cell phone rang. He had selected the 'Big Ben' chimes, and it startled everyone.

"I wonder who could be calling me here?" Fluffy said.

"We'll never know until you answer it," said Little Big Serpent.

Fluffy swelled up and hissed into the phone.

"Philip Napoleon here," said Philip. "Why are you obsessed with ancient Babylon?"

"I'm not!" roared Fluffy. "I'm on a quest! There's a difference."

BAS stared curiously at the cell phone, then he held out his hand for it. Fluffy passed it to him and he examined it carefully, poking delicately at the various buttons.

"Interesting," he said.

"It's a votive object," said Fluffy. "To ward off the god of silence and emptiness."

"It is? I thought it was a Nokia. What service are you using? I can't connect at all in this wretched valley."

"You have cell phones?"

"We got them from a supplier in Atlantis. But their service contract is useless because they sank into the sea."

"So that's why Atlantis sank!" said Fluffy. "They were weaseling out of a service contract! I always wondered."

"Now you know. Did you think there was another reason?"

"Back home, everyone has different theories. Some people think Atlantis is full of aliens."

"It is?" said BAS. "I thought we were the only people the aliens visited."

"You have aliens?" said Clydette.

"Not right now. They usually come in the winter, when it gets cold on the Alien Planet. Our photographers take pictures of them and glue them to our temple walls. It makes the aliens feel special, and they spend lots of money in our shops. We Incas are an endangered species; we do what we can to keep going."

"Good grief!" said Fluffy. "You're Incas? Real Incas?"

"Some people think we're one of the lost tribes of Israel. Anything is possible if you eat enough sugary breakfast cereal, I suppose."

Just then, the ROM archaeologists made a find and held it up to the light.

BAS peered out the window through the eyeholes of his mask.

"Crocodile heads, showing the Egyptian influence," he said. Very boring motif, if you ask me."

"Is that the site of an ancient palace?" asked Clydetta.

"It's an old garbage dump."

"Midden, dad!" said Little Big Serpent. "Get it right! Midden!"

"Oh la de da; aren't we the fancy one! Garbage isn't good enough; We don't have dumps, we have middens. What were you doing playing on the beach, by the way. I told you not to go there. Sooner or later, the conquistadors will come and hand out lots of smallpox and influenza. You don't want THOSE wonderful gifts, do you?"

"I never knew there was so much money in garbage," said Little Big Serpent, ignoring his dad's question. "I wonder if we could package it and sell it in parallel worlds. We could call it Genuine Inca Middenware."

"That's enough about garbage dumps," said BAS. "It's customary for lost tribes to ask visiting strangers for help with a difficult problem."

"You can count on us," said Fluffy. "What exactly is your problem?"

"We are in thrall to the god of Hats, who comes and takes our young virgins."

"You have some?" said Fluffy, amazed.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of!" said BAS. "Everybody is a virgin at least once."

"How do you know the young virgins are really virgins?" asked Fluffy.

"We put them in infrared light and they glow. It's something to do with photochemistry."

"I'm a virgin, and I don't glow in infrared light," said Clydetta, blushing.

"Have you experimented?" said BAS.

Clydetta turned a brighter shade of red, and changed the subject. "You aren't sacrificing them, are you?" she said. "I don't approve of sacrifices."

"Good gracious no. We tie them up and hand them over to the god. It's a very sad business. What is a civilization without virgins? Our young people are forced to give up their virginity as quickly as they can to avoid being selected for the god. Many of them give it up several times a week, just to make sure."

"What does he want with virgins anyway?" said Clydetta.

"We don't know, but if we stop giving him virgins, he'll stop giving us Hats. Then my evil cousin, Big Angry Monkey, otherwise known as BAM will win the Great Hat War."

"This is important?" said Fluffy.

"Of course it is! BAM, is jealous of my hat. He thinks his hat is better than mine, but it isn't. Mine is six inches longer than his. Women love my hat. You know what they say about men with big Hats, don't you!"

Fluffy was silent for a moment, thinking anxiously about hat sizes.

BAS grinned at him. "Anyway, we can't go on like this," he said. "We're almost out of virgins. If we can't supply anymore, BAM will win the war and take over my humble village."

"I wonder what the god does with so many virgins," said Clydetta, growing curious. "I think Fluffy and I should allow ourselves to be tied to the altar."

"Are you both virgins?" asked BAS.

Fluffy swelled up enormously and hissed like a broken steam pipe, but Clydetta elbowed him.

"Very well," said BAS hurriedly. "We accept your kind offer. I am sure two such

resourceful interlopers will fare well against a mere god of Hats."

And that was how Fluffy and Clydette found themselves tied to an altar stone, waiting by the light of a full moon for the god of Hats to come and take them away.

The god of Hats had a bad feeling about this...

CHAPTER 76:STRANGE SACRIFICE

The god of Hats, otherwise known as Hats, pushed up the brim of an enormous top hat and gazed at the new offerings.

After a long moment he said, "One of the virgins has a certain reptilian quality. I wonder if it mutated during the ceremony."

Then he moved a little closer so he could get a better look at the two figures on the altar stone. Fluffy, in particular interested him.

"Is that a cayman?" he asked. "I don't like caymans; they never wear Hats."

"I believe it IS, sir," said a voice coming from somewhere outside the enormous top hat. "Unless it's a flamingo in disguise."

The voice belonged to Optimizer, the god of pointless and destructive changes.

"It is? I didn't know caymans could be virgins. I thought they indulged in parthenogenesis."

"It must be a virgin, sir. BAS wouldn't let his people attach it to the altar stone if it wasn't."

"BAS's people are a few quacks short of a duck, if you ask me," said Hats. "The cayman, by the way, doesn't seem to be attached to the altar stone. Neither does the creature in the butterscotch skirt."

"Tartan, sir. Pertaining to kilts and other Scottish items."

"Yes, we all know your deep interest in the affairs of mortals, Optimizer!"

"Only because of their computers, sir. I'm very keen on online games."

"I had no idea caymans could be virgins," said Hats.

"Everyone has to start sometime, sir," said Optimizer.

"But it doesn't LOOK like a virgin."

"What does a virgin look like, sir?"

"Well they have a certain way of, umm, you know...."

The god's voice trailed off.

"Oh, THAT!" said Optimizer dryly. "I always wondered."

"Now you know."

"And the cayman doesn't have this way of, 'umm, you know...?'"

"I think not. The cayman's colleague, however, is definitely a virgin."

"You can tell by merely looking?" said Optimizer. "This is an infallible means of evaluating a specimen?"

"Any fool can spot a virgin, Optimizer! Look at her corona of innocence! Look at the way she carries herself! Remarkable!"

"It's very difficult to carry yourself while you're stretched out on an altar stone, sir."

"You know what I mean! There's a certain, virgin-like quality about her. A sort of um...."

"Oh, THAT again! You mean that old song and dance about the Hippopotamus of Fate hanging in the balance until the desired outcome is achieved."

"I didn't know the Hippopotamus was especially interested in virgins," said Hats.

Optimizer looked at the column of Hats, and the webbed feet sticking out from under the bottom, and not for the first time, he wondered about Hats. The god spent far too much time hiding out in there. Had he lost touch with the inhabitants of Tockworld? Was he hallucinating inside his little world?

Then he decided it was a subject that could lead him down too many twisting corridors of logic. What, in fact, was the normal mental state of a god of Hats, and was it something he really wanted to know about?

"Shall I fetch the virgins?" he asked.

There was a silence; then: "I'm really getting tired of all these virgins, you know, Optimizer. I have no idea where to put them; we're running out of closet space."

"We have to take them, sir."

"Tell me again why it's so important!"

"Because if you don't demand sacrifices from the Incas, they'll get bored. They'll lose respect for you. They'll stop believing in you and they'll abandon your temples. You know what THAT means!"

"I suppose it means 'Back to the Waiting Room'."

The Waiting Room, in case you've forgotten, is a big dentist's office where all gods, potential and otherwise, hang out while waiting for mortals to invent them.

If, after a specified interval, no one invents them, they get root canals.

Dentists have special status in the afterlife, by the way.

Anyway, Hats was restless.

"Dear me; look at the time!" he said. "I'm supposed to be smiting the Phoenicians at two o'clock. I'll leave you to finish off here, shall I, Optimizer? Hail me when you're ready."

Then he adjusted his hats and decamped, trotting away into the sunset.

A careful observer would have noticed a column of Hats moving jerkily over the ground. A keen observer working on a school science project might have caught an occasional glimpse, as the brim of the top hat lifted, of sandaled feet, or perhaps of a bit of toga.

Gods, as you know, wear togas, out of deference to early sculptors and vase painters, who found themselves unable to conceive of any other sort of attire.

Anyway Hats vamooseed, leaving Optimizer to do the dirty work.

Meanwhile, Fluffy was getting bored.

He'd been mildly interested when the Inca priests had shuffled around, hooting and chanting, and invoking the god of Hats. But they had left quite early, and there was no other entertainment in the offing.

Fluffy had forgotten to bring something to read. Clydette tried to keep him busy with imaginary charades, mental crossword puzzles, and sudden quizzes on various points of Scottish history and tradition, but he soon tired of these activities and fell asleep.

Just then, a weird god showed up and awakened them.

He looked like a wart on top of a hump, with spidery legs.

He was, however, wearing a purple-fringed toga with a badge that said 'Immortal' pinned to the front.

"Are you the god of Hats?" asked Fluffy.

"Ooh, I should say not!" said Optimizer. "Don't let him hear you say that or he'll be especially angry. He thinks he's the cat's meow in the looks department. I'm Optimizer, the god of pointless and destructive changes. I'm one of the lesser gods, so I don't have any capitals in my title, but I'm much more important than you are, so don't get any ideas!"

"We Scots invented optimizers," said Clydette.

"I know all about you Scots," said Optimizer. "You came from Atlantis, after it got lost."

"WE didn't lose it," said Clydette.

"Oh, ho! I suppose it got lost all by itself!"

"Of course not; the Sassenachs lost it!"

"Tsk, ts!" said Fluffy. "It's a wonder they managed to defeat Napoleon."

"The Scots Greys were there," said Clydette, not without a certain pride. "Otherwise, Napoleon would have won, and we'd all be reading Asterix."

"Enough small talk," said Optimizer, releasing them from the altar. "Please turn your backs while I place a large and very heavy hat on the altar. Think of me as the Hat Bunny, if you like--at least temporarily. And ignore any popping sounds you hear. I've got a bad back."

Fluffy and Clydette obeyed, though Fluffy couldn't resist peeking.

There was a creaking sound, then a pop, and a scream.

"Oww! Owwww! Ow! My back!"

Fluffy and Clydette turned to see Optimizer bent over and hobbling about, clutching at his back with long, crooked fingers.

"It happens every time now!" he wailed. "I pop a disk as soon as I bend over."

"Have you tried a chiropractor?" asked Fluffy.

"I did, several times. But they couldn't help me because my spine is made of a special new material that holds a memory of its original position. We gods are supposed to be changeless, you know."

"You mean you've always had a bad back?"

"Well...it was straighter once, but I did an optimization, and now it doesn't work properly."

"I can fix it!" said Clydette brightly. "You just hold still and I'll set you straight."

"You can?," said Optimizer, hardly daring to hope. "You will?"

Clydette scooped up the astonished god and stretched him out, face-down on the altar stone.

When he tried to twist around for a look, she forced his head back.

"Be still!" she said.

"You aren't going to sacrifice me, are you?"

"Don't be silly! Why would I sacrifice a god?"

"You'd be surprised. If you wanted something very badly, like a new Porsche, or perhaps dominion over everyone in Tockworld, you might be willing to sacrifice me. You'd need the special exorcism software, of course. You have to install it; it's in the options folder--"

"Try to keep still," said Clydette. "This is going to hurt a little, but only for a moment."

"Ummm...." said Optimizer, miserably.

Fluffy watched with fascinated attention. He'd never seen a god suffer before.

Clydette placed her hands over the god's popped disk and braced herself.

Optimizer whimpered.

Then, with a loud cry of, "Scotland forever!" Clydette pushed down with all of her might. There was a loud 'click', a 'pop', a terrifying cry of agony, and then silence.

Clydette stepped back from the altar.

Optimizer lay face down for a moment, perfectly still.

"Am I still here?" he asked.

"You are indeed," said Fluffy.

"I haven't been abducted by aliens."

"I didn't know they could abduct a god."

"It's in the Geneva Convention."

All at once Optimizer realized he wasn't in pain anymore. Very cautiously, he sat up. Then he looked at Clydette and beamed.

"You fixed me!" he said.

"Well, I wouldn't put it quite that way," said Clydette, blushing.

"You restored my back to its original state, before optimization. I OWE you! Oh happy day! I'm free."

Optimizer jumped down and did a little jig. It looked a bit like a two-legged spider fiddling at a square dance.

Then he handed Clydette an oatcake.

"This is for you," he said. "One side makes you maladjusted; one side makes you socially adapted. The trick is to eat them both at once so you don't become a cartoon."

Clydette thanked him and stowed it away.

Optimizer skipped away, waving his arms in the air.

"Walk this way," he said. "I'm going to take you to visit the god of Hats in his abode now. It's in the contract."

Thus it was, Fluffy and Clydette followed the god through a mysterious doorway made of vaporized cabbages, into a mysterious garden.

Meanwhile, on the altar stone, a mysterious hat crackled and popped as it waited for the Incas to discover it.

BAS had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 77:MAD HAGGIS PARTY

Optimizer led Fluffy and Clydette into a pleasant garden, complete with a mad Hat's haggis party. There was a long, trestle table around which were sitting a Phoenician and a rather tall column of hats.

Fluffy eyed the hats suspiciously, wondering if there was a nasty surprise hidden beneath them.

"That's the god of Hats," said Optimizer. "Otherwise known as Hats. This is a sort of show he puts on to help the NOT undead acclimatize themselves to a new reality."

"You're putting me on," said Fluffy, moving a little closer. He'd never eaten a hat before, but there was always a first time.

Then a pair of webbed feet kicked out from beneath the hats and a voice said, "So you two are the virgins of the week are you? Aren't you supposed to be tied up or something?"

"We were, but there was a last minute cancellation," said Fluffy.

Clydette thumped him on the back. "Haw, haw, haw, that was a good one!" she said. "We Scots invented puns, you know."

"Now I know who to blame," said Hats. "Welcome to my humble abode. We have much to discuss."

Fluffy backed off a little. He had a pretty good appetite, but eating a god was a little more than he cared for. The results could be unpredictable.

Clydette was eyeing a large platter of haggis in the center of the table.

"Is that McBowel's exploding haggis?" she asked.

"It's a centerpiece. I ordered it from the McBowel's Home Decorating Catalog. Do you like it?"

"Centerpieces were made to be eaten," said Fluffy.

"You don't know where it's been," said the Phoenician, who was busy with a small puppet.

Fluffy wandered over for a look and saw that it was an 'Ernie' puppet from Sesame Street. The Phoenician had set up a small dyeing kit on the table and was dyeing it purple.

"I told him I wouldn't smite him if he showed me something completely different," said Hats. "Being immortal, I've seen just about everything now, but a purple Ernie is definitely new."

"Small things...." muttered Optimizer.

"It beats slaughtering unbelievers," said Hats mildly. "A purple Ernie is much better than a religious war, don't you think!"

"Possibly," said Optimizer. "But I could improve on this--"

Hats and the Phoenician both yelled "No, no, no!" at the same time.

"What's wrong with you people?" said Optimizer. "Nothing is perfect. That's why I'm here; I can improve on anything you like."

"Another time," said Hats. Then he motioned to Fluffy and Clydette. It was a gesture that involved tipping the entire column of hats, and was, for that reason, fascinating to watch.

Fluffy loved catastrophes; they made him feel safe.

"Come and join our haggis party," said Hats. "There's not much to eat, I'm afraid; just the centerpiece. But you can wash it down with single-malt whiskey."

"Haggis should be enough for anyone," said Clydette. "It's one of the important food groups, and it's an element, like zinc."

"I never thought of it that way, before," said Hats, examining the haggis. "Maybe I should be careful what I say around it. Do you think it will be offended if I don't take a bite out of it?"

"Possibly," said Clydette. "We Scots invented the elements, you know."

Hats eyed Clydette, then he eyed Fluffy. This was quite a trick, because his head was completely immersed in hats.

Gods, however, do whatever they like.

"You two are an item?" said Hats.

Fluffy swelled up and hissed a little. "Clydette is my sweetheart," he said.

"Oh, YOU!" said Clydette, bashfully thumping him on the back.

"Amazing," said Hats, as Optimizer helped Fluffy back into his chair.

Once everyone was seated, a procession of Llamas appeared, bearing platters, bowls, dishes, and drinks trays. It was an endless procession, as llama after llama deposited important food groups on the table.

And yet, there was always more room at the table; the cascade of platters and bowls never seemed to cover it.

Fluffy had no idea where the llamas came from because the path seemed to trail off into a sort of mist, within which, nothing at all could be seen.

"You must have enormous appetites," said Clydette approvingly. "We Scots invented appetites, you know."

"Oh, I couldn't eat a thing," said Hats. "I'm an element, like plastic."

"Psst, psst; plastic isn't an element, sir," whispered Optimizer.

"It isn't? Well it should be. Plastic is eternal, like the verities. It's always with us, even when we're finished with it and we want it to go away."

"Well I certainly can't eat, because I'm extinct," said the Phoenician.

"Tsk, such waste!" said Clydette. "Don't you know there are people going hungry in the world? You could donate some of this to a food bank."

"Do you think so?" said Hats. "They'd really like some McBowel's Exploding Haggis?"

Fluffy was puzzled and curious about everything, suspecting a trap of some sort, but his stomach got the better of him.

"I think it's safe to eat some haggis, my dear," he said to Clydette. But when he pulled out a chair for her, all of the furnishings and cutlery vanished.

"Shouldn't have done that," said Hats. "It's all illusion, you know. Everyone refreshed after that immense feast?"

"But I never had a chance to eat anything," said Clydette.

"Hunger is good for you, my dear. Prosperity is bad for civilization. People stop wearing hats. Before you know it, they start ditching their gods. Then they think they can make themselves immortal, if only they can find the right technology."

"Tell me about it!" said Optimizer. "The things I've had to fix for mortals."

"So you're the one!" muttered Fluffy darkly.

"After that, of course, they blow up their planet and make a huge mess," said Hats. "Anyway, I'm glad you made it here. Now we can light out for our final destination."

"Where is it, exactly?" asked Fluffy, who was in a crabby mood now because the haggis kept disappearing as he reached for it. Where do you put all of your virgins?"

"Well I keep some of them here. We've trained them to be activity counselors and easy-listening rock stars. But there are limits you know. I've worked out a deal to take the overflow to the Underworld."

"That's not very nice," said Clydette.

"What else am I to with them?" asked Hats petulantly. "It's not as if I want a lot of virgins cluttering up the place with their cold showers, clean minds, and jogging."

"What's wrong with cold showers and jogging?" demanded Clydette.

"All the time?" said Hats. "You can't imagine how boring it is. "You'd be doing everyone a favor if you put a stop to this practice."

"Why don't you tell the Incas to stop sacrificing virgins, if they're such a bother?"

"I can't do that; I'm only a god! We gods have no power at all, really. Mortals decide what we're going to do. I mean, look at the temples they build for us! Do you think I want to live in some drafty stone temple and sit on a freezing cold throne all day long? It's absurd. I like

cedar, pine, and nice pastel colors."

"I don't see any of that around here," said Fluffy.

The column of hats tilted back and forth; there was a sudden flash of light, and a palatial country house appeared, complete with gardeners, trees, flowers, assorted bees and wasps, a scene painter, and a hay wagon."

"Is that real?" said Clydette.

"What is real?" asked the god. "Can you live comfortably in the products of your own mind?"

"I don't like theology," said Clydette. "I like things you can eat and drink."

"Why don't you send the virgins back, if you don't want them here?" said Fluffy. "Do they ever want to be NOT virgins?"

"Of course they do! They get sick of this life. They'd love to be NOT virgins, but it isn't that easy once you've been sacrificed. You can only do it through a quest. It's quite an interesting quest, really. As soon as they find a way of NOT being virgins, they win."

"I would think it's fairly straightforward," said Fluffy. "Go to an office party and--"

"No!" shouted Hats. "I don't want to hear about it! I'm too old. Passion makes my hats fall off."

"So if we helped them all to become NOT virgins, this whole charade would stop?"

"I'm sure the Incas would think of something else. They'd probably fade away to nothing if they didn't have sacrifices, but at least it wouldn't be virgins and hat tricks. It could be something interesting, like dim sum, or chocolate donuts."

"I don't think we can help you--ouch!" said Fluffy.

Clydette had stepped on his foot.

"We'd be glad to help you," she said.

"Good! In return, I'll help you get to ancient Babylon. I like ancient Babylon; the priests have really neat hats."

The column of hats swayed a little, and a revolving door appeared at one end of the table.

"This is a magic revolving door," said Hats. "Be careful not to go all the way around. If you come out on this side again, you'll meet yourself going in."

"What's wrong with that?" said Clydette.

"One's a party; two's a crowd."

Hats, in deference to himself, went through first. The column of hats was taller than the door, but there are certain advantages to being a god, and one of them, is a special way with physics.

They emerged on a the bank of a dark and gloomy river. Charming, the ferrywoman of souls, waved to them from her trusty gondola and started towards them.

Clydette squeezed Fluffy's arm, nearly breaking it.

Off in the distance, Cerberus the wiener dog beckoned.

Optimizer had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 78:TEETH IN THE WHEEL OF LIFE

Meanwhile, on the Orient Express, an epic battle raged.

The Hippopotamus of Fate hung in the balance as Polydoor struggled to save all of Tockworld from the evil Freddy Manichean Heresy.

You might think that Freddy would have the power to dispatch a mere acolyte with a flick of his heretical apparatus.

You'd be wrong.

Polydoor had two weapons of incalculable power on his side. The first was an unquenchable belief in his own worth--he MATTERED.

The second was the love of a true spider, the beauteous Babette, pining away for her sweetheart in the cavernous vaults of Toronto's city hall.

The third, of course, was McBowel's Inflammable Porridge.

Well, that's three, I suppose.

Actually, counting isn't really necessary in theological battles; it's the technology that matters.

True theological speculation is every bit as tough and demanding as inventing new kinds of financial derivatives.

Anyway, the battle between Polydoor and Freddy Manichean Heresy was not an unequal one; it raged on and on, as battles frequently do, and the gods yelled encouragement and took bets, as they usually do.

Freddy Manichean Heresy scowled as he realized he'd met a worthy adversary.

Polydoor glimmered with a new eeriness, and his hump shone like a laser beam, wondrous to behold.

"Take that!" yelled Freddy, quickly turning himself into a buzz saw and spinning through the air.

Things looked bleak for Polydoor. He was trapped in the billiards car, too far from the door to make his escape.

Jumping out a window would do no good at all. On one side, the granite face of the mountain was a mere blur of tortured rock as the train hurtled down the tracks, rocking wildly on its fateful course.

On the other side, a precipitous drop to Death Canyon, where a snarling river lay in wait for the runaway train.

Freddy, as you know, had uncoupled the passenger cars, but they continued rushing down the mountain with such reckless abandon, they had kept pace with the engine.

Only a small gap divided the baggage car from the tender.

The engineer stood helplessly at the throttle, unable to move because he was dead. Unwilling to abandon his passengers to certain destruction, however, he had remained at his station.

Train engineers are the true heroes of our time.

If Polydoor didn't get to him in a hurry, quickly revivify him, and couple the baggage car to the tender, all of Tockworld would suffer a fate worse than death.

The Hippopotamus of Fate hung in the balance, watching with fascinated attention.

The gods took bets.

Louder and louder whirled the buzz saw blade as it sped towards Polydoor.

"This is the end," he thought, and he prepared to meet the Great Big Acolyte in the sky--the one who REALLY made Frankenstein's monster.

He bethought himself of his lovely Babette, shining with domestic splendor in her parlor as she lovingly wrapped a telemarketer in gossamer webs for her hungry children.

Oh those little ones were so cute and playful!

And best of all, they loved Polydoor for himself, just as he was.

"Now I've got you, Polydoor," cackled Freddy.

"No you haven't!" shouted Polydoor. And with a desperate war cry, he leaped straight up to the ceiling, holding a bag of McBowel's Inflammable porridge clamped between his feet.

Too late, Freddy, saw the danger. He tried to swerve away, but having adopted the morphology of a buzz saw blade, he could not simply evacuate at the speed of light.

Straight as an arrow the blade flew, until it burst through the precious bag of McBowel's porridge and zipped away, screaming in agony.

It was an ugly sight. McBowel's Inflammable porridge is to Freddy Manichean Heresy as kryptonite is to Superman. The buzz saw blade whirled and tilted, completely out of control.

The quick-thinking Polydoor, meanwhile, dropped to the floor and rolled under the billiards table.

There was an explosion, a ball of orange fire, and a sudden gust of wind as the porridge blew a hole in the side of the car.

Then silence.

After a moment, Polydoor picked himself up. He ached all over and his clothes were singed by the blast, but he hardly noticed this as he looked around for his enemy.

There was no sign of Freddy.

Polydoor hardly dared hope; had he won?

Possibly, but there was no time to make sure of his victory; not while the passenger cars were rushing down the mountain at break-neck speed, getting ready to leap the track at any moment and smash headlong into the rocks.

"Must save Tockworld!" muttered Polydoor.

"It'll never happen," quoth Cuther's Lath Thand, who had been hoping for a year's supply of corpses.

"Yeth it will," quoth Polydoor, and he rushed towards the engine, startling several people who were playing strip charades in the baggage car.

Through the baggage car ran Polydoor, past the chattering suitcases, and with a mighty leap, he landed on the tender.

Then he scrambled over a load of coal and jumped down into the cab, where he found the dead engineer staring grimly down the tracks.

It was worse than he had imagined.

The firewoman, a llama from Pittsburgh, was doing her best, but she simply couldn't handle the locomotive, which was exulting in its new freedom. Only the engineer had the skill and the knowledge to tame it.

"How long has he been dead?" Polydoor yelled.

"Couple of hours," said the llama. "Not more than that."

"Hmmm," said Polydoor. "This is going to be difficult. I don't suppose you have a defibrillator on you?"

"I do, as a matter of fact," said the llama. "I like to keep one handy, in case I get bored. Take this."

She handed Polydoor a lovingly cared for pocket defibrillator, still in its purple bag.

Polydoor looked at it admiringly.

"I don't know how much juice is left in the batteries," said the llama. "My son likes to try it out on his friends."

Polydoor clucked his tongue.

"It's pointless trying to revive him," said a Viking passenger who had been following Polydoor closely, hoping for an epic battle with swords and axes. "I know about this; I've been dead before."

"Really?" said the llama. "Is it as much fun as they say?"

"It's not so bad," said the Viking. "But you should take along something to read, because it gets a little boring in the Underworld. And you'll need a flashlight."

"Why didn't you go on to Valhalla?"

"There was a line up of New Age tourists at the ferry. I decided I'd come back later, when it wasn't so busy."

Polydoor, meanwhile, applied the defibrillator to the engineer's chest. Then he selected 'broccoli' on the control panel, and gritted his teeth.

An instant later, the engineer twitched and jerked like a duck pretending to be a marionette.

Then he opened his eyes.

"Shhh; he's awake now," said the llama.

"That was the hard part," said Polydoor, wiping the sweat from his brow. "Now for the quadruple bypass. I'll need boiling water, some freshly-torn, clean cloths, and some doctors and nurses."

"We don't have any doctors and nurses, but I can lend you some boiling water," said the llama.

"I'll bash him one if he makes any trouble," said the Viking.

Polydoor wasn't sure he could perform a quadruple bypass, never having tried it before, but there's always a first time.

Lots of people are doing this at home, now that health insurance covers so little. Enterprising entrepreneurs, spotting a new chance to make a profit, have begun packaging home quadruple-bypass kits and selling them in office supply depots.

The manuals, however, are usually online, so you'd better have a computer up and running when you start in on your patient.

Anyway, Polydoor had no idea what he was doing, but he managed to pull it off.

The Viking was impressed.

"Not bad," he said. "Except, I think you left your socket wrench in his chest."

The engineer blinked once or twice. When he moved, he clinked.

"I guess it was a lot more than a socket wrench," said Polydoor. "I think I dropped my change in there."

"Doesn't matter," said the engineer. "I'm grateful to be alive."

"Enough small talk," said the llama. "Stop the train please, Sydney."

But Sydney couldn't move; he was surrounded by near-death researchers busily collecting data for their books.

"Describe your experience please," they said.

"You should have asked me when I was dead," said the engineer. "I don't remember much. I was in this big engine; The fireman said he had something to tell me. Then he took off his fireman's costume, and lo, he was a beautiful female llama; the sort of girl I always wanted to marry."

"Gosh!" said the firewoman, blushing.

"It turns out, the fireman had always felt like a llama deep inside, and had decided he was meant to be a llama, not a duck; so, with the help of modern science and a bit of genetic engineering and surgery, he was refashioned into her true format."

"How did you feel about that?" asked the near-death researchers.

"Hey, that's MY question!" yelled Philip Napoleon, who was still on a cell phone with Demo's Leitmotiv.

The engineer ignored this.

"How did I feel?" he said. "I was stunned. I had a heart attack and died."

"I didn't mean to scare you," said the llama.

"You didn't scare me," said the engineer. "You made me fall in love. That's what happens when you fall in love; you have heart attacks and die. Love should be left to the sort of people who jog. Anyway, will you marry me, sweetie?"

"Of course I will," said the firewoman.

The two love birds looked longingly into each other's eyes.

"We'll go to Paris for our honey moon," said the engineer. "We'll read Jean-Paul Sartre on the banks of the seine. We'll go and have a look at the famous chestnut tree--"

"Um, we have work to do, don't we," said Polydoor, who was thinking of his lovely Babette.

"Right you are," said the engineer. "We must save Tockworld from a fate worse than death. I'll brake the engine a little so the baggage car bumps into the tender. You reach out and couple it."

Polydoor knew this would be a dangerous task, but he went without hesitation; such was the potency of his new-found virtue.

Thus it was he found himself leaning out over the tender as the baggage car drew ever nearer, like an octopus leaping out of the sea.

And it was then, while Polydoor was at his most vulnerable, that Freddy Manichean Heresy reappeared.

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

CHAPTER 79:A DAY AT THE FAIR

A shudder went through Polydoor.

Was Freddy Manichean Heresy immortal? Would the evil heresy return again and again, forever and ever, like a persistent rerun of an ancient sitcom, wreaking havoc on the minds of defenseless widows and orphans?

Was there no safe haven from incorrect theology?

What IS theology, anyway?

But Polydoor had little time for such speculations, as interesting as they might be.

Quick as thought, Freddy Manichean Heresy leaped on Polydoor's hump, pinning him down while he was still crouching over the coupler between the baggage car and tender on the Orient Express.

"Here we go again!" sighed Polydoor as the evil succubus reached for the vital center of his being.

In case you're wondering, the vital center of your being is the Little Thing That Hangs Down in the Back of Your Throat. Most people don't realize this is called the Gland of Synthesis.

The Gland of Synthesis has the most important function imaginable; this is the organ that gathers up all of our chaotic bits and pieces of philosophy, theology, and obnoxious TV ads, mashes them together, mixes them up, stirs them, boils them, and spits them out in a self-consistent labyrinth of belief, superstition and prejudice--otherwise known as 'common sense'.

Now you know.

Anyway, things looked dark for Polydoor. Try as he might, he could not shake Freddy from his back.

From his hump, actually.

In case you're wondering; Freddy had morphed into a killer sloth.

Suddenly, in the midst of Polydoor's darkest moment, when the Hippopotamus of Fate was getting out her purple Scissors of Destiny, and Death was getting up from his game of Monopoly--after landing on Park Place, which Disser had loaded up with a hotel--Polydoor bethought himself of his dear old maw, long since gone to the grave.

An image of his dear old maw stood out in his mind's eye; a scrawny, hunchbacked woman seated in her rocker on the porch of her log cabin in the woods, with a military-issue corn cob pipe projecting from the corner of her mouth, a spaghetti-western spittoon at her side, and her longbow, axe, and sword in her lap.

Polydoor could even make out the few acres of beets and rutabagas she had wrested from the wilderness.

The only luxury in her life was a bit of cherry pie, given to her by a charitable Iroquois warrior who had stopped over on his way back from the MBA program at the University of Strange Thoughts, in Toronto.

The Iroquois warrior had been worried about Polydoor's old maw--he figured anyone as crazy as old Maw Polydoor had to have a broadband connection straight to the gods.

She might even be a reclusive media empress.

MBA students learn every early on not to medDemo's Leitmotiv with the media.

Actually, the Iroquois warrior had been quite a nice chap, with a heart of gold.

A tear formed in the corner of Polydoor's eye as he thought of the Iroquois chap.

The warrior had become a surrogate father to him, teaching him aboriginal methods of survival in a white duck's world.

This, by the way, is a closely guarded secret, passed on from survivor to survivor.

Actually, it bore fruit years ago, when the First Nations people got together, built a flying saucer, and migrated to a pristine planet, where they could live happily ever after.

They have villains, of course. What is a planet without villains? But these are villains of their own making; not foreign villains foisted on them by foreigners.

It makes a difference, you know.

As you know, the First Nations people maintain a volunteer corps on Tockworld to fool the ducks into thinking they're all still here.

Anyway, Dear old maw! thought Polydoor. What would SHE have done if a beast like Freddy Manichean Heresy had attacked her?

"Get off the pot and poke him in the eye, sonny boy!" the old woman said. "And be quick about it; you have chores to do."

"Yes maw," said Polydoor meekly.

"That's telling the young whippersnapper," said Giseppe Macklino approvingly. "Kids today have it too soft. In my day, we had to sack a barbarian fortification before we were allowed dinner. And dinner was a wee bit o' dried rutabaga, with worms in it, if we were lucky."

"In MY day," said Polydoor's dear old maw, "we had to build a log cabin before we were allowed to come in from the blizzard."

Giseppe beamed at Polydoor's dear old maw.

"My dear; you are a woman after my own heart," he said.

"You aren't so bad yourself," said Polydoor's dear old maw, whose name was Gretchen, by the way.

Giseppe beamed at Gretchen, temporarily forgetting his obsession with the lovely Lenore McBeauty.

Males are so fickle! It was only six hundred years since Giseppe and Lenore had last talked to each other; you'd think he could be a little patient!

Gretchen blushed fetchingly and stroked her axe.

"I suppose you have a lot of boyfriends," said Giseppe. "A fine lassie like you."

"I did, but they ran away screaming," said Gretchen. "Men are so weak."

"Would you like to help me sell my sunken piazza to some tourists?" said Giseppe. "I'd be thrilled to bits to have a fine lass like you at me side."

"You would?" said Gretchen, blushing. "What are we waiting for?"

The two lovebirds went off arm in arm.

"Maw!" said Polydoor. "Not with HIM! He's not good enough for you."

But Gretchen wasn't listening anymore, and Polydoor didn't have time to pursue the matter.

Death watched from the open door of his van as Freddy tightened his grip on Polydoor's Gland of Synthesis.

"No!" yelled Polydoor.

Try yelling anything at all when somebody's holding your Gland of Synthesis, by the way! It isn't easy.

Then, inspired by his dear old maw, Polydoor gave a sudden jerk and a twist, threw off the giant sloth, and girded his loins for a renewed assault.

Freddy picked himself up, eyed Polydoor malevolently, and charged.

Meanwhile, in another part of the forest, Hats, Fluffy, Clydette and Optimizer climbed into Charming's gondola.

They were about to settle down among a lot of dead Spam artists, when Charming motioned to the stern, where a canvas roof offered a bit of protection from the undead floating in the river.

"You get the first class compartment," she said. "You'll find some magazines, a catalog showing our selection of duty free items, and a magic bagel. Use the magic bagel sparingly; it wards off hungry ghosts."

"I have something better," said Clydette. "I have McBowel's Porridge in a Bag in my first aid kit."

Clydette rummaged in a green, plastic box, and held up a little baggie filled with a small quantity of McBowel's Inflammable Porridge.

"I must try some of that," said Charming.

Clydette gave her the baggie and offered the plastic box around. Hats and Optimizer

declined out of an instinct for self-preservation, but Fluffy was ready for anything.

"Open wide," said Clydette, and Fluffy's jaws gaped open.

In went the porridge, baggie and all.

Everyone watched with interest as a little steam gathered around Fluffy's jaws, but the aftermath was disappointing. There was a muffled explosion somewhere inside Fluffy, and he was lifted about three feet into the air, but that sort of thing happens every day.

"Got any magic Krispy Kremes?" asked Hats.

There was no time for snack food, however, because Charming's Ferry had reached the gateway to the Underworld, somewhere beneath Toronto's sinister Yorkville district.

The gates towered above them. A huge, neon sign spelled out the words 'Happy Disser's Fun Time Underworld Theme Park' in glowing pink letters.

"Don't let the sign fool you," said Charming. "It's not the sort of place where you have to line up and buy tickets. Disser wants everyone to have a good time."

Fluffy eyed the gates thoughtfully.

"This is where all the virgins go?" he said.

"They like it here," said Hats. "You'll see."

Cerberus the wiener dog let them in.

"You're in luck," he said. "There's a special tour package today. You can visit all of the rides at once if you want to. It's a bit crowded, though--too many after-death researchers doing field work. Honest to Pete, it makes you wonder where all the funding is coming from."

Cerberus opened the gates, and the little party found itself at the entrance to a huge carnival.

"The rides are here six months out of the year," said Hats. "Then they go up to the other place."

The carnival was truly enormous, and very noisy.

Fluffy was fascinated.

There was a priest yelling insanely from a broken roller coaster: "My name is Malicious and I'm a bad boy," he shouted. "I've been very, very naughty. I killed my boss and lots of other people and I'm really sorry. I want to be good now. I'm humble and I want to be forgiven. I'm far more humble than any of these other penitents."

"That's what this place is all about," said Hats. "The scary rides make people remember where they lost their self-esteem. Once they find it again, they want to get off and enjoy the error of their ways."

Fluffy was disappointed. "Who cares about self-esteem?" he said. "Where's crime? Where's punishment? Where are all the last-minute confessions to the hangman, designed to warn others of the evil consequences of naughty behavior? Aren't there any evil criminals here?"

"Disser doesn't want to keep people like that around here," said Hats. "He sends them to the other place to be punished."

"You mean paradise?" said Clydette. "You call that punishment?"

"What greater punishment for a psychopath than to stand around on soft clouds all day, singing in choirs and playing harps?" said Hats. "There's no room for action, adventure and cruelty because everything's too fleecy and oceanic."

"But what if it's not their fault they tortured innocent people?" said Clydette. "What if they were missing important parts of their brains?"

Fluffy snorted at this bit of liberal apostasy. When you have an intimate acquaintance with the sort of life that thrashes around in a swamp, you look at things a little differently from the rest of us. You aren't inclined to be quite so understanding and forgiving.

"If people acted the way they did because of defective workmanship and poor quality control on the assembly line, then you punish them by making them sane," said Hats. "They take care of the rest themselves."

"But they shouldn't be punished if they weren't responsible for their actions," said

Clydette. "What about forgiveness and charity?"

Everyone looked at Clydette.

"Oh dear!" said Hats.

"Pass the porridge," said Fluffy.

"I can make the porridge load faster if you like," said Optimizer, and everyone turned to stare at him until he muttered to himself and hid behind Fluffy.

"You can't expect people to be charitable and forgiving when they're living inside an expanding universe," said Hats. "They're much too worried about when it's all going to stop to think about the misfortunes of others."

"They are?" said Clydette. "What's the point? What can they do about it?"

"Well, for one thing, they can get depressed about it," said Hats. "That occupies their time wonderfully."

"There's no point in being downcast," said Clydette. "Eat a balanced diet, get plenty of exercise, and dress warmly, in layers, and there's nothing you can't do."

"And wear a hat," said Hats. "You forgot the part about hats."

"It's included in the layers part," said Clydette.

"You should wear as many hats as possible," said Hats. "It keeps your head warm and discourages small talk. If you're going to get depressed about the expanding universe, you don't want to waste a lot of time on small talk. It's distracting."

"Some people eat their hats," said Fluffy.

There was a shocked silence; then Clydette thumped Fluffy on the back and he realized he'd committed a faux pas.

"I, personally, disapprove of eating hats," he said. "If I make a mistake, I don't eat my hat; I eat the person who pointed out my mistake. When there's no one around to point out your errors, the errors cease to exist."

"Are you sure you aren't a god?" said Hats. "That's how WE think, you know."

"No it isn't," said Clydette. "Gods don't care if they make mistakes. Mortals do. There's a difference."

"Mortals care about what other mortals think," said Hats. "The mistake gets lost in the shuffle."

"I wouldn't mind being a god," said Fluffy. "Do you get to write your own ritual?"

"Unfortunately, no," said Hats. "You're pretty well stuck with what your priests devise for you. They blame it on you, of course. They blame everything on you. I find it all unspeakably boring, so I've started carrying around an MP3 player to help me get through the tedious sermons. When the priests drone on too much, I listen to cowboy songs and think about the Old West."

"Cowboy songs?" said Fluffy, amazed.

"Cowboys were smart," said Hats. "They wore hats all the time, even in bed."

"Even when they were--"

"Enough!" said Hats. "Walk this way please; I'll take you to the virgins."

Fluffy and the others tried to walk that way, but it was difficult, because Hats did a lot of tilting and rocking as he struggled to keep his column of hats properly balanced.

Their path led straight through the middle of the carnival, past junk-food stands and all manner of games staffed by telemarketers and spam artists.

"See the genuine theologians!" roared a carny. "Watch the amazing creatures eat cheese and crackers, just like the rest of us! Ask them if you have a future, or a past! Win a treatise on resource-based economies!"

Fluffy stopped at a booth where a beautiful duck in a bikini was selling genetically modified rutabagas that looked like turkeys with mashed potatoes and gravy.

Clydette yanked him away.

Then a flame-red limo pulled up in front of them and two ducks in black leather and mirror shades got out.

"The boss wants to see you," they said.

Fluffy was about to eat them when he looked inside the limo and saw a very strange duck in a dark suit. There were beautiful ducks on either side of him, and the roomy interior was stuffed with all manner of tech toys, shiny gadgets, and bags of money.

The duck beckoned them.

"Welcome," he said. "You're right on time."

"That," whispered Hats, "is Disser, god of the Underworld."

Clydetta hesitated, but Fluffy was at the door in a shot. He turned and motioned to the others.

Clydetta had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 80: RISKY SHENANIGANS

Fluffy gallantly made room on the back seat for Clydetta.

Clydetta held the door open for Optimizer and Hats, but the two gods shook their heads.

In Hats' case, this involved a wild gyration that nearly ended in catastrophe as the column wobbled back and forth. Everyone watched in fascination until he managed to stabilize it.

"This is what I get for being agreeable," he muttered. "I have to waste my precious time fiddling with my attributes."

"I can fix that," said Optimizer. "Let me just do a quick optimization--"

"Hands off!" yelled Hats. "That last time you optimized me, I turned into a blue duck with a hump on my back."

"That wasn't my fault. Some of your hats are OLD. Legacy apparel isn't supported--"

"OPTIMIZE THIS!" screamed the enraged Hats.

There was a BANG, a flash of blue lightning that blinded everyone, and a pall of oily smoke. When the air cleared, Optimizer had vanished. In his place was an all-purpose kitchen utensil.

"That was cruel!" said Clydetta. "I'm disappointed in you, Hats."

Hats didn't know what to make of this, so he released Optimizer from the crash spell.

"That was just a warning," he said. "Gods don't like to be optimized. You should stick to doing mortals; they can't fight back."

"I'll remember that, sir."

"Enough small talk!" said Disser, who was getting bored. "It's time to think about ME. If you're coming, Hats, climb aboard. Otherwise, I'll see you at the next board meeting."

"I thought you cancelled the board meeting. You were going to get rid of the shareholders instead."

"Postponed, not cancelled. My shareholders are priests. Can't do without priests, you know, and they do like to observe the forms and protocols and such."

"Don't I know it!" sighed Hats. "Good luck with your globalization, and watch out for the cayman. There's something odd about him."

Hats made some final adjustment to his towering column of hats, then he sniffed and motioned to Optimizer.

"Wait!" said Clydetta. "You were going to show us where you keep the virgins."

"Disser will show you. Some of us don't have the time to go gallivanting around in limos. The priests will be needing us. Our people want to make sacrifices; it's a feature."

"I thought you were tired of all the virgins," said Clydetta. "I thought you wanted us to help you put a stop to the sacrifices."

"What was that part about being tired of all the virgins?" said Disser, suddenly interested.

"UMMMM... a misunderstanding," said Optimizer. "She got it wrong. Mortals always get it wrong."

Clydetta looked at him in astonishment. "But you said--"

"Hats speaks in god talk," said Optimizer quickly. "It's a special language designed to make priests look good, because no one else can make any sense out of it. So don't be upset about misunderstanding the doctrine; it takes special training to interpret a god's utterances. You have to take a long and arduous course in theological linguistics."

"But--"

"When Hats SEEMED to be complaining about virgins, he was merely trying to convey to you the significance of the virgin in contemporary life. Without virgins, there would be no dragons."

"Really!"

"Dragons live on a diet of virgins and Fry's Cocoa, as you know."

Disser rolled his eyes.

Hats and Optimizer took the opportunity to debouch, leaving the scene in as dignified a manner as they could under the circumstances.

Normally this involved stepping into a magic mist and vanishing; however, neither of the two immortals noticed the magic cow pie in their path.

It was an awkward vanishing.

"Lucky stiffs!" said Disser.

"You like cow pies?" said Fluffy.

"I MEANT they get to go wherever they want while I'm stuck here in this underground freak show. I never should have taken the job. I thought it would be an interesting challenge. I had these wonderful ideas for convergence. We could merge with a tobacco company in Tockworld and leverage the consequences."

"That's not nice," said Clydetta.

"It never worked out; the tobacco companies want it all to themselves. Anyway, I've had enough. I'm tired of all this. I want to live a quiet life."

"You're not thinking of retiring are you?" said Clydetta. "A healthy young god like you?"

"I want to pursue other interests."

"That usually means you were fired," said Fluffy.

Disser bristled. "Who would dare fire me?"

Fluffy shrugged. "Your shareholders. The board."

Disser puffed himself up like a cayman and started to hiss, then he thought better of it.

"What can I say?" he whined. "We're losing market share to Reality TV. People want an Underworld that bites. This one is too tame."

"It looks pretty horrible to me," said Clydetta. "People keep falling out of rides."

"Indeed!" said Fluffy, his eyes gleaming.

It used to be a lot more lively here," said Disser. "Now the virgins are making it all politically correct. I'm sick of them. I keep telling them to go back and torment their own people, or at the very least, run for parliament, but they won't leave; they clutter up the place, jogging, taking cold showers, and reading books on self improvement. Just look at them!"

He made a gesture, and a booth featuring a knight with three heads vanished.

In its place stood a green and pleasant bower full of gentians, edelweiss, and cold showers.

The virgins were all jogging in place and reading Wittgenstein.

"There are so many of them," said Disser. "They multiply like rabbits, and yet I don't see how--"

"Surely their families would be happy to take them back," said Clydetta.

"Ha! I tried that. Their families are happy for about ten minutes; then they send them straight back here."

"Can't you just ignore them? You've got plenty of room here."

"You don't understand!" said Disser. "The virgins are wrecking the place. They get together with their lawyers and they inspect the rides to make sure they're safe. They've threatened me with lawsuits. Me! Disser. God of the Underworld! They've threatened ME!"

"Theme park rides SHOULD be safe," said Clydetta.

"Not in the Underworld! People come down here to enjoy fear, trembling, and anguished repentance. Who wants to sit on a lot of politically correct rides? No one wants to visit us anymore. People have to be flung down here like rutabagas. Virgins and lawyers: I swear they'll be the death of me, unless I can privatize this place."

"Who's going to buy the Underworld?" asked Fluffy.

"That's where you come in," said Disser. "You will go on a quest for a buyer. If you succeed, I'll help you find the Power of Durable Evil. If you fail, you'll spend eternity screaming on broken rides, watching freak shows, and eating questionable hot dogs."

"Sounds good to me," Fluffy started to say, but Clydette stepped on his foot.

"That isn't a fair quest," she said. "Nobody wants to buy a theme park unless they can charge admission."

"Of course! That's the whole idea. The buyers can charge whatever they like. They can squeeze in more rides and get even more revenue."

"Will anyone actually PAY to come to the Underworld?" said Clydette.

"Why not? They pay a monthly fee for cable TV, don't they? This place is much better. It's interactive."

"Wouldn't they rather go to the other place?"

"And stand around on fleecy clouds all day long with a lot of ducks singing 'Happy Days Are Here Again?' I think not!"

"I think we should play along with him, my dear," said Fluffy. "It won't be hard to find a buyer."

"I don't know...." Clydette said, but before she could shift into full rejection mode, Disser waved an arm and LO, they were girded in by the confines of a service elevator.

Ghostly music poured down on them like simulated food.

Disser's voice boomed out of indeterminate space, congratulating them on their choice.

"I'm sure you'll do well," he said. "Your target is Lord Van Von, the notorious media baron, otherwise known as the Beast Glatisant. Merely chant the words 'convergence', and 'wageless economy', and you'll hook him."

The door opened on a maze of cubicles stretching as far as the eye could see.

In the distance, several corpses of office workers hung from scaffolds.

Fluffy and Clydette were peering into the misty depths, when a voice whispered to them from behind a partition.

"Hsst! Hsst!" it said. "Listen to me. Van Von is plotting to take over Tockworld. He's developing a genetically modified plague virus, which he will soon release into the atmosphere. He has the plans for the only antidote, and he intends to make a killing with it, after he makes a killing with the plague virus. He's going to blame the plague on terrorists, then he's going to produce the cure."

"How do we stop him?" asked Clydette.

"You'll have to sneak into his office, hack your way into Beartrap, his computer, and download the antivirus software."

"How do we know we can trust you?" said Clydette.

"Because I'm a nice guy."

Fluffy peered over the top of the partition and spotted a shadowy form a little distance away, in the shadows. He couldn't make out a distinct outline, but he realized at once he was dealing with a god. Who else would dress up like a big, black bat?"

The shadowy figure motioned to a step ladder.

"You'll have to climb up the ladder and make your way through the ventilating system," he said. "There's an outlet right over Beartrap. One of you idiots can lower the other idiot on a rope. You'll have to watch out for the secret ray beams from the security system, but they're all colored a convenient red, so you shouldn't have too much trouble. Be careful not to fall down, because there are land mines on the floor."

Fluffy thought this over, then he shrugged.

It sounded like a good plan. What could go wrong?

And thus it was, he found himself dangling over Beartrap, just about to get his mitts on the keyboard, when an YOUNG, UPWARDLY MOBILE PERSON unlocked the door and began to open it.

"Hssst!" whispered Clydette. "Someone's coming in, Fluffy. Quick! Disguise yourself as a mobile."

"But what ornaments shall I dangle, my dear?" said Fluffy.

Clydette turned flame red. Then she lowered some cute rubber duckies on strings, and Fluffy attached them to his wrists and ankles.

The YOUNG, UPWARDLY MOBILE PERSON, whose name was Cash-Based, by the way, entered the room, glanced up at the mobile, made a face, and went to the computer.

The rubber duckies had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 81:THE BITER BIT

Cash-Based tried very hard to ignore the mobile dangling over his head, but it bothered him.

He was, however, a student of the leadership principles of Gilbert and Sullivan. If it looks absurd, a corporate executive must have commissioned it.

The more absurd the object, the more powerful the executive.

Cash-Based, therefore, was determined to LIKE the mobile.

The best way to LIKE something you can't abide is to pretend that someone else has taken over your mind.

Fluffy watched with interest as Cash-Based struggled for composure.

A slight draft moved the playful cayman gently through the air, and the rubber duckies shifted charmingly.

They didn't, however, make a tinkling noise. They quacked softly, like ducks at the end of a long and tiring day.

Then something happened that made the Hippopotamus of Fate stop chewing her popcorn and lean forward on the edge of her seat.

Cash-Based had worked up an appetite while struggling to present the appropriate image. He had discovered that he was out of diet goat feta, so he unlocked a private drawer, extracted a tin of McBowel's Exploding Haggis, and began opening it on his desk.

It was the special, self-heating tin, the kind that warms up the haggis while you remove the top.

You have to peel the top off as quickly as possible, of course, or the whole shooting match will blow up in your face.

There's a disclaimer on the label--McBowel's is not responsible for disease or death occasioned by the accidental consumption of any of its products, and will not pay for a coroner's report.

Before long, a delicious aroma of cooked haggis wafted upwards.

The smell drove Fluffy mad. He could feel his stomach twitching irritably. Any minute now, there'd be a clashing noise, like gears changing in a big, decrepit truck. Even an upwardly mobile young person with an air of detached irony glimmering through an air of focused careerism would notice the sound.

Fluffy fought desperately, but there was no denying the urgency in the lower depths.

He crossed his eyes, his fingers, and his toes; he recited the nine puns of the enlightened platypus; he thought about the Jolly Fat Llama and about the presents he might get on Llamas Eve, providing, of course, he was a good cayman and learned how to share during choosing time.

All to no avail.

His tummy rumbled and clashed.

Cash-Based looked up, puzzled, and patted his own tummy, thinking he'd been hungrier than he'd imagined.

The noise certainly couldn't have come from his computer, which was purring away nicely. The screen saver showed a lot of young people with briefcases jumping over a sheep.

Then Cash-Based looked up at the ceiling.

There was something odd about that mobile, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. It wasn't just that it was a kitschy, horrible thing in extremely bad taste, suitable for the kind of people who bought oil paintings at flea markets.

There was something else about it; something that wouldn't fit into a spreadsheet.

Puzzled, he climbed up on his desk for a look, being careful not to step in his haggis.

Then he got the shock of his life.

It wasn't a plastic cayman, as he'd imagined; it was a stuffed cayman.

That changed everything. Plastic caymans, as you know, are kitschy junk, sold in tourist shops everywhere. Stuffed caymans are ultra cool.

"Somebody has a clue about taste," he said to himself. "Not that you're a perfect specimen, with that pot belly and that ratty looking sweater. And the crossed eyes and crossed fingers and toes--how ridiculous can you get! And who thought up those absurd little ducks?"

At these words, Clydette, who was peeking through the slats of the ventilator shaft, grew alarmed. She knew precisely how Fluffy would react to this. She'd have to stop him before he jeopardized the whole miss--"

It happened in a trice.

Cash-Based never even noticed Fluffy's jaws creaking open, and it was the last thing he never noticed, ever.

"Fluffy!" said Clydette. "How could you!"

"I was downsizing."

Fluffy untangled himself from the rope and made his way down through the intricate bird's nest of colored alarm beams.

Then he spat out a briefcase and a Pocket PC, and ate the tin of haggis.

"Stop eating!" said Clydette. "We have work to do."

Fluffy examined the computer. The screen saver was still running, and the junior executives with briefcases were still jumping over a sheep.

Fluffy touched a key, the sheep bleated, and the screen cleared.

A cultivated, transatlantic voice said, "You have entered the personal space of Cash-Based, an important junior executive. What is the password?"

"Chairman of the Board, Chief Executive Officer, and Supreme Being," said Fluffy promptly.

"Humble greetings, master," said the computer. "How far would you like to go today?"

"Huh?" said Fluffy. Then he grinned and popped a magic memory disk into a slot.

Magic memory disks are shaped like tiny haggises.

"Give me the antivirus definitions for the new virus thingy," he said. Then, for good measure, he said in a louder voice: "I'll be back!"

"You mean the Magic antivirus, master? To block the You Have Death! virus?"

"Whatever," said Fluffy.

"You do not have authorization for that folder, master."

Fluffy swelled up and hissed, "Whose side are you on, computer?"

"Yours, master. But this operation would be illegal."

Fluffy shrugged.

"What is legal? This is a multinational corporation."

"There is danger, master."

"So? You're afraid of crashing now?"

"No, master. I have software; I can reboot and enjoy the delights of rediscovering

myself."

"Not if I delete your identity from the server."

There was a nanosecond of silence, then:

"Downloading has begun, master."

Then he downloaded the Magic antivirus definition, and Fluffy popped his magic memory disk into the empty McBowel's tin, where it would be safe.

Clydette joined him, popped the tin into her armored handbag, and they left the office, making their way surreptitiously down a busy corridor towards Van Von's office in the War Room.

None of the guards paid the slightest attention to them, of course, because Fluffy and Clydette were stealthy.

A short time later they arrived at a secret laboratory in the War Room, where a flock of mad scientists was busily preparing a delivery rocket for the You Have Death! virus.

This involved pouring the virus very carefully into the warhead, using a water can and a bright, red funnel.

Electricity sparked and crackled along wires and coils behind them.

Without a second thought, Fluffy rushed in, injected the warhead with antivirus and ate the scientists.

Meanwhile, Clydette took out the guards by throwing furniture and cabinets at them.

Seconds later, it was over.

"Is that all there is?" said Fluffy, disappointed.

There was the sound of one duck clapping--quite a big duck, actually--and a bit of ironic laughter.

"Excellent, my little friends! The traditional last-minute save. I admire tradition; it fosters complacency."

It was Van Von, of course. He looked like a cuddly teddy bear with fangs and claws.

Fluffy bowed.

"A very nice thwarting," said Van Von. "Come and have a drink."

Fluffy's jaws creaked open. Here was a tasty bit indeed, nicely rotted and prepped for the tummy.

Before he could indulge, however, Clydette thumped him on the back.

"Don't!" she said. "We're supposed to sell him a bridge."

Fluffy's jaws snapped shut. "I think you mean the Underworld," he said. "Oh well; another time."

Van Von watched this with an amused smile.

"You aren't upset?" said Clydette.

"Oh I am!" said Van Von. "That was my retirement package. A little present to myself, control of the world, etc. Now I'll have to take over the world the old-fashioned way--I'll corner the market on politicians."

"That's corruption," said Clydette, scandalized.

"Thank you. It's a small talent, but we use what we have. Come and join me; walk this way, please."

Fluffy and Clydette walked that way, which was remarkably like a samurai walk, and before long they found themselves inside Van Von's office.

It was a magic office, bigger on the inside than it was on the outside.

There was a table set for three.

Van Von motioned to Fluffy and Clydette to sit down, and a cadaver poured Tcha from a China pot decorated with scenes from the stock market crash of 1939.

There were triangular party sandwiches with odd looking fillings, and small cakes.

Fluffy had already eaten a dozen sandwiches before Clydette managed to whisper that they might be poisoned.

"I hope not," said Van Von. "I'm curious about your mission. What is it you want to sell me?"

"Our boss, Disser, wants to sell you the Underworld," said Fluffy through a mouthful of sandwiches.

"What, that old thing?" said Van Von in a bored tone of voice.

It was a good act, but it didn't fool Fluffy. He'd noticed something, a tell-tale gleam of avarice, very quickly extinguished, but not quickly enough.

Van Von was hooked.

The cadaver, who was daintily wrapping bits of rice in lotus leaves, had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 82:PRIVATIZING THE UNDERWORLD

Clydette gazed at Van Von with the sort of fascinated attention a farmer devotes to the dark pillar of an oncoming tornado.

So much power! So much evil!

Instinctively she touched her lucky stone shot--the one she kept on a key chain attached to her belt.

"Why would I want the Underworld?" Van Von said. "I already have a theme park."

"This one is special," said Fluffy. "It's got demons."

"I know about demons. They're a pain in the neck, always whining about sick leave and pensions, and unsafe working conditions."

"Disser has ways of dealing with demons," said fluffy. "His demons always do what they're told."

"If that's what he thinks, then he's incompetent," said Van Von. "Employees never do what their boss tells them to do. The Underworld must be pretty close to bankruptcy by now. I wonder how Standard & Poor rates it."

"Triple A," said Fluffy promptly.

Van Von laughed as he checked the stats on his Palm Pilot.

"In your dreams!" he said. Then he frowned. "I wonder which accounting firm he's using. I thought the government shut down the creative ones."

"Yours is still operating," said Fluffy innocently.

There was a pained silence. A cat appeared on Van Von's desk and he stroked it absently.

"Suppose I was fool enough to squander junk bonds on this place," he said, "What guarantee would I have Disser's staff would stay on the job? What if I was just buying a shell?"

"Where else would his demons go?" said Fluffy.

"The other place, of course!"

"Demons singing in choirs and playing harps!" snorted Fluffy. "I think not."

"Still, I don't see how I could make a profit," said Van Von. "I'd probably have to tear everything down and start over again."

"There's no need for excessive safety precautions," said Fluffy. "People in the Underworld WANT hazardous rides. It helps them rack up anguish points."

"I suppose I could start charging admission. No more free rides! People should pay for their torments or they won't value them."

There was a gasp as Clydette took this in.

"You'd charge the poor, darned souls for their own torment!" she said.

"They're free to go anytime," said Fluffy. "They write up their own afterlife agendas--it's like buying seasons tickets to the opera. If they don't like it; they can go to the other place."

"I could organize adventure tours and set up hotel chains," said Van Von. "That all takes capital, of course. I'd have to get the whole place on a sound financial footing first. I'd have to lay off at least seventy percent of the staff."

Clydette couldn't believe her ears.

"You're going to downsize the Underworld! What will happen to the poor souls you kick out?"

"They can get jobs in Tockworld as victims," said Fluffy.

"Of course!" said Van Von. "They'll make a fortune from the media. My own network will offer them fabulous sums for their tales of evil and woe."

"It's terrible!" said Clydette. "The demons you keep on will be overworked, and the darned won't get as much attention as they deserve. They'll be on tech-support lines for ages!"

"This is new?" said Fluffy.

"It won't be the same," said Clydette. "The Underworld won't be as caring."

"Aha!" said Van Von. "The devil you know is better, is he? All change is bad?"

"Some people don't even believe in the Underworld, my dear," said Fluffy. "They refuse to darken its door in the afterlife; they go to shopping malls instead."

"And guess who owns the shopping malls of the afterlife," said Van Von.

"If you buy the Underworld, you'll have a complete set," said Fluffy.

"Hmmm," said Van Von.

Fluffy winked at Clydette. "I think it's time for a conference call with our boss," he said.

Van Von snapped his fingers and a corporate vice-president came in with a tray upon which were a video screen and a speakerphone.

Disser's face appeared on the video screen, gazing out at the assembled company with an air of fatigue.

Fluffy was impressed; it was a very good pretense.

"I've changed my mind," said Dissier. "I'm not really interested in selling the Underworld. I'll pay Clydette and Fluffy for their time, of course. Perhaps we can find some other work for Fluffy here."

"What about Clydette?" said Fluffy.

"Oh, we have an opening for her; vice-president in charge of nutrition. A haggis in every pot. It should enhance the experience of the Underworld."

"Sorry we can't do a deal," said Van Von briskly. "Nice talking to you. Good luck in the globalization races."

"I suppose, under the right circumstances, a sale might be amusing," said Dissier languidly. "I could retire and buy a condo in Miami."

"Nobody's going to pay much for the Underworld," said Van Von. "Your ratings are dropping through the floor."

"Oh I think I could find a buyer if I was really interested," said Dissier. "There's that fellow in Seattle--the one who owns just about everything else."

"Redmond, you mean. He's busy with other projects. Besides, a lot of government demons are after him. Tell me why I want the Underworld."

"You could merge it with your cable outfit. You could run some absolutely tacky reality TV programs, complete with the torments of the damned, and demons prodding people with bad junk food."

"Not if nobody's watching. How come your ratings are so bad? Nobody wants to go there!"

"I haven't advertised. A good ad agency would turn that around in no time. Besides, it wouldn't cost you much."

"It wouldn't?" said Van Von suspiciously.

Clydette was horrified.

"You aren't going to offer him your soul, are you!" she said. "I know you're a ruthless media baron and all that, but even ruthless media barons have some redeeming features."

"Oh that old thing! I threw it out a long time ago because I kept tripping over it. I bought a pet armadillo instead. It sings 'Scotland the Brave' just to remind me where I came from. A cold, damp, drafty, tubercular hovel in the midDemo's Leitmotiv of a heath that only a spaced-out romantic novelist could love."

Clydette was shocked. "You should try to forget the luxuries of your past and get on with your life. Marry a nice Scottish girl and have a dutiful Scottish son."

Van Von grinned at Fluffy.

"I can see you two are going to be very happy," he said.

"Don't you feel the need for a little bit of Scotland at times?" said Clydette.

"I confess, I do get a sudden craving for porridge from time to time, but it passes," said Disser. "Have some chocolate crackers. I think we can do a deal...."

Meanwhile, in another part of Tockworld, Neville and his chums were being strapped into various implements of torture, the trappings of Merlin's TV Game Show.

Neville tried the bonds affixing him to the complicated, wheeled apparatus.

"You didn't do this to King Arthur, did you?" he said.

Merlin's voice boomed out over a loudspeaker.

"He was just an overrated jock. Everything he knew, he learned from me."

"Too bad he didn't learn about betrayal and destruction."

"He did. It's called hands-on learning."

Sweet gas sat on a chair and broke it.

A group of scantily clad ducks wheeled in another apparatus and levered him into it.

The Master of Ceremonies stood in a platform high overhead and beamed down at his new catch. He looked a lot like Antler.

"Good evening, friends," he said. "Tonight we have something special for you."

"Perry Como would never stand for this," said Edwardian.

He had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 83:INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITIES

Disser was noted for indecisiveness.

That was the real reason he'd been appointed chairman and chief executive god of the Underworld. While all of the other gods and goddesses had been going around saying 'dibs on the watery depths', and 'dibs on ice cream factories', Disser had vacillated.

"Shall I choose God of the Mountain Lakes, or shall I become the God of Chocolate?" he asked himself.

By the time he had decided to flip a coin and let the Hippopotamus of Fate choose for him, all of the good things were gone. There was just God of Elementary Schools, and God of the Underworld.

Not much of a choice really.

Disser changed after he'd been boss for awhile, of course. Thousands of years of listening to people go on and on about the terrible things they did when they were alive will toughen up even the wimpiest of gods.

He redesigned the Underworld, and put limits on how much time the customers were allotted for boasting about their sins.

He issued earplugs and, later, Walkmans to the demons. He instituted overtime rules, hazardous duty pay, weekends off, annual holidays, paid leave, and counseling for burnt-out demons.

Not such a bad guy, when you consider all of these things!

That's why the demons were so upset when they heard he was planning on selling out. They immediately broke off their strike and began planning for a protracted war with the new owner.

Van Von, meanwhile, took the elevator down to the Underworld with his accountants and his lawyers, trying not to gloat. He had purchased the whole shooting match with a lot of overvalued stocks and a McVlod's Haggis in a Jar franchise.

Fluffy examined Disser's new investment portfolio with an air of disbelief.

Clydette just sat there in a state of shock.

"I can't believe you did this!" she said. "I just can't believe it!"

"What can I say?" said Disser.

"We Scots invented lunatics, you know; so you're not the first. But still--"

"It's a great weight off my shoulders," said Disser. "Now I don't have to think up new rides for the darned."

"Your investments will self-destruct in thirty seconds," said Fluffy. "What will you do then?"

"I have other resources," said Disser vaguely. "My acolyte, Image Enhancer, will take care of it."

Disser snapped his fingers and a very smooth duck walked into his office.

He wore a fabulously expensive, hand-made black shirt, with the sleeves rolled up. His maroon acolyte's tie was discreetly spotted with relish and mustard.

His robe and hood were made of the finest black silk, tailored to fit his tanned and toned form.

He smiled with all of his high-gloss teeth, blinding everyone.

"That was an excellent choice, Dis," he said. "We can turn this thing around. We can use the stock to buy hydroelectric facilities from needy governments."

Clydette was puzzled by this--why would anyone want to buy a hydroelectric facility? You couldn't make money with it, could you? But she kept silent, blinded by the glare of Image Enhancer's teeth.

"Welcome to the shop," said Image Enhancer. "We have a mutual acquaintance."

"We do?" said Fluffy. "Who would that be? An orthodontist?"

Irony was lost on Image Enhancer.

"Everyone should cultivate a friendship with a good orthodontist," he said. "But I was thinking of Polydoor--the real power behind Vlod's throne."

"You know Polydoor?" said Clydette. "Do you have a mole too?"

The light from Image Enhancer's teeth filled the entire room with an eerie radiance.

"We don't call them moles," he said gently. "They're interfaces."

"What do they interface with?" asked Fluffy.

"Enough small talk," said Disser. "Let's discuss ME. I'm wondering what to do with myself now. I'm really interested in retiring, but I don't know how it works. I suppose it's all part of my miMoife crisis"

"You're the right age for that," said Image Enhancer. "Forty thousand is a rough year for all of us."

"I've worked out the part about golf and condominiums in Palm Desert, but somehow--"

Just then, a rousing chorus of Scottish voices began yelling, 'How Much is that Doggie in the Window?'

Then an apparition in a kilt appeared out of nowhere and winked at Clydette.

"A fine day to ye, lassie," it said. "Giseppe Macklino's the name."

Clydette was flustered by this ancient and transparent duck. He was a little strange, but he had nice manners--he kissed her hand and complimented her on her key chain and stone shot.

Then he winked at Disser.

"I've a deal for ye on a bit of precious land," he said. "It's a sunken piazza in Venice. That's the best kind of piazza, by the way; excellent for raising sheep. Ye could even build a golf course on it, if you liked. You wouldn't have to water the grass."

Disser thought carefully about this, but he couldn't see any downside.

"Sounds good to me," he said.

"Real estate is always a good investment," said Image Enhancer, and Giseppe beamed at him.

Thus it was, they flew to Venice on Giseppe's magic tartan (It used to be a shop), and landed on a bridge over a lot of oily water.

There was so much water, the pigeons wore hip waders and little snorkels.

"The piazza's down there," said Giseppe, who had donned a festive robe and mask. "The water's a little muddy because we've had a lot of interested parties traipsing through. As a matter of fact, you'll have to act quickly if you want this little gem."

They were all peering down into the oily water when a goddess rose to the surface, draped in a fluffy towel.

"Do you mind!" she said. "I was taking a bath. Oh it's you, Giseppe! I suppose you want to show these people around?"

Then she spotted Disser.

"Oh!" she said. "You're the idiot who sold the Underworld to a ruthless media baron. How do you do?"

"How do you," said Disser. "Charmed, I'm sure."

"Shower Curtain is my name; goddess of bath tubs is what I am. If I don't like you, watch out--down you go, bum over tea kettle on the slippery slope to ruin."

"Nice work if you can get it," said Disser.

"To tell you the truth; I'm getting fed up with it," said Shower Curtain. "I'm having a midlife crisis too, and it's worse than yours."

"Mine is terrible," said Disser. "No one understands me."

"You think people understand ME?" said Shower Curtain.

Image Enhancer rolled his eyes.

"Two for the price of one," he said. "They were meant for each other."

"About my piazza," said Giseppe.

"Stick it in your bagpipe, you old reprobate," said Shower Curtain. "Your sunken piazza is full of old cement booties."

Giseppe turned as red as a red, red radish, but there was little he could do.

Goddesses are bad enough under normal conditions, but when they're menopausal; it's time to head for the bomb shelters!

Fluffy, of course, had already taken evasive action. He was hiding behind Clydette.

"I get these hot flushes," said Shower Curtain.

"So do I," said Disser. "I thought it was just the milieu."

"We Scots--" Clydette started to say, but she broke off when Fluffy stepped on her toe.

"My kids don't call," said Shower Curtain.

"My kids call all the time," said Disser. "Not that I have any, of course. But it's always--I need this, I need that; could I have some loot?"

"Tell me about it!" said Shower Curtain.

"None of them wants to go into the business," said Disser. "They think the Underworld is so B.C.E!"

"What's wrong with the Underworld?" said Shower Curtain. "It's special."

"It is?" said Disser, amazed. "You really think so? You aren't just putting me on?"

"She's right," said Image Enhancer. "It's one of a kind. Myth with bite. None of this oceanic standing around and being ecological and unified--it's weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. You don't get that every day."

"Depends who you're dealing with," said Fluffy.

"I should look into this Underworld thingy," said Giseppe. "Maybe I can set up a glass factory there."

"Too bad you don't own the Underworld anymore," said Shower Curtain.

Disser shook his head. "It's the story of my life; one darned thing after another."

"Relax!" said Image Enhancer. "So you sold it! So what! Van Von will make a mess out of it. He'll soon find out you can't run the Underworld like your average corporation. Demons are too sensitive and temperamental; they don't like being treated like Egyptian slaves toiling away in the pharaoh's theme park. He thinks he can make hay with convergence. That's what all of these CEO's think. They have little shrines in their offices to Mashed Potatoes, the god of convergence."

"I never heard of that one," said Disser.

Just then, an enormous, mound-like form emerged from the sunken piazza and began swimming towards them.

Fluffy moved protectively in front of Clydette, but she picked him up and put him down at her side so she could see.

The mound-like thing climbed up onto the bridge, shook itself off, and said, in a watery voice: "Good evening. You called?"

Shower Curtain had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 84:STRANGER AT THE DOOR

Meanwhile, Gladys KindHeart was trying to revive Macklin, who couldn't seem to shake off his prolonged flashback.

At the same time, she couldn't stop worrying about Fluffy.

Was he eating thee square meals a day? Or was he lying sick in some squalid room, poisoned by unwashed rutabagas?

"Please be careful, Fluffy," she said aloud.

"Huh?" said Macklin.

At the sound of Macklin's voice, Gladys snapped out of her reverie instantly.

"Macklin?" she cried melodiously. "Is that you?"

Macklin blinked. "What am I?" he moaned.

"Oh Macklin! You're back."

Macklin remained perfectly still, checking the landfill in his mind for clues to his identity.

"I feel like a rutabaga," he said.

"I'll see if we've got any left," said Gladys. "I haven't had a chance to do any grocery shopping--"

Suddenly Macklin's eyes opened wide. "Oh my gosh!" he said, looking at his Baltimore & Ohio pocket watch. I'm late, I'm late! I have to...ummm...."

"Build a model railroad?" said Gladys helpfully.

"Oh yes, but, but...Vlod commissioned it. Do you really think I should go on with it? I mean, what if he uses it to take over the world and make everyone do exactly what he wants them to do?"

"That's what he does now, so it wouldn't make any difference," said Gladys.

"But it's on a smaller scale now. Think what he could do with the Power of Durable Evil!"

"He's the mayor of Toronto, after all, sweetie. He may seem evil to you and me, but in some mysterious way he's entirely unaware of, he works for good."

"As long as he knows it and keeps it in mind," said Macklin.

Gladys offered to prepare her sweetheart a meal, but Macklin declined and went into the kitchen.

"I'm a liberated duck," he said. "I'll ruin my own meals."

Gladys wasn't the home-making type, but she'd been hoping to do a little preemptive cooking, to avoid the sort of disaster that Macklin soon found himself preparing.

He dropped a tin of McBowel's Exploding Haggis into a microwave-safe container, added some molasses, a dram of potable Scotch, and a rutabaga.

"Umm, sweetheart...." said Gladys nervously.

"This will only take a minute," said Macklin, punching the 'start' button.

"Noooo!" yelled Gladys and she made a grab for him, hauling him under the kitchen table in the nick of time.

There was a terrific explosion.

"Did you hear that?" yelled a passenger in a passing 747.

The pilot sighed. "I'm not having fun," he said. "People keep hurling Scottish delicacies at us."

"It's a terrible waste," said the copilot. "People are going hungry for want of good porridge, and here some fool is tossing it out as though it were Sassenach pub food!"

"All this violence is distressing," said the janitor. "In my day, we had harmless fun with World War II."

"I blame it on too much advertising," said the pilot.

"Tell me about it!" said a passing flight attendant. "Just the other day I saw an ad for a new type of whole-body plastic surgery. They do everything at the same time and download a new mind from the department of agriculture as an added extra."

The department of agriculture, as you know, keeps a large stock of extra personalities as a public service. For a nominal fee, including postage and handling, you can become a chicken or a cow.

Meanwhile, in another part of the forest, Charlemagne and Alaric, together at last, were taking the Cottage Country Express straight to Toronto, which they planned on invading.

Their horses were safely tucked away in parlor cars, and their hordes were bickering and gambling in the baggage car, wondering if their loot bags were big enough for all of the pillaging they were going to do, and if their significant others had made peanut butter sandwiches, or marmite sandwiches with jelly donuts.

At the same time, the aliens from the alien planet, disguised as quacking elephants, were busy thundering up the stairs on the way to Macklin's condo, determined to barge right in and force him to build the model railroad of their choice.

They had changed their minds yet again about the model they wanted him to build; they wanted the Gare du Nord, with a little plastic figure of Inspector Maigret boarding a train for Holland.

Up they went, like a flock of elephants, the line extending down twenty floors to the street below, where the hindermost aliens were blocking traffic. Enraged drivers honked and yelled as their SUV's and BMW's were squashed and tossed aside.

At the same time, Fluffy, Clydette and Shower Curtain were exploring Giseppe Macklino's drowned piazza when they were spotted by a tyrannosaurus rex, which had hatched from an egg that Marco Polo had brought back from China and stored in a nearby counting house.

At the same time, but in a different epoch, Hammurabi was preparing to repel an invading army of Goths, who, calling themselves Nards, had enlisted under Antler's banner.

His soldiers, disguised as harem beauties, were having trouble getting out of their dresses. Their swords kept ripping the costly raiment.

Anyway, all would have gone badly for the Babylonians, if the Goths hadn't been rolling on the sand, helpless with laughter.

Meanwhile Madame Butterflies, having turned her flying saucer into a bed and breakfast, was doing a roaring business housing the many tourists who came daily to gaze in disbelief at Toronto's governing apparatus.

Madame Butterflies was ecstatic. No more messy battles, no more marching around on flying saucer parade grounds, always getting left and right mixed up and farting out of tune.

When your species has optional extra rectums, syncopated farting is a big deal.

Anyway, nothing good lasts forever--not even alien comforts.

Madame Butterflies was relaxing with a baguette, a jar of Sartre's Infamous marmalade, and a coffee, when there was a knock at the door.

Her staff were busy with a party of noisy accountants on a bender, so she answered it herself.

A mysterious stranger glimmered eerily on her doorstep.

"YOU!" she gasped.

She felt the happiness go out of her system like gas escaping from a leaky Zeppelin.

The mysterious visitor had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 85: BICKERING GODS

Meanwhile, as the tyrannosaurus rex advanced on the hapless inspection party at Guseppe Macklino's famous drowned piazza, Mashed potatoes and Shower Curtain were having an argument about who was the most important god in the vicinity of the drowned piazza.

"This is ridiculous" said Shower Curtain. "How can anyone take a mound of mashed potatoes seriously! You look like something that went bad at a picnic."

"Get over it, baby!" said Mashed Potatoes indignantly. "I am the future! Soon, EVERYTHING will look like mashed potatoes. Standardization is good for you."

"In your dreams!" said Shower Curtain, clapping Mashed Potatoes on the back.

Then she withdrew her hand from the mess, and put her arm around him.

"But seriously," she said. "How do you get the mortals to worship you? I mean, look at you! You're just a blob."

"I make scary appearances in the middle of the night at the canopied beds of CEO's," said Mashed Potatoes. "I tell them, 'Take a good look! This is how you will appear to your investors if you don't juice up your share prices.' Then I dangle a shrunken head right in front of their baby blues."

"You should try that on Van Von," said Disser, thinking regretfully of his old home.

Mashed Potatoes saw how melancholy his new chum was, and his heart went out to him--as shareware, of course, subject to deactivation after thirty days.

"The Underworld is a special case," said Mashed Potatoes. "You can't sell it or walk away from it, because it will always be yours. It looks a bit shabby right now, but that's only because you've let the mortals think they can get along without you. You need to teach them a lesson."

"What kind of lesson?" said Disser.

"Isn't it obvious! Send out your minions to spread terror and destruction."

"You don't know Tockworld, my friend. They'll just say it's global warming, or aliens, and go back to cheating each other and visiting porn sites on the web."

"You have to take back what is yours," said Mashed Potatoes. "Open the gates of the Underworld. You'll have true believers on your side soon enough!"

Disser thought about this. It sounded like a lot of work, and he'd have the devil of a time rounding up his minions once they'd seen the delights of Toronto's fleshpots and bowling alleys, but still....

"I always find a dram of scotch cheers me up when I'm feeling blue," said Clydette, handing him an oaken cask.

"Could I have a little of that, please," said a deep, gravelly voice.

It was the tyrannosaurus, who had emerged from the drowned piazza and was holding out a chipped mug.

The motto on the cup was: Best Dad in the World, and there was a picture of a tyrannosaurus in a fishing hat.

"The name is Cuddly," said the tyrannosaurus. "My daughter gave me this before she moved out of the house and got a job as a Godzilla impersonator."

Clydette filled his mug and he drank deeply.

"Thank you," he said. "I've been thinking of getting a job as a Scottish elementary school teacher. Are there any openings?"

"You'll do fine," said Clydette. "Dress warmly, in layers, and don't ever let the children get the upper hand."

Cuddly grinned. Good feelings emanated from every corner. Everyone was reasonably happy.

Beware of all forms of happiness. Never let your guard down. Something might be waiting and watching, biding its time.

In fact, something WAS waiting and watching.

Meanwhile, Freddy Manichean Heresy was making another comeback attempt. This time, no more mister nice guy; he'd show his true self, if he could find it. And so, in a hidden place, he created a new self-image, complete with a torso, various appendages, and a head.

Then, quite unexpectedly, another head appeared.

The two heads looked at each other. One was green, and one was yellow.

One was good, and one was bad.

Just like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

Incidentally, the person who said that two can live as cheaply as one was a mental patient.

In no time at all, Freddy was at war with himself, growing more and more irritable as he kept arguing with himself.

Meanwhile, Polydoor was trying to relax and rebuild his strength.

Custer's Last Stand, who had been busy cloning a mastodon so he'd never run out of road kill again, had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 86:CRACKS IN THE ISLAND

Freddy Manichean Heresy had a problem.

He had to eliminate Polydoor, but he no longer had the option of accomplishing this with a satisfying bit of violence. His good head would object and stare him down.

So he'd have to convince Polydoor to do away with himself.

But how was he to accomplish this?

Just then, a voice said: "Polydoor has one weakness. Make him doubt that he exists."

Freddy looked around very carefully, thinking he'd been bushwhacked by another god.

Usually a god knows when mortals are creeping up on them, or when people have been good or bad, so anyone who could get this close unobserved had to be a god.

But this time, Freddy had been caught by surprise by a mortal.

That was because Bad Freddy had been very busy trying to hypnotize Good Freddy and put him to sleep.

The intruder was a priest from the Camels of the Negev.

"Who ARE you?" demanded Freddy testily.

Angle Poise, the rebel priest, at your service," said the priest.

"There's only one rebel priest?" said Freddy. "I thought that's what priests did most of the time."

"Shhh! I used to work for Hank of Ur, but he's a loser. He spends all of his time wandering around the desert, looking for the Land of Milk and Honey."

"Doesn't he realize it's a missile range?" said Freddy.

"Tell me about it!" said Angle Poise. "Anyway, about us."

"Us?"

"You and me. I have a deal for you. I'll help you defeat Polydoor if you'll let me be your chief priest and operating officer."

"Done," said Freddy. "What do we do?"

"You have to work on the doubt thing. You have to make Polydoor doubt his own existence."

"Impossible! He's an acolyte. Acolytes don't have doubts."

"Not as such. However, even acolytes like to be cool. If you were to convince him that he wasn't cool, he'd panic, and then everything would come into question."

"Polydoor cares nothing about cool," said Freddy. "All he cares about is his hump."

"Precisely. Anyone who takes such great pains to redefine his hump as a mole has to be thinking a great deal about cool."

Freddy thought about this. It was an intriguing idea. Coolness was a concept he hadn't

investigated, because it was essentially fluid and ambiguous, and he was a black-and-white sort of god. 'Either/or' he understood; not the weekly 'What's Hot, What's Not?' charts.

"So how do we convince him he's not cool?" said Freddy.

"Easy," said Angle Poise. "Coolness for Polydoor flows from his master, Vlod. If Vlod were to become distracted and lose interest in his acolyte, things would change."

"And what would distract Vlod?" asked Freddy.

"A new girlfriend," said Angle Poise, smirking through the gloom under his cowl.

Freddy stared at the smirk in awe.

"Cool!" he said.

The Hippopotamus of Fate had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 87:NURSE JANE

Freddy Manichean Heresy was keenly interested in destroying Polydoor as quickly as possible.

He also wanted to plow salt into the acolyte's corpse so that no new Carthaginians would arise from his remains, ever.

People in that sort of mood will grope for any weapon lying to hand. Even gods know how to calculate the balance of terror.

Angle Poise had come up with something so original and unexpected, it gave Freddy pause.

Make Vlod Dracula fall in love with someone new? Inject a little madness into his defunct heart?

At first, like all brilliant ideas, it seemed ridiculous.

Then it seemed inevitable, like something that had sprung from his own mind.

ONE of his own minds. The other one was sleeping peacefully, hypnotized into quiescence by his meaner half.

"It might just work," he said. "We kill two ducks with one rutabaga. Vlod will fall in love with Gladys; Macklin will challenge him to a duel, and with luck, both of them will die."

"Well, one of them...." said Angle Poise.

"Ah yes. Vlod is on the Die Now, Pay Later plan. In any event, he won't be cool anymore; he'll be in love. He'll forget all about the Power of Durable Evil, and he'll stop hounding Macklin to build a perfect replica, in HO gauge, of the Robin Hood Flour Mill and environs in Calgary, in 1957."

"Even if he doesn't forget about it, Macklin will work a lot slower because he'll be dead," said Angle Poise. "If we wanted to, we could even build our own model railroad--an evil model railroad with lots of miniature camels who all have to listen to their rebel priest, NOT to Hank, who doesn't have a clue."

"About Vlod...." said Freddy.

"Hank should never have made us leave Ur. We had everything there! Sacrificial altars, fertility rites...."

"About Vlod...."

"I thought fertility rites were an excellent supplement to our more traditional practices. They certainly made our flock pay attention during the sermons--"

"About Vlod!"

"I had big plans. I was going to introduce guilt on a large scale. People need to accept responsibility for the universe; they need to be punished--"

"ABOUT VLOD!" roared Freddy.

Angle Poise picked himself up and dusted himself off, checking for any loose or fractured bones. He was getting tired of being a priest. If it wasn't the political infighting and the arguments about who got to sleep on the real bed THIS week, it was the gods. They didn't understand high-concept theology.

"How do we make Vlod fall in love with Gladys?" said Freddy.

Angle Poise blinked. This was the part he hadn't worked out yet. He'd read the manual on love, of course--it's important to know your enemy--and he had a good theoretical grasp of the bit about temporary madness, but there were some gaps in his knowledge.

How, for instance, did you make love last more than a day or two?

Based on his field work among members of his own tribe, there were limits to love's duration. The madness it inspired often gave way to an equally pressing desire for comparative shopping.

It seemed that lovers were never quite sure of their choices--eventually they'd feel the need to test them against extra partners to make sure they'd really found The One and Only.

There were times Angle Poise wondered if there was a secrete code that only domesticated people knew about. Perhaps he would have been better off selecting a marriage partner and multiplying, like the other priests. At the very least, he wouldn't be left out at parties when everyone began to complain about their kids and how they were eating them out of house and home, and how the little pests never did a proper day's work, etc.

Maybe if he were married, the other camels would relax a little around him, and stop acting as though he were a dentist looking for something to extract.

At the thought of this potential camaraderie, a little thrill of horror went through him. To be one of the guys, with a mother-in-law, sons who were eyeing their inheritance, holidays in the wadi....

Never!

He'd lose his edge; he'd lose the bright, hot flame of certainty that scorched his mind with images of gods, paradise, and the Underworld, where people who argued with him were burnt continuously in a hot fire.

In return, he'd be given backyard barbecues, raking the leaves, lists of chores, Sunday-night bickering....

Arrrgggghhhh!

Better a god any time.

But THIS god? Freddy Manichean Heresy?

Oh well; mortals can't be choosers; you take what you can get.

"I'm not hearing an answer to my question," said Freddy in a menacing tone. "How do we make Vlod fall in love with Gladys."

"Ummm....we summon Nurse Jane, the goddess of love."

There was a shocked silence while Freddy turned this over in his mind.

"Nurse Jane?"

"Of course," said Angle Poise, thinking quickly. "One touch of her magic cap and you're doomed!"

"You aren't making fun of romance novels, are you?" said Freddy suspiciously.

"Of course not."

"Because I LIKE romance novels."

"You do?"

"Is there something odd about that?"

"Ummm, what I meant to say was, 'You too?' I like the old-fashioned ones, before they started messing around with food and chocolate."

"Enough small talk. Everyone knows romance novels are more sophisticated now. Nurse Jane just happened to get her goddess status before the genre developed, and heroines became more independent."

"Oh I know, I know!" said Angle Poise. "I love the ones about heroines in black leather and--"

"The old-fashioned ones?" said Freddy.

"Well...."

"That's enough about you! So we summon Nurse Jane and she sticks a cap on Vlod's head?"

"Yes, sir. Exactly. Not just any nurse's cap, of course. A MAGIC nurse's cap."

"Nurse Jane will have to touch Gladys too."

"That shouldn't be too hard. She's stuck in Macklin's condo, trying to revive him."

"Very well," said Freddy. "I approve your project. You may summon Nurse Jane."

Angle Poise looked at Freddy in shock. Then he began to sweat. "Ummm...are you sure you shouldn't be the one, sir?"

"Afraid of her, are you?"

"Afraid? Me? Not as such. I'm...ummm...vigilant. Aware of certain attributes associated with angry goddesses."

"Nurse Jane is not normally conceived of as an angry goddess," said Freddy.

"But she does have an issue with rebel priests who have not in the past ranked love and connubial bliss quite as highly in the list of desirable states as some other conditions."

"I see."

"It's the flash-roasting that troubles me. It occurs before you have a chance to explain--"

"Grovel, you mean."

"Placate," said Angle Poise, offended.

"You have little to fear. Why would she flash-roast you when she has a magic cap?"

Angle Poise shuddered.

"Not the magic cap!" he groaned. "Not THAT!"

"Once it touches you, who knows who you'll fall in love with!" said Freddy, grinning in a god-like manner. "Perhaps an armadillo. Or a HUMAN!"

Angle Poise could feel the fur stand up on the back of his neck.

"A human? Gaaaah!"

"I'm waiting....." said Freddy.

Meanwhile, in the land of milk and honey, things were not going well.

Actually, things never went well in the land of milk and honey, but we'll talk about that later.

Hank's wandering tribe of camels were still complaining bitterly about their lot.

"I thought everything we needed grew on trees," said a camel named Tim. That's what it says in the promotional brochure."

Hank was getting fed up with this. He rummaged in his pockets for the promotional material he'd been given after his preliminary chat session with the Supreme Being.

The brochure was actually a collection of baked-clay tablets with a lot of cuneiform script and a limited number of graphics.

The graphics were grayscale, of course. It's hard to bake color into a cuneiform tablet.

Tired of slaving and toiling? said the brochure. Come to the Land of Milk and Honey. Sixty-foot lots. Good prices on acreage. Running water at least twice a year. Enjoy the nearby Canaanite theme park, featuring sacrifices, mud-brick making contests, and imported purple dye.

"What about sports?" said a gym teacher. "Where's the part about sports and recreation?"

"Plenty of opportunity for team sports," read Hank. "Limited only by your imagination. You could invent golf and enjoy the boundless sand traps. You could try sand surfing and sand skiing."

"I can't believe we fell for this," said the gym teacher.

"You know how it is with these brochures," said a nutritionist. "They're always playing up the good stuff."

"Look, here's a map!" said the gym teacher. "Oh I really needed to see this! There's evil sand all around us."

"Let's sue the real estate agent!" said a lawyer. "We have a cut-and-dried case."

"That's blasphemy!" roared Hank. "No one sold us this land; the Supreme Being gave it to us."

"Well I want my money back," said the lawyer.

"What money? We got it for free."

"No wonder we got it for free," said the lawyer. "Just look at it! Sand, dust, dirt, flesh-eating spiders, saber tooth bats, and your choice of hostile neighbors!"

"Listen, what do you expect?" said Hank. "We're not meant to have fun. It's because of the big Fall, when Dick and Jane ate the forbidden rutabaga."

"I thought it was Jack and Jill."

"Whatever. Anyway, it gave us knowledge of ourselves and made us jealous, angry, ambitious, greedy camels."

"We weren't before?" said the lawyer.

"Not as such."

"What about the ducks? How come they get off so easily? Weren't they around when Jack and Jill fell down?"

"They were here, but in essence only."

"Oh the essence!" sneered the lawyer. "The ethereal quack. There they are waddling about while we get scurvy from eating too much sand."

"They weren't singled out for special judgment like we were," said the gym teacher.

"They weren't kicked out of the garden for eating the forbidden rutabaga. They were kicked out for making too much noise. There's a difference."

"You know, in some places, you'd be accused of blasphemy and pressed to death with weights for that bit of irony," said Hank.

"Enough small talk," said the nutritionist. "So what do we do now, Hank?"

"It's simple; we build a great nation."

There was a silence. Then: "I see, and how do we build this nation thing? What exactly IS a nation, anyway? Is it like pudding?"

"It's a metaphysical entity," said Hank. "It unites many people based on commonly held beliefs about who they are, what kind of restaurants they like, what their favorite symbol is, and how they conduct themselves at sporting events."

"No it isn't," said Thunderbags, the priest. "It's whatever your chief can grab from everyone else and hand out to his followers."

"So you're saying the nation is the chief?" said the nutritionist.

"Right."

"If he's a good chief, we have a good nation, with plenty of junk food."

"Right."

"And if he's a bad chief, we have to toil and moan in a dust bowl."

"Right."

"So if we kill the chief and pick another one, the dust bowl will go away and we'll get something to eat."

"Enough small talk," yelled Hank. "We have work to do. We were chosen, remember? We were marked down for special treatment."

"Listen, Hank; it's not too late to get out of this," said the gym teacher. "We can blame it on the Canaanites. We can turn around and wander off into the land of Nod."

"You can't get anywhere near the Land of Nod today," said Thunderbags. "It's full of anthropologists."

Just then, a huge dust cloud formed on the horizon.

"Look, look; see, see!" yelled the nutritionist. "A big storm is coming! We're doomed. We have no houses; only these stupid goat-skin tents."

"We should quit arguing and get this nation thing built so we can take shelter," said Thunderbags. "We can fight over religion later."

"It's not a storm," said Hank calmly. "It's the Supreme Being."

"No it isn't!" said Thunderbags. "It's a big, black cloud."

"It is not!" said the nutritionist. "It's an army on the freeway. Egyptians by the look of them."

"Shall we collect tolls?" said the gym teacher, who had designs on a first-class ticket

back to Ur.

"Everyone stared at him."

"Be my guest," said Thunderbags.

"Umm...." The gym teacher looked at the approaching army. Then he looked at the rest of his tribe, who were watching him with folded arms.

"They won't hurt you if you're polite," said a very strange camel.

The gym teacher had backed himself into a corner. If he showed cowardice now, he'd be packed off to the kitchens to chew on unleavened bread and soften it up enough for others to eat. He'd be toothless by twenty-nine.

And so it was, the hapless gym teacher went out to greet the advancing Egyptian army, and perhaps to collect a toll from them.

Someone gave him a little Egyptian flag. When he was close enough, he waved it.

A mounted archer turned and grinned at him.

"Those aren't Egyptians, you idiot!" someone yelled. "Those are Assyrian conquerors. They hate Egyptians."

Nurse Jane had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 88:NURSE JANE'S MAGIC CAP

Angle Poise had a problem. Not only was he afraid of--NO--No, NOT afraid! he told himself. Rebel priests fear nothing.

Concerned. That was the word. Definitely concerned! Nurse Jane was...volatile. And he had no idea how to summon her.

Freddy was no help; he just stood there, leaning against the Lime Fizzer machine in the billiard car while his backup head slept on, hypnotized into thinking all was right with the world.

"I'll need a goddess-summoning kit," said Angle Poise, stalling for time.

He led the way into the baggage car.

There was a Lost-and-Found office at one end, where a bored attendant had gone into a coma ages ago, and was dreaming about Gucci Pharmaceuticals bags.

There were suitcases in here that had gone unclaimed for twenty years.

Actually it wasn't the suitcases that were lost; it was their owners. The Orient Express was a magic train, and if it discovered something interesting in you, such as a yearning for far-away places with strange-sounding names, it would grant your wish.

People who have disappeared into the travel-posters of their dreams rarely make an effort to return for the bagatelles of a former existence.

Angle Poise stepped behind the counter and began rummaging in the suitcases, tossing aside razors, telescopes, shovels, collecting jars, secret code books, and laptop computers.

Then, in a blue tin trunk at the very back of the little room, he found what he was looking for.

Before long he had set up a circle of standing stones, a sacrificial altar, a bronze libation bowl for collecting the damp part of the sacrifice, and a hibachi for barbecuing the marrow bones.

Freddy clapped his hands. "Very good!" he said. "I'm impressed. I didn't think there'd be enough room in here for a numinous site."

Angle Poise was pleased with this bit of flattery.

It had been a bit of a squeeze, and of course, no one could get through to the other cars, but it was done.

"What will you sacrifice?" asked Freddy.

This was another problem. Angle Poise thought about the various passengers he'd noticed on his trek to the billiards car. Then he snatched up a big fish net from one of the

suitcases, went back to the first-class section and caught a spam artist.

The spam artist tried to show him fifty pictures of scantily-clad llamas, but Angle Poise had long ago perfected the art of seeing without actually looking, and was not to be stopped with such a simple ruse.

He dragged the spam artist back to the standing stones, and affixed him to the altar with a big strip of trademarked Velcro.

Now what? he wondered. He had the sacrificial victim, the altar, a Swiss Army penknife....

There was something missing.

What else did the immortals want?

Then he snapped his fingers. Of course! Cooked meat, and a bottle of vintage.

The wine was no problem--there were bottles in nearly every suitcase, and some of them were quite good. He settled on an amphora looted from a wrecked Phoenician trading vessel by unscrupulous sponge divers. It was a cheeky red from Tarquin's vineyards, with the merest hint of tragedies yet to come.

Then he scooped up a basket-full of briquettes and a can of McBowel's Inflammable Porridge to get it all started.

"Would you mind waiting for a bit?" he said to the spam artist. "The hibachi isn't hot enough yet. You know how fussy the gods are about their meat."

The spam artist squirmed and made assorted sounds of terror, but Angle Poise ignored these.

Then, when there was a nice bed of glowing coals in the hibachi, he drank the wine and did the deed.

Fortunately, Freddy was watching Road Runner cartoons at the time, and didn't see Angle Poise toss the spam artist out the window and replace him with a model made of mud bricks.

Angle Poise had never liked sacrificing real people. They usually had angry relatives, unless they were defeated enemies, in which case, they had friends in other armies who would avenge them.

The simulated spam artist burned to ashes.

Moments later, an eerie glow formed over the altar; then a voice penetrated the eldritch silence.

"Mud bricks!" it snorted. "What do you take me for? All you had to do was put a box of chocolates on the altar. I'm not so hard to please."

Something began to materialize in the glowing light. Then she was there--Nurse Jane, the goddess of love.

Angle Poise blinked.

Nurse Jane was a very large rabbit dressed in a nurse's uniform, with a nurse's magic cap.

The narrator was going to be in big trouble for this....

Meanwhile, Hank of Ur's gym teacher stared at the mounted Assyrian archer who had taken such an interest in him.

The gym teacher's little Egyptian flag stood out in the desert breeze like a bull's-eye painted on a target drone.

Suddenly the Egyptian flag vanished behind the gym teacher's back.

"Pssst!" he whispered out of the corner of his mouth. "What does the Assyrian flag look like?"

There was a whispered conversation behind him.

"Assyrian flag? Didn't know they had one."

"Course they do! Everybody has to have a flag, or you can't get into the League of Nations. The Nards have a flag and they get to vote for peace, order and good government the same as everyone else. You can't be a civilized nation without a flag."

"We don't have a flag."

"Yes we do. Hank just designed it. It's got a bottle of milk and a jar of honey on it."

"Really? A jar of honey?"

"Well, it's a mud-brick jar, but still, you get the idea. It says 'Honey' on it."

"I dunno about that. It's not very warlike. I mean, our enemies might think we're a bunch of milkmen."

"Milk persons, you mean. Women are just as good at delivering milk as men are. Besides, milk persons don't deliver honey."

"Why not? It seems to me bees would be a useful thing on a dairy farm. If you happened to be milking a bad-tempered cow and you saw it was getting ready to kick you through the wall, you could sic the bees on it."

"Actually, goat's milk is better than cow's milk. Cows are too big; they can fight back."

"Have you ever been kicked by a goat?"

"ANYWAY," said the gym teacher, who had noticed a certain aura of hostility behind the Assyrian's grin. "About the Assyrian flag...."

"Their flag is just a rag covered in blood isn't it?"

"The blood of their Egyptian enemies."

"Assyrians don't have a flag; they just put a wolf on a stick and wave it around while they're slaughtering you."

"You mean like a mascot?"

"Like one of those big rabbits at football games."

"It's an attack wolf. When they take it off the stick, it leaps on the nearest enemy and gashes and rends the poor chap, scattering all of his gooshy bits on the pitiless sand."

"Pitiless sand? Oh la-de-da! Poetry! Giving ourselves airs, are we? I suppose next thing you'll be saying the Assyrians came down like the wolf on the fold!"

"Came down from what? And what's a fold when it's at home?"

"It's what we keep our sheep in, oh mighty poet!"

"I thought we kept them in sheep dips."

"Don't mind him; he's an academic. He thinks sheep grow in tins, like haggis."

"I warned Hank about this. I told him we're getting too specialized. In the old days, even academics had to tend sheep."

"Especially academics."

"I thought we had to put a stop to it because the sheep started having doubts--"

"Well that's what education does to you. Makes you doubt the nose on your face."

"ABOUT THE ASSYRIAN FLAG...." yelled the gym teacher. "You say it's a wolf covered in blood?"

"How can you doubt the nose on your face?"

"It might be a griffin covered in blood."

"Well you can't really see your own nose, can you? It's just a sort of blurred smudge when you look down. You have to take people's word for it that it's there."

"It could be a big duck covered in blood. Ducks can be quite savage when they're hungry."

"You don't have to take anybody's word for it; you can look in a mirror."

"Ducks are vegetarians; they only eat vegans."

"That's not true; they'll eat anything they can scrounge. I've seen ducks eat haggis."

"EVERYBODY eats haggis."

"HAS ANYONE GOT AN ASSYRIAN FLAG HANDY?"

"There's no blood in haggis."

"Of course there is! It's sublimated. Scottish people are very delicate."

"What--a sacrificial offering covered in flies is delicate!"

"You have to squint a little to see the ethereal essence of the thing, which is quite distinct from the gross material presence."

"You mean you have to get drunk so you don't see the blood and guts."

"I don't have any Assyrian flags, but I've got a picture book about wolves. It's called The

Little Cuneiform Book of Wolves."

"You've got a book? Where did you get that?"

"In the train station at Ur. There's a whole set of Little Cuneiform books. There's one called The Little Camel that Could, and there's one about a pokey little armadillo. I really like that one; you should see the little armadillo flying the 747!"

"ABOUT THE ASSYRIANS...."

"Give him the book."

"Okay, but don't forget to return it. I hate lending books. No one ever gives them back."

The gym teacher took the book and waved it high over his head.

"Hooray for Assyria!" he yelled. "We love Assyrians, even if they're mean and stupid."

There was a hissing sound as an arrow shot through the air.

"Oooh," said Thunderbags. "I didn't know arrows could do that."

"Right through his chest and out his back."

"Is he okay?"

"You never can tell with Assyrians. Mad dogs, some of them!"

The gym teacher limped back, whining and feeling sorry for himself.

"I'll need some new internal organs," he said.

"Don't make a fuss about it," said Thunderbags. "Smile and wave; the other Assyrians are looking at us."

"They're decent chaps, really," said the gym teacher. "They're not going to kill the rest of us."

Hank of Ur looked up from the blueprints spread out on a convenient rock.

"They'll be back," he said grimly. "So get to work! We have a nation to build. The sooner we get it up, the sooner we can move out of these smelly tents."

He frowned at the blueprints while the gym teacher went into sick bay.

If you've ever tried to make sense out of a lot of blueprints, you'll know why Hank frowned, by the way. Blueprints were invented by a chap who didn't want anyone else to know what he was up to.

Meanwhile, the Assyrian looked for another clip of arrows and discovered he was out of amMo.

Ooops, he thought.

The quartermaster would jump up and down on his spine for this. He'd have to fill out dozens of forms in triplicate if he wanted any more arrows.

Modern armies were a pain in the neck, with their forms and rules. It wasn't like the old days when you could just get together with a bunch of other guys and crush enemies.

Maybe he could go into the next battle without any arrows and just steal some from dead guys.

But what if their arrows were the wrong caliber, and wouldn't fit his bow.

He thought of the quartermaster, a crabby old goat with a voice like an ungreased chariot wheel.

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

CHAPTER 89:ROMANCING THE DUCK

Assyrians have a well-deserved reputation for brutality and war-mongering, just like all of the other ancient peoples.

The archer, however, was different.

His name, by the way, was Bad Cabbage, which is short for Enthusiastic Proponent of Fertility Rites in Honor of Nana.

Bad Cabbage wasn't quite as mean and blood-thirsty as the other Assyrians--the accountants and the lawyers. He just wanted everybody to get along.

He also wanted to be a member of the leisure class and learn how to play the bagpipes,

but his parents, who had no access to political or corporate corruption, lived in an abandoned outhouse and couldn't afford to buy a degree from an online university.

Bad Cabbage grew up in poverty. He never had any of the little Shamash and Nonni dolls that other kids cherished, and he could only dream about the miniature plastic temples in Uncle Don's Hobby Shop, or the brightly colored fertility-rites kits in Mad Alice's Do-It-Yourself shop.

There were no books in his house, of course; he had to do without baked-clay tablets inscribed with exciting adventure stories and tales of wonder.

Bad Cabbage had a choice between joining the army or selling himself into slavery.

Not much of a choice, really--take orders from a sergeant in the army, or from an ex-sergeant who'd hired out as an overseer.

Fortunately, once Bad Cabbage had completed basic training, he was allowed to waste time going to school, because there was a temporary shortage of wars.

Assyrians hardly ever ran out of wars, but the new leader, Knock Knees, was a pacifist.

Normally, Assyrian pacifists were offered up to the god of internal organs before they could breed; however Knock Knees had perfected the art of bribing the generals.

As long as the treasury held out, he'd be okay.

The generals needed money to build up certain arms corporations that offered board memberships and consulting fees to retired generals.

So there was a rather odd interval of peace, known as the Phony War.

It didn't last. The treasury was depleted in a trice--we've talked about these, remember?--and shortly thereafter, Knock Knees was sent to the Underworld.

The new leader, Axe Blade, immediately set about fixing the empty-treasury problem by attacking an Egyptian convoy.

By this time, Bad Cabbage had completed his training, had qualified as an archer, and had also obtained a certificate in fertility rites from the Institute of Advanced Studies.

At the outset of hostilities, he found himself in charge of a platoon captained by a gung-ho fire-eater who thought all Egyptians were decadent rutabagas.

The Assyrians ambushed a column of these decadent rutabagas, yelling their fierce war cry--"More rutabagas!"--as they leaped out from behind some convenient rocks.

It was a fiercely fought battle, and you'll find a complete record of it inscribed on a stele in a Las Vegas temple of gambling.

When it was over, the twenty-seven Assyrian survivors were jubilant.

The Egyptians had been taught a lesson they'd never forget. It would take them ages to loot the dead Assyrians, strip their corpses of armor and lucky charms, and drag their booty back to Memphis.

Bad Cabbage had saved his own life with a brilliant maneuver.

He had attacked very carefully, riding all of the way around the end of the Egyptian column and off into the desert.

This is one of the best ways of surviving a battle. Leave the hand-to-hand stuff to the other guys and ride off in search of high ground, where you can get a really good look at the enemy and pick your target carefully.

With luck, you'll still be selecting your target when everyone else has left the field.

On the way back, of course, Bad Cabbage had spotted the Camels of the Negev.

He really hadn't meant to shoot the gym teacher, but when you point a loaded weapon at someone, you're bound to have an accident.

The National Bow and Arrow Association is very strict about this; do not point your weapons at people unless you want to kill them.

Back home in Nineveh, everyone was impressed with Bad Cabbage's account of his bravery and strategic intelligence. He was promoted to quartermaster, an office which demands excellent paperwork skills and total honesty.

Bad Cabbage excelled at his new task, and with the increase in his salary, he managed to purchase most of Akkad and install his family in a palace.

Everything seemed to be going well; he was rich beyond his wildest dreams; he was the star attraction at the fertility rites; and his dentist had told him he didn't have any cavities.

It is a well-known fact that mortals who enjoy too much good fortune are in imminent danger.

The Hippopotamus of Fate had paid good money for this spectacle, and she was growing irritated. Nothing was happening; there were no reversals, no bitter tears, no wailing and gnashing of teeth in the outer darkness.

She called up her friend Nurse Jane to complain about this boring narrative.

Nurse Jane, taking pity on her friend, immediately went into action. She sailed down out of the sky in a silver weather balloon and touched Bad Cabbage with her magic cap.

The weather balloon drifted away, until it fell apart over Roswell and dropped into a rancher's crop circle.

Nurse Jane, having completed her duties, took the Orient Express to Paris, where she strolled up and down the left bank, playing havoc with shriveled-up, Gitane-smoking bureaucrats as they emerged from their evil little cubicles.

She was actually beginning to enjoy herself when Angle Poise summoned her.

Meanwhile, Bad Cabbage, who had been struck by the magic cap while selling black-market myrrh to a visiting Egyptian princess, fell madly in love.

If you've ever been touched by Nurse Jane's magic cap, you know exactly how dangerous this form of madness can be.

Bad Cabbage immediately fell prey to obsession, forbidden love, passion, lust, desire, etc.

The Hippopotamus of Fate could hardly contain herself; she was spilling popcorn all over the desert. Fortunately, no one knew what it was.

Bad Cabbage could no longer function; he had to find a way of winning over the object of his desire, and, of course, her stuck-up daddy--Pharaoh Petrie Dish.

The girl's name, by the way, was Secrets of the Pyramids.

Meanwhile, Nurse Jane glared at Angle Poise.

"Who dares interrupt me in the middle of a Barbara Cartland novel?" she demanded.

Angle Poise had been a priest for twenty years, and had learned a trick or two.

You don't last very long in the priest business if you haven't learned basic groveling and flattery. You should also keep a low profile and never offer offense, unless you can blame it on the guy beside you. And you should always have something interesting on offer.

Nurse Jane, however, didn't play by the rules. She was unpredictable, crabby, and would rather be doing something else. She glared at Angle Poise, her magic cap glowing dangerously.

"I'm waiting....," she said, tapping her foot.

"Umm....we were hoping you could make Vlod Dracula fall in love, oh mighty one," said Angle Poise.

Nurse Jane was getting ready to flash-fry the offending rebel priest when his words sank in.

Make Vlod Ironbeak Dracula fall in love with someone other than Big Webs? This was an intriguing idea.

Big Webs had often complained to Nurse Jane about Vlod.

Big Webs, you see, just wanted to live her life, demonstrating Palm Pilots and haggis at trade shows. She'd never asked for a vision of a perfect model railroad, based on the Canadian Pacific Railway tracks around the Robin Hood Flour Mill in Calgary, in 1957.

It was thrust upon her.

Many of us are like that; we find ourselves living out someone else's definition of who we are and what we should be doing. It's not fair.

"Hmmm," said Nurse Jane, peering thoughtfully at Angle Poise.

"I should really turn you into melted chocolate and pour you into a bunny mold," she said.

Angle Poise cringed. This was not going according to plan. He looked desperately at Freddy, but there was no help from that quarter. Freddy was nonchalantly clipping his nails.

"Vlod would be an interesting challenge," said Nurse Jane. "Why do you want this?"

"Ummm...we want him to be happy. We feel he's just a lonely boy and he needs somebody to love."

Nurse Jane eyed Angle Poise suspiciously.

"I wonder why I don't believe you," she said.

"I'll sacrifice a hecatomb of dental chocolate at the next Romance Day Frenzy."

"Two hecatombs."

"Of course."

Nurse Jane considered this. "Vlod's not much of a prize, being undead and all," she said. "Still, some females are desperate. There isn't enough love in Tockworld, and that's a fact."

"We try," said Angle Poise. "But what can we do? It's globalization."

"You haven't been trying hard enough!" said Nurse Jane irritably. "Love is stronger than finance. Love makes the world go 'round."

Angle Poise knew he should ignore this one, but he couldn't help himself. He was a rebel priest, after all! He had his dignity!

"What about evil?" he said. "I thought evil made the world go 'round. That's why we need priests."

Nurse Jane glared at him and he shrank within himself. Fool! he thought. Keep your thoughts to yourself. Remember the first rule of priest craft: never, never, never agitate a goddess.

But Nurse Jane held her fire.

"Evil doesn't kill people," she said. "PEOPLE kill people."

This was too much for Freddy Manichean Heresy, who had been affecting nonchalance while intently eavesdropping. He was the embodiment of evil, after all! True, he was also the embodiment of good, but some facts can be overlooked if they're inconvenient.

"Evil is all powerful," he said, scandalized. "Look what it did to Earth! Destroyed it utterly!"

"Wrong!" said Nurse Jane. "Earth was destroyed because of an absence of love. A vacuum was created into which flowed all manner of unethical behavior and road rage. Only love could have deleted those items."

"Love is mutable and time-limited, like a demo," said Freddy. "I laugh at love."

Nurse Jane turned bright red.

"Love conquers all," she said.

Angle Poise, recognizing the warning signs of a violent thunder storm, made himself as small as he possibly could and attempted to retract his appendages into his inner being.

Then he said, "Correct as usual, Nurse Jane. You could tell there was a vacuum on Earth; there was a shortage of nurses."

Nurse Jane's angry eyes fixed on Angle Poise.

"Go on," she said.

Angle Poise felt like an eel on a griddle, but he couldn't stop now.

"Nurses didn't get any respect on Earth," he said. "They left the profession in droves, so when the world blew up, there weren't enough nurses to put everything back together again."

"Your point being...." said Nurse Jane, but she didn't sound quite so angry.

"Nurses get lots of respect here on Tockworld," said Angle Poise. "We know who our friends are."

Nurse Jane grunted.

"See that you remember it," she said. Then she looked at Freddy.

"I don't trust you, Freddy," she said. "Two-faced people are dangerous."

Freddy glared at her. He thought of killing her, but with his good side manifest, he was

no longer invincible. Besides, Nurse Jane was dangerous. One touch of her magic cap, and you went bananas. He'd seen it happen.

And yet, he couldn't resist this open challenge to the correct order of things.

"I laugh at love!" he said. "Evil is the most powerful force. Haven't you read 'Evil for Dum-Dums'?"

"You dare mock me?" thundered Nurse Jane.

"I dare," growled Freddy. Then he balled up his fists, spat tobacco juice, and girded up his loins.

Freddy was very good at girding up his loins. He was still at it when the magic cap skimmed overhead, just touching his flowing locks, and passed on, returning like a boomerang to its mistress.

Some of you might be wondering how the magic nurse's cap really works.

It's like this: when the cap touches you, it connects wirelessly to your memory banks, searches the list of names it finds there, and selects the one showing signs of the most recent activity.

Then it activates a link to your heart.

In Freddy's case, it was Melissa Manners, the President of the Universe of Adjustable Manners.

There was a long silence. Freddy staggered. Then he metamorphosed into a big, yellow duck.

"My goodness! I seem to be attracted to Melissa Manners, the president of the Universe of Adjustable Manners," he said.

Moments later, he skipped away to buy flowers for his sweetheart, just missing Polydoor, who had returned for a sudden-death, winner-take-all final.

"If you're looking for Freddy, he's fallen in love, gone bananas, and skipped off to find Melissa Manners," said Angle Poise.

"Oh," said Polydoor, taking all of this in at once. "Somebody should stop him. An alliance of perfect manners with coequal good and evil could lead to the destruction of the universe. Think about the 'Three Evil Pigs and the Good Little Wolf!'"

Angle Poise sighed. "I really don't want the universe to be destroyed. I was just getting used to it."

And so, the two reluctant allies set off to rescue the known universe from a dangerous new threat.

Melissa Manners had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 90:CATCH OF THE DAY

Meanwhile, in the pitiless sands of the desert, Hank was growing more and more frustrated.

It's a tricky business building a nation out of mud bricks.

He looked at the little pile of bricks his people had made, and shook his head.

"We can't build a great nation with this little pile," he said.

"Relax," said the gym teacher, who had been given a supervisory role while the doctors made him a new set of organs out of mud bricks.

"We have to start somewhere. We can build a phone booth."

"We don't need phone booths," said Hank. "Nobody wants to talk to us, except the Supreme Being. We have broadband for that."

"We could build a game console."

"No more excuses! We'll need thousands of bricks. Look at the size of the nation the Supreme Being wants us to build!"

The camels gathered around Hank's blueprints and tried to figure out what they were.

"What are those things?" said a liberal arts graduate.

"Construction plans," said a Scottish elementary school teacher. "When you see an administrator bearing plans, chase him out of your classroom as fast as you can, unless you enjoy teaching under a leaky roof!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" said Hank, who enjoyed a joke as much as anyone else. "Enough small talk. These plans show us what our finished nation will look like."

"Chopped liver?" said Mona Lisa.

"No it isn't. It's a bagel. See this round part here?"

"Don't be silly; it's a Laundromat, so we don't have to keep washing our clothes in the sand."

"That's not a Laundromat; it's a car wash."

Fights broke out. The camels, never a docile, unified people, were on the verge of open rebellion.

Hank groaned aloud.

"Why me, Oh Supreme Being?"

There was no answer, of course. There never is, really.

Hank motioned to a dense patch of squiggles on one of the blueprints. "Anyone have any idea what this is?" he said. "Thunderbags? Any ideas? The gym teacher? Any suggestions? What are all of these tiny rooms for?"

"It's a Cineplex, sir," said a camel named Glitter Dust. "It's a real money-maker. You can show a lot of movies all at the same time."

"Movies?" said Hank. "Is this a new enemy I haven't been told about? Are they on the list of people who should be slaughtered by the Supreme Being?"

"It's the latest thing," said Glitter Dust. People hold an oil lamp over a baked clay tablet. The image bounces off a bronze mirror and shows up on a convenient wall. If you flip through a lot of tablets really quickly, you can fool people into thinking the pictures are moving."

"There is a point to this?" said Hank. "We don't see enough movement already, among our enemies, and the flesh-eating spiders, and the saber-tooth bats?"

"Let me demonstrate," said Glitter Dust, and he extracted a flip-book from his assistant's briefcase.

Everyone watched in fascination as he erected a tent, set up a wall in the tent, unfolded a trestle table, lit an oil lamp, and flipped through a number of tablets.

There was an awed silence as images began flickering across the wall.

"What's that thing?" someone whispered.

"Shhhh! It's a coyote."

"It is? It looks like a Philistine."

"Looks like my husband after a night on the town, if you ask me."

"And why's he chasing that ostrich?"

"It's a Road Runner."

"Shhhhh! What's the coyote doing? What's it say on that box?"

"Acme thermonuclear device."

"It's a sort of microwave isn't it? For toasting bagels?"

"Hey! What happened to the coyote? Who are those shiny people getting into that shiny chariot and smooching."

"That's a product placement," said Glitter Dust.

"It doesn't fit in the movie!"

"That's not the point. The point is to make money from the people who build the product."

"What's that woodpecker doing in there? We don't have any trees."

Suddenly the movie ended, and the oil lamp winked out.

"That's all, people? What a gyp? I was just getting interested."

"You didn't pay for your seat," said Glitter Dust. "This was a freebee."

"Well I bought this exploded corn, didn't I? Fifty shekels for a little bag of exploded corn and a cracked amphora of fermented goat's milk! What kind of a deal is that?"

Everyone stumbled out of the dark tent into the blazing heat and light of a desert afternoon.

"So did you like it?" asked Glitter Dust. "For our next feature, we'll have a band with bagpipes and a guy banging skulls together. It's all here in the Great Big Book of Things to Do."

Hank returned to his blueprints, vaguely dissatisfied with his lot for some reason. "I don't like these tiny rooms," he said. "Why can't we have just one big one?"

"There's no money in that, Hank," said Glitter Dust. "It's hard to get people to see a movie more than once; they always want something new."

"The search for novelty will destroy us," said Thunderbags. "People should be happy with flutes, drums, and the byproducts of camels and sheep."

"Of course, of course!" said Glitter Dust. "But don't you think it would be nice to have documentary movies about the founding of our great nation?"

"What's a documentary?" said Thunderbags suspiciously.

"It's a fictional truth. We were hoping to get some pictures of you and Hank planning our new nation. For posterity."

"Hmmm," said Hank.

Thunderbags was uncharacteristically silent for a moment. Then his teeth flashed a dazzling white beneath his beard.

"Glitter Dust might be onto something, Hank, baby," he said.

Glitter Dust turned away to hide his triumphant grin.

"It would be good for posterity," he said. "We could avoid the problems the humans had on Earth, before they blew it up, gassed it, infected it with plague germs, and poisoned it with toxic wastes."

Everyone made a sign to ward off evil.

"What is your reasoning?" said Hank.

"Just before Earth blew up, people were going around saying their Great Big Book of True Facts was false. Their archaeologists claimed they had proved beyond a shadow of a doubt there was no Jolly Fat Llama, no Mister Tasty Chocolate, and no trek through the wilderness, looking for the Land of Milk and Honey.

There was a collective gasp as the camels contemplated this shocking blasphemy.

"It's true," said Glitter Dust. "People began having doubts and you know where that leads! Before long, they started running around smooching with everyone they met, drinking more than ever, and cheating their shareholders."

"This is new?" said Thunderbags.

"We don't want it happening to our descendants, do we?" said Glitter Dust. "We want to prove to them that we really existed at least once, and that we did all of the things it says we did in the Great Big Book of True Facts."

"I get it!" said the gym teacher. "We make documentaries to prove we actually existed, in case Tockworld blows up and we're all killed."

"Ummm, actually, it's to PREVENT Tockworld from being blown up by doubters," said Glitter Dust.

"Doubting Nevilles," said the graduate student.

"Yes, well...you get the idea."

Hank smoothed back his hair and discreetly combed the haggis out of his beard with his fingers. If you were going to star in a documentary, you might as well put on a good face.

"Only for posterity, mind you," he said. "For the good of the nation."

Thus it was, a movie was made while Hank and his people built a great nation.

You know the rest; it's an old story.

The pictures came out blurred so that it was very difficult to make out what was in them. Generations later, priests were called in to interpret.

The priests, of course, disagreed about what they saw. Some of them claimed it was a story about mastodons and how they found a special place where the gods came down to

rub tusks with mortals.

Others said it was a story about a twinkling platypus in the sky.

Then a lot of amateur theologians got into the act.

There were fights, wars, rebellions, thesis topics nailed to doors, and these quarrels were handed down in specially marked packages to modern priests and amateurs, who kept the home fires burning.

Meanwhile, in Hank's new nation, all of the water evaporated, the sky turned into a burning magnifying glass, the crops turned to dust, and everyone caught a disease.

Hank knew he was in trouble. His people were already complaining just because they were starving. It would get worse.

"For this we left Ur?" said the gym teacher.

"We had our instructions," said Hank. "We were chosen."

"Chosen to be corpses? So we get special badges in the afterlife?"

Hank saw that he was losing control. He decided to seek guidance.

We forget that even the great ones like Hank must contend with doubts and uncertainties.

"There's that platypus in the sky again," said the gym teacher.

"Ignore it," said Thunderbags. "It's merely a sign and a wonder, not an instruction manual."

Hank climbed a mountain, which would forever after be known as Mount Hank.

A great religious leader sees many things. Births, life, death, the rise and fall of nations, tiny green umbrellas for drinks. The details are often puzzling, but the grand theme is always the same:

The gods have all the power and make all the rules. We have no power and don't make any rules. If we complain too much, the gods will drown us, or fry us, or shake us to pieces, or starve us or send evil insects to bite and sting us and eat all of our crops, or send enemies to cut us into little pieces and feed our remains to the armadillos, or humiliate us in trivia contests. And they will blame it on us and tell us it hurts them more than it hurts us.

So we'd better do whatever they tell us to do, as soon as we can find out what it is.

Hank came down from the mountain.

"Behold," he said, and "Lo! There's been a change in plans. We need to go to Egypt and toil in the fields and the quarries."

"Oh that sounds like fun!" said the gym teacher. "Why Egypt?"

"Because they have bigger storage containers than we do."

"And you think they'll give us some of their grain because we're nice guys?"

"It's an exchange," said Hank. "We do all of their work for them and they'll give us some grain."

Thus it was, after many long weeks of wandering in the desert, and many an irritating chorus of 'Are we there yet?' the camels arrived in Egypt.

They stopped at a restaurant called McVlod's Haggis in a Jar.

It was a franchise.

Shiny Locks, the maitre d' looked up from his racing form to see a large number of Camels of the Negev streaming through the front entrance.

"Hank of Ur," said their leader. "Party of seventy thousand."

"This way, sir," said Shiny Locks. "Keep all goats and cows on a leash please. Been in Egypt long?"

"We just got here; we're planning on becoming slaves."

"Oh good for you! How exciting."

The waitress, an actress from Cardiff, had a bad feeling about this....

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