

THE DUCKS OF DOOM
Chapters 91-120
A WEEKLY SERIAL
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CHAPTER 91:PHARAOH'S THEME PARK

The Camels of the Negev had been wandering for quite some time in the desert before they reached a McVlod's eatery. During that long period of hunger, thirst, blisters and grumbling, they'd begun to forget their sophisticated, urban manners.

They grew accustomed to goat-skin tents, snakes, vicious battles with their enemies, flesh-eating spiders, and water that ran away before it could be used for anything. They grew irritable and weary, and they stopped leaving artifacts for museum curators.

Some historians think there was a limit to their urbanity even before they left Just Ur.

Living in a family of 70,000 (actual quantity may vary from number printed on box) puts a crimp in your sophistication. You have to jump right into a conversation with both feet if you want to be heard, and you have to elbow your way to the haggis if you want anything to eat.

Not very delicate, but that's how it is in big families.

Anyway, by the time the camels arrived at a McVlod's eatery, they were a rough-and-ready crew.

The restaurant was soon a chaos of exuberant camels belting out chorus after chorus of 'On Top of Old Smoky', 'She'll be Coming 'Round the Mountain', and 'How Much is That Doggie in the Window?'.

They had food fights, they bonked each other with antique canopic jars, and they embalmed each other with the little embalming kits that were supposed to be party favors for young people.

They drank too much McVlod's Ambiguous beer and they threw up in incense jars and sarcophaguses.

A waiter dropped the check into the mess and departed. Hank put on his reading glasses and discovered that the camels owed an amount approximately equal to the gross national product of Denmark.

He summoned the waiter.

"This seems a little excessive," he said mildly. "What's this item here? Ten thousand shekels for Alpine water?"

"It's special water, sir," said the waiter. "From pristine Alpine streams."

"In a goat's eye it is!" said Hank. "I saw your water boy get it from a well in the back yard, next to the privy."

"That's our Alpine well. Didn't you notice the gentians growing in the shade of the privy?"

"And what's this item here? Fifty thousand shekels for Salade de Petrie Dish?"

"That's a house specialty, sir. Our chef designed it himself, in honor of Pharaoh Petrie Dish. It's made with fresh-picked greens garnished with natron."

"You picked it off the rocks in that pond by the stables! It's algae."

"Those are organic rocks, sir."

Hank shook his head. "I don't have enough cash," he said. "Will you take my IOU?"

Thus it was the camels spent forty days and forty nights washing baked-clay bowls and antique canopic jars at McVlod's.

When their term of service was up, an Egyptian overseer by the name of Amen's Tooter led them into captivity in the Land of Goshen, east of the Nile Delta.

As it happened, the place was full of Canaanites.

"Your job, Hank," said the overseer, "will be to build a theme park. We want it 5000 cubits by 20,000 cubits. Here are the blueprints."

Hank sighed. "Blueprints, blueprints!" he muttered. "What is it with these things? Doesn't anyone use baked-clay tablets anymore?"

The camels gathered around for a look at the mysterious squiggles.

"What's this?" said Thunderbags, pointing at a particularly odd tangle of lines.

"That's the Book of the Dead ride," said Amen's Tooter. "It includes the Crocodile's Revenge ride, the Judge with the Funny Hat ride, and the Pecked to Death by Bird People ride. We're hoping to draw in a lot of tourists from the Minoan empire."

"Does Disser know about this theme park?" said Hank.

"Umm, Hank...," said Thunderbags. "We don't believe in Disser. Don't you remember? We're camels of the Negev; we think Disser is just a cultural icon, like the Jolly Fat Llama in the red suit who brings toys to all the good children in the world."

"It's not a question of belief," said Hank. "It's diplomacy. Disser will be very angry if someone makes unauthorized copies the Underworld."

"But he doesn't own the Underworld anymore," said Thunderbags. "He sold it."

"Really?"

"It happened in the future. I foresaw it."

There was a silence.

"Nice work if you can get it," muttered Brubaker, the eternal complainer. "Making statements about things that can't be checked out until we're dead and gone."

Thunderbags turned the color of an overripe beet.

"Peace, brothers," said the gym teacher. "The future doesn't concern us. Whatever WILL happen has already happened."

Brubaker shuddered. "Don't say that!" he squawked. "I've seen the future in Thunderbags' crystal ball, and it's full of giant mushrooms in the sky. I'd rather stay in the past. I don't even like mushrooms."

"Oh, so!" said Thunderbags. "The old fake priest isn't so fake after all! Sometimes his crystal ball works."

"No one's wrong ALL the time," said Brubaker.

"I thought we decided crystal balls weren't kosher," said the gym teacher. "We get burning bushes, ladders, angels from the WWF and smitings, but no crystal balls or other bric-a-brac from primitive demon worshippers."

"MY crystal ball is merely an aid to reflection," said Thunderbags. "It all depends on your attitude."

"Anyway, If we're planning on staying here in the past, we're going to need a lot of mud bricks," said the gym teacher.

"Stones, you mean," said Amen's Tooter. "We Egyptians build our monuments in stone. The archaeologists insist on it."

"Stones are heavy," said Brubaker. "If you build with bricks, you can save money on workers. You won't have to keep reinflating the squashed ones."

"Listen, I don't like this anymore than you do," said Amen's Tutor. "But you have no choice. Pharaoh Petrie Dish knows you not. He feels you might be thinking of getting together with the Assyrians and attacking him."

"Are you kidding?" said Brubaker. "The Assyrians hate us! EVERYBODY hates us! Who are we gonna get together with? The Hyksos?"

"What are the Hyksos?" said the gym teacher. "Do they live around here?"

"They were immigrant shepherds who got fed up with sheep," said Amen's Tutor. "They started taking jobs away from our plutocrats, so Pharaoh Ahmose kicked them out and sacked their home cities."

"Are you sure that isn't US?" said Brubaker. "We're the ones who are always getting sacked."

"After the Hyksos, the Egyptians got antsy about ALL immigrants," said Amen's Tutor. "So he doesn't really have anything against you, per se; it's just bad timing. All immigrants have to build theme parks, temples, and monuments. They also have to toil in the fields and make mud bricks."

"I really hate mud bricks," said Brubaker.

"We could always leave this place and conquer Canaan," said Thunderbags.

"All in due course," said Hank. Then he gave his attention to the blueprints again.

"Okay, we can do this," he said. "But afterwards, we're going to escape into the desert, wander around and starve for forty years, and then we're going to enter the Land of Milk and Honey and take part in a lot of messy battles. Many of you will be eviscerated or mutilated."

"Sounds good to me," said the gym teacher.

"I'm looking forward to it," said Thunderbags.

Just then, Hank's wife, Sari, ventured a bit of wisdom.

"Why don't we just ask the way at a gas station instead of wandering around for forty years?" she said.

"You're wasting your breath," said Michelle, Thunderbags' wife. "You know males!"

"The sooner we get started, the sooner we can wander off into the desert," said Hank.

"Don't forget the plagues, boils and frogs for the Egyptians," said Thunderbags. "They won't let us go unless we afflict them with something."

The overseer was impressed. "I really like you people," he said. "You have a very appealing theology with lots of pain and suffering. Can I join you?"

"Sure," said Thunderbags. "Got the scissors, Hank?"

Hank passed him the special bronze scissors with the little picture of a tent flap engraved on the haft.

"What are those for?" the overseer asked nervously.

"Well there's a small matter we have to take care of; it's a sort of initiation rite."

"What? Are you joking? I've already had it done. I'm an Egyptian. We Egyptians get trimmed at the age of fourteen."

"Aha, but you're not a natural-born Egyptian," said Thunderbags. "You're an immigrant from Mycenae. I can tell by all of the feathers you're wearing."

Amen's Tooter turned pale.

"Relax," said Thunderbags. "It's only a little thing."

"Speak for yourself. Mine is quite large."

"Anyway, we don't take the whole thing, just the tent flap."

"But that will hurt. And it's going to be cold afterwards."

"You can make a little toque for it. You can put signs on the toque."

"Yeah; you can sell ad-space for beer, bread, and haggis," said the gym teacher. "You'd be surprised how much money you can make."

"But who will see the ads?"

"Well, that depends on what sort of a social life you lead."

"Do you use anesthetic?"

"We have scotch. We traded a Phoenician some bagels for a barrel of McVlod's Hair-Raising Scotch."

"The Phoenician thought the bagels were a kind of flotation device," said the gym teacher. "They sink like stones, actually."

"It's not as if we didn't warn him," said Thunderbags. "He can always use them as ballast."

There was a sudden howl of pain.

Later, the overseer hobbled over to the canteen and drowned his agony in a barrel of fermented goat's milk.

"That wasn't so bad was it?" said Thunderbags. "Now you're one of us! You're part of a big, happy family."

"Well, we do have a bit of backbiting, feuding, civil war and such," said the gym teacher. "But it's no worse than anyone else."

"You'll have to learn our customs," said Hank, and he wheeled over a cart loaded with parchments and cuneiform tablets. "These are tech manuals, FAQ's, and articles on stuff like, How to be Persecuted, What to do When your neighbors start to like you, and One thousand and one answers to the question: Why Me, Oh Supreme Being? You also get your own copy of the Ten thousand food rules."

"Gosh."

And that was how the camels won over their overseer and began plotting their escape into the desert.

Pharaoh Petrie Dish had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 92: ANCIENT RADICALS

Now that the overseer had been recruited, Hank was beginning to feel better.

He had a plan.

"We'll have to continue being slaves and suffering for four hundred years, but we can handle it," he said. "The important thing is, we have a spy who can help us get ready to flee."

The other camels whined and groaned.

"Four hundred years! Do we have to! I'll be OLD by the time we get out of here."

Hank sighed. Even great souls get discouraged at times. It can be so difficult, explaining the necessity for long periods of torment and hard labor to people who have never acquired a taste for such things!

Meanwhile, Pharaoh Petrie Dish had problems of his own.

For one thing, the archaeologists couldn't make up their minds if he really was the pharaoh who had been so mean to the camels, or if it had been some other chap.

Perhaps it had been Tuthmose, or Ramses. Or had the camels made a mistake and shown up in the wrong era?

These were troubling questions.

If you're going to organize a gang of 300,000 unionized construction workers and set them to work building gargantuan monuments, you want to make sure you get your dates right.

It would be embarrassing if you spent all that money only to find out you'd built your monuments in the wrong era.

Also, it's very difficult to rub out mistakes in blocks of quarried rock.

For this reason, Pharaoh Petrie Dish's chief scribe, Beak Head, sent off a delegation to the Royal Ontario Museum, where many of these issues are decided.

This is not the ROM that once existed on Earth, by the way, when Earth itself existed.

The ROM on Tockworld is associated with the University of Strange Thoughts. Every scholar in the world pays obeisance to it, because the ROM is the final arbitrator in all matters having to do with the past.

The past, as you know, is never over and done with. It squirms around quite a lot, assuming now this shape, now that, depending on who is looking through the microscope.

It's a lot like organized religion--the infighting among curators is every bit as savage and bloodthirsty as it is among priests.

Anyway, pilgrim scholars from exotic places and eras are often seen at the ROM, lining up in processions and bearing tribute to the curators.

Adulation is one of the perks of the job.

There's an altar stone in the lobby, in front of a stock-market totem pole that features various ancestral heads of corporations. Visiting scholars can sacrifice politicians here before entering the museum proper and seeking counsel or an oracular pronouncement.

Vlod Dracula, by the way, the colorful mayor of Toronto, has figured out how to tax the past, so caution is urged.

Anyway, even as Pharaoh Petrie Dish waited upon the ROM curators for answers to the perplexing question--was he the correct Pharaoh or not?--he was forced to deal with other issues.

There was no shortage of pressing issues in ancient Egypt, as you know.

"My wife doesn't understand me," he said to one of his concubines--Lovely Luba.

"Of course she does," said Lovely Luba. "That's why she keeps a stable of lawyers on retainer."

Actually, Queen Klepto would have dissolved her marriage to Pharaoh Petrie Dish a long time ago, by having him assassinated, were it not for his vast treasury.

Queen Klepto needed ready cash; she had a lot of expensive hobbies.

She was especially interested in beautifying the land. She had begun with her own little portion of the land--her villa in Memphis, along with her other villa in Thebes, and her palace in Vegas.

She also liked things that glittered and glimmered. Jewelry of all kinds attracted her, and everyone who was anyone knew this. People just loved giving her expensive baubles.

Slaves in the gold mines only had to be told who they were toiling for and they'd settle down and stop whining.

The alternative was lunch with the crocodiles.

Everyone in ancient Egypt loved Queen Klepto. People thought about her constantly. They were especially interested in helping her in her perilous journey to the other world.

The land and the queen are one, after all.

But Pharaoh Petrie Dish was a party pooper. He'd decided that his queen's beautifying projects were diverting scarce resources from monument building and agricultural pursuits.

In fact, there was a shortage of manpower, because everyone was busy amassing loot for Klepto.

Temples lay in pieces in their open boxes, waiting for assembly. Peasants, taking advantage of a temporary shortage of inspectors, drove their herds into the desert to avoid taxes. They couldn't drive their crops into the desert, of course, so they disguised them as weeds.

The land was suffering.

PD was growing desperate. There was hardly enough money to keep the quarries going. Something would have to be done before Standard & Poor downgraded his debt to junk status.

He couldn't raise taxes anymore, because his people hated him and were already plotting rebellion. Everyone thought he was remote and unsympathetic.

The alternative to raising taxes was cutting costs.

But which costs?

"The military budget is enormous," said Lovely Luba. "You should downsize it and maybe even privatize it."

Pharaoh Petrie Dish thought about his army and what a drain on the treasury it was.

Did they really need all of those expensive war chariots? Too much larking about in chariots made warriors soft and lazy. The men needed exercise; marching would be good for them.

Anyway, it was force of will that led to victory, not equipment. The French knew that--it was the secret of their quick victory over the Goths in 1914.

Thus it was, the illustrious and battle-scarred Egyptian general, Crush Enemies, was sacked.

Mycenaean mercenaries, also known as Philistines, were hired to replace regular soldiers at a fraction of traditional pay rates. The promise of stock options and loot was enough for them.

Once Pharaoh Petrie Dish had downsized his army and camouflaged its debt, he looked for a buyer.

This part of things did not go as well as it should.

The Assyrians and the Babylonians were interested of course, but PD thought there might be a strategic problem down the road if he sold these people an actual, working army.

Eventually he managed to sell the army to a Pictish millionaire for considerably less than he'd hoped.

This, of course, explains the presence of bagpipes in ancient Egypt. Unfortunately, tomb artists never depicted them because the locals thought bagpipes were demons in a bag, screaming for blood.

Now that the army had been disposed of, PD discovered that he had other problems.

For one thing, he was going through a mid-life crisis. Gold had lost its luster, jewels their sparkle, etc. He'd even lost interest in his concubines, because they all wanted relationships.

And the ghosts of slaughtered enemies haunted him in his sleep. What if they were waiting for him in the subway entrance to the Underworld, beneath Yorkville?

Life was indeed turning sour for PD. Every night he tossed and turned, clutching his plush toy crocodile to his chest and crying for his mummy.

And then he learned it's not always a good thing when your mummy answers your call.

To add to his worries, there was the problem of his daughter, Secrets of the Pyramids. What a pain in the neck she was! No quiet submission to authority for her! It was all radical student jargon and demonstrations against the war in the Land of Milk and Honey.

And what was this 'Power to the people!' business? She wanted those little brown people in the fields to have magical powers, like Spidermummy!

Ha! Give the people power and there'd be a real mess.

And the music his daughter listened to! Gothic barbarians banging skulls together, jumping around on a dais like frogs on a hot tin roof, screaming about the pain they were in because their concubines had left them and they had no more shekels, and older people didn't understand them.

And they sweated so much on the dais, PD couldn't believe his eyes!

And of course they all smoked hemp and poppies, and ran around starving and naked in the crooked streets, moaning about Moloch.

Anyway, Secrets was obviously interested in stuffing her dear old dad into a mummy case as fast as she could, and then taking over the kingdom and setting up a socially useful government with organic food, equal treatment for animals, and cooperative decisions on how many tractors they should make this week, and who was on clean-up duty.

There's one born every minute, thought PD.

"Why me?" he moaned to his favorite priest, Corrupt Beans. "Where does she get these ideas?"

"She's been anticipating Thales of Miletus," said Corrupt Beans. "She thinks everything is made out of water."

"But that's what we believe too! First there was a lot of water, then the gods came along and--"

"Yes, but this is different water. It's made up of lots of little atoms."

"Oh, well, if you're going to get picky about it, you might as well trade in the afterlife for a lab smock."

PD was so upset, he went off and sulked for awhile.

Secrets, meanwhile, was busy rebelling against the older generation.

She thought her nice old dad was mean, stubborn, and flatulent. She was angry at him

because he'd arranged to marry her to a decrepit and crapulous old king of the Moabites.

Moabites, as everyone knows, are vile and disgusting wash pots, and sworn enemies of the Camels of the Negev.

The Moabites didn't know this, of course; they thought they were just ordinary guys, living their lives, stealing what they could, trading for what they couldn't.

The Egyptians had taught them a lesson by slaughtering them, building forts in their land and fortifying the overland route to Damascus.

That showed them a thing or two!

Now it was time for PD to show what nice guys the Egyptians really were by sending Secrets of the Pyramids to the crapulous old king to be his wife.

Pharaoh Petrie Dish liked this arrangement. Secrets was a pain in the neck. She kept butting in during committee meetings, telling him to tax the rich, stop taking bribes, encourage community irrigation projects, pay a living wage, restrict the powers of the priests, and establish an independent judiciary.

Some people have no head for government!

Fortunately, the Moabite king would soon put her in her place--in a diaphanous garment, actually, in the harem quarters.

Secrets of the Pyramids knew exactly what was in store for her, but there was little she could do about it. She was trapped. She had no allies. None of her friends wanted to be feminists. The priests liked her even less than her father did. And the nerds hated her because she kept beating them on the Nin-Ten-Do board.

Just when she was falling into bitter melancholy and despair, however, the love-sick Assyrian archer turned up, sneaking into the palace disguised as a governess with forged letters of recommendation from Nebuchadnezzar.

PD was impressed, especially since Nebuchadnezzar hadn't been invented yet.

"You are the ugliest woman I have ever seen," he said. "Are all Moabite women like you?"

"Uglier even," said the Assyrian.

"Amazing. How is it you speak with an Assyrian accent."

"I was captured by Assyrians, who thought I was one of them, because of the beard. I escaped by shaving their beards while they were sleeping. This made them impotent."

"Oh good! I hate Assyrians! Nasty, disgusting people with huge beards, like yours."

"This? This isn't a beard. It's a lot of feathers."

Thus it was, the Assyrian was accepted into PD's abode, and might have continued indefinitely as governor to the royals, had he not melted into a puddle at the mere sight of Secrets of the Pyramids.

Once he was alone with her, he revealed himself.

Not, of course, in a literal sense.

"Psst," he said. "I'm not really a Moabite governess. I'm a handsome frog here to--I mean a handsome PRINCE--"

"I know what you are," said Secrets. "Be quiet and let me think."

Secrets, always quick to recognize an opportunity, was busy incorporating this love-sick fool into a new stratagem.

The Assyrian's heart burned with fierce love, but at the same time, he felt sick with anxiety.

He was utterly alone; there was no one he could trust. If PD found out about his little deception, he'd be fed to the crocodiles.

If he met another Moabite he'd be exposed as an Assyrian. If a delegation of Assyrians spotted him, they'd laugh themselves sick.

And he had nowhere to take Secrets even if he could get her out of the palace. He hadn't thought things through.

But Secrets was already working on that.

Could she flee with this strange, bearded, frog-like duck, establish a colony somewhere

in the New World, and build a egalitarian tractor factory?

The Pharaoh, however, had other ideas.

He had seen through the Assyrian archer's disguise right away.

Who did this toad think he was fooling, dressed up like Robin Williams in a silly governess outfit?

But if he could be encouraged to elope with Secrets, perhaps to the Aleutian Islands, then PD would immediately become a tragic and sympathetic figure. He could go to his people and say, "Behold, an evil villain has made off with my daughter! I'm just like you, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief."

Then he'd get the sympathy vote and his people would stop plotting rebellion.

True, Secrets was promised to a Moabite king, but PD could send the old fellow a goat instead.

Moabites were fond of goats.

Then he could raise more money in taxes, buy his army back, and attack his wife.

It was a good plan, and it might work, but the army would pose a problem.

Once you've privatized an army, it can be difficult to regain control.

CHAPTER 93: BAGPIPE BLUES

Meanwhile, Polydoor and Angle Poise were still on a quest to find Freddy Manichean Heresy, who had been touched by Nurse Jane's magic cap and was burning with love for Melissa Manners, President of the Universe of Adjustable Manners.

Polydoor was desperate to find them; the thought of an alliance of separate-but-equal evil with perfect manners and charm made him shudder.

Who knew what deadly pastimes a charming Freddy would take up! Religion, for instance. Or advertising.

He had to be stopped.

But where to find him? The problem with quests is you never really know where to start. Usually someone gives you a hint by trying to disembowel you with a sword; however this doesn't always work.

Polydoor and Angle Poise were stumped. After a certain amount of tramping through burning-hot sand, they called a time-out.

"I'm bushed," said Angle Poise. "If we keep wandering in the desert like this, I'll start to have visions and hear voices. You know where that leads!"

"Forget it! We have all the Hollywood mystics we need right now."

Angle Poise sulked for a time. Then he said, "Shouldn't we be looking for a patch of mist or a mysterious door or something?"

"How about a lamp in a cave?" sneered Polydoor. "Rub it with a chamois and a guy in a loincloth pops out and offers you a pack of coupons, good at participating stores."

"I don't think you have the right attitude, Polydoor. When you're on a quest, you're supposed to empty your mind of petty thoughts and top up on purity and faith."

"I have plenty of faith," said Polydoor. "I believe that if you empty your mind of petty thoughts, a spam artist will immediately stuff it with links to exotic ducks."

"Exotic ducks?" said Angle Poise. "Are you serious?"

"You don't think ducks can be exotic?" Polydoor said in a dangerous voice.

Angle Poise chose not to respond to this, and a silence descended on the weary travelers as they started out on their journey again.

After much boring plodding, they came to a ruined city that had been sacked ages ago by Nubians.

Little remained but mounds of mud bricks, an old copy of James Michener's Novel, THE SOURCE, and a few derelict temples.

"Welcome to Egypt," said Polydoor.

"That's funny; I thought we were in Babylon," said Angle Poise. "Have we been going in the wrong direction all this time?"

"That's what happens when you empty your mind of petty thoughts," said Polydoor, smirking.

Angle Poise ignored this.

"I don't remember going through customs," he said. "Usually there's a fortified city blocking the way. Migdol, I think."

"The tomb paintings depict a big duck in a kilt," said Polydoor. "He seems to be playing the bagpipes. Maybe that's why the Nubians sacked this place."

"What are bagpipes?" said Angle Poise, fascinated by the paintings.

"A Scottish ritual device," said Polydoor. "The Scots keep their gods in them. Whenever they want an oracular pronouncement, they squeeze and blow on their gods."

Angle Poise gasped.

"They squeeze their gods! Unthinkable! Do you mean to say the gods actually permit this?"

"I'm sure they enjoy it," said Polydoor. "Otherwise they wouldn't speak in such melodious tones. Bagpipes can be very pleasant when manipulated by an expert. Amateurs, however, have been known to bring elephants to their knees."

"And what is this lump on the offering table? Is it some mystical part of a sacrifice?"

"Looks like a haggis," said Polydoor. "It's made from the stomach of a sheep. They stuff it with delicacies."

"Presumably it's the SCOTS who do the stuffing, not the SHEEP."

"Theoretically."

"I've heard of this," said Angle Poise. "It's called a pinata. You stuff it with toys and gifts; then you hang it from a branch and people take turns hitting it with sticks until it bursts open and drops delightful items all over the floor."

Polydoor turned away for a moment, nearly helpless with silent mirth.

"After the toys and gifts, there's some sort of joyous festival isn't there?" said Angle Poise.

"Yes, it's called 'The slaughtering of the Sassenachs'," said Polydoor. "They all rush out and pillage Tewksbury."

"They must be fierce warriors," said Angle Poise.

"Oh they are! They notch their bagpipes to show how many kills they've made."

Angle Poise gazed in awe at the mighty Scottish warriors depicted on the walls of the tomb.

"I'll tell you something else," said Polydoor. "There's a secret code in every Scottish tartan. If you figure it out, you'll learn who made the pyramids and what they're for."

"Everyone knows that!" said Angle Poise. "The pyramids were designed as a big windbreak, to keep the sand from blowing away."

Polydoor shook his head; there was no helping some people. "I've never seen bagpipes in Egyptian ruins before," he said. "I wonder if this is an anachronism."

"You mean someone came and put these ruins in the sand just to confuse people?" said Angle Poise. "Who would do a thing like that?"

"Don't you know anything?" said Polydoor. "The same people who went around burying dinosaur bones and making crop circles!"

"Oh. The Russians. But I thought the Cold War was over! We're all supposed to be friends now."

"We are friends," said Polydoor. "These are older than Glasnost."

Just then, a terrifying sound rose up from among the ruins. Angle Poise went as white as a Macintosh computer.

"What in Tockworld is that?" he screeched. "Have we blundered into the Underworld?"

The sound intensified until Polydoor thought his eardrums would burst like toy balloons. Then it settled down, and he began to recognize a kind of regular variation in pitch and

tone.

"It's music," breathed Angle Poise.

"Approximately," said Polydoor.

"I'd like tae see ye play the pipes when there's sand in every part of the instrument, laddie!" boomed an angry voice.

Angle Poise immediately bowed down, pressing his forehead into the sand.

"It wasn't my fault, Oh Divine Purveyor of Exquisite Sounds," he whined. "Please don't remove my stomach and stuff it with toys and gifts."

Polydoor lounged against a sarcophagus.

"I can hear you, but I can't see you," he said. "I presume that means you're a ghost."

"Correct as usual, Polydoor."

After a moment, the piper managed to clear away the sand. Once that was accomplished, he played 'How Much is That Doggie in the Window?' with a degree of accomplishment that impressed even the cynical Polydoor.

"Well done!" he said clapping.

"Coming from you, that is high praise," said the piper.

"I'm so happy I want to sacrifice myself!" said Angle Poise. "At a later date, of course; when the time is propitious."

"Oh get up off your forehead, lad! I'm a Scotsman, not a Sassenach club doorman. Anyway, I'm just passing through. I was hired to entertain a flock of historical romance writers in Omaha, Nebraska, but I got lost."

"Just keep heading east until you come to a big ocean," said Polydoor. "Cross the ocean and you'll come to Lighter Than Air, California. Look for the drive-in psychics. You're bound to find one going out on tour; I'm sure you can hitch a ride."

"Can I ask directions there?"

"Ask somebody from Lighter Than Air where Omaha is? Ummm...you might get lucky."

There was a sensation of wind, then silence. The piper was gone.

"Well, that was amusing," said Polydoor. "Now it's back to work."

"I feel strangely refreshed," said Angle Poise.

"Relief after much suffering. I hope he gets his bagpipes properly cleaned."

"You're such a cynic, Polydoor. I'm looking forward to this quest. I feel almost... tolerant. I might even think about allowing laypeople to interpret one or two of the less important items in the Great Big Book of Facts. Perhaps the rules about decapitating people who use cell phones in Cineplexes...."

Polydoor tuned this out. He was fed up with questing. All he wanted to do was find the Power of Durable Evil, save the world, and get back to his sweetheart, the lovely Babette.

Was that so much to ask?

Why, then, did he have to waste time traipsing off after the love-sick Freddy? Was it his problem if Freddy and Melissa Manners got together and smooched their lives away?

Yes, it was, he thought. If he'd done his job properly and eliminated Freddy in one climactic battle, none of this would be happening.

"Why is it so hard to get rid of a god?" he said aloud.

"Because Freddy isn't a god," said Angle Poise. "He's a theological system. You can't destroy a theology once it's been released into the atmosphere; you have to store it in a museum. It's a well-know fact that things buried in museums disappear from public consciousness forever."

"No true," said Polydoor. "Some people will stop at nothing. They'll spend entire days in museums, looking for secret keys to ancient mysteries."

"You could always make it a required course in high school. Anything that people are forced to study in high school vanishes the moment they leave the classroom."

"Until someone comes along and repackages it as a new and better version," said Polydoor.

"You think?" said Angle Poise.

"Back to basics."

"Oh the horror!" Angle Poise turned an admirable shade of green and scurried on ahead of Polydoor, never once looking back to see if his new chum was following.

Polydoor was depressed.

Was there no end to niche theologies? Why couldn't there be one official religion with rites and doctrines that everyone committed to memory and followed precisely, like cogs in a watch?

There wouldn't be anymore inquisitions, holy wars, hatreds, etc. All you'd have to do would be to apply a little oil to the cogs once in awhile to keep things moving smoothly.

Actually, a dram of scotch would do the job.

Even so, there would be priests who'd make trouble; priests who would be sticklers for rules.

Their own rules, of course: rules about what you could say to the gods and when you could say it.

Just like protocol chiefs in embassies.

Every experienced acolyte knew that the gods should be left to work out their own arrangements, free of the mortal translation guilds.

On the other hand, who but a priest could understand a god?

Even when the gods tried to be nice, telling you to build arks and things when they were about to drown everyone, they weren't much help. Their instructions were usually conveyed in early Sumerian, a language understood by auctioneers and technical writers, but few others.

People receiving god communications frequently had to make educated guesses about what they meant. This quite often led to misunderstandings such as the following:

"Is that supposed to be an ark?"

"Well Shem, I don't care whether you like it or not; this is what the Supreme Being told me to build."

"It looks like a giant duck!"

"It's an ark, you idiot. See this curved bit--this is called a hull, and this flat part with all the cubits in it is called a deck."

"I think the hull is supposed to go on the bottom."

"No it isn't! It's meant to keep the rain off the flat part. We'll be nice and dry when everyone else is running around in galoshes and ponchos."

"If you think I'm going to live for an entire month inside a funny-looking barn with a lot of cubits and smelly animals, you're crazy!"

"You prefer living under water?"

"Are you kidding? The Supreme Being would never do a thing like that!"

"You might want to invest in a few swimming lessons...."

Polydoor carefully put this babble of voices back in its box and sighed wearily.

On the whole, it was better to ignore advice from the gods and shop at a hardware store. There were some good ark kits available now, because mortals had learned from their last experience with a deluge, and knew how to make their own now.

Just then, a patch of mist arose.

Oh, oh, thought Polydoor. "Don't go there, Angle Poise!"

But it was too late; Angle Poise, mistaking the mist for the entrance to their quest, stepped through without a second thought and vanished.

Polydoor heard a scream.

"Hmmm...." he said.

The Scottish piper had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 94:ROSE-PINK THEOLOGY

Polydoor eyed the patch of mist hovering in the desert air. It looked innocent enough but so did a lot of other things, until you got close to them.

Octopuses, for instance. Who would suspect a bag of sausages could jump on you like a pit viper, drag you towards its gaping beak, and....

And there had been that scream....

"Angle Poise?" he called. "Are you okay?"

There was no answer.

He walked around the cloud of mist, keeping a safe distance.

It moved a little, but it didn't leap out at him. It was quite small actually; easily circumnavigated, and not very threatening.

All the same, Polydoor moved cautiously, watching for booby traps.

Meanwhile, the sun burned his dome, the sand burned his feet, and the intense light burned his eyes.

Far off on the horizon a tiny dust cloud marked the progress of an advancing army of bloodthirsty warriors. Polydoor glanced disinterestedly at them. It mattered little who they were--Assyrians, Egyptians, British soccer fans--if they wanted to slaughter him, they'd have to wait in line.

There were too many other things in this vale of tears that wanted him to join his ancestors.

He walked all the way around the little patch of mist without encountering a single enemy. He listened carefully, but there were no more screams from the other side; there was only silence, and an air of menace.

Actually, Polydoor had learned ages ago that almost everything in Tockworld had an air of menace.

He was sweating now and his hump was itching. He yearned to simply walk away, trek across the desert, catch a boat to Toronto, and rejoin his sweetheart.

But Polydoor's Victorian upbringing wouldn't let him abandon his quest. Mommy was always looking, even when she wasn't there.

He started off again, walking around the mist a second time.

Then he noticed footprints in the sand.

Big footprints, like waffle irons.

He froze, only his eyes moving as he peered from side to side. His ears strained at the silence. High overhead a vulture sailed on the thermals, watching him.

Lunch is served, it thought.

Then a black thunderbolt hurtled out of the empyrean, screaming "It'll never happen!" A beak slashed like a scalpel, and the vulture tumbled out of the sky, thumping lifelessly to the sand.

Polydoor looked up, startled out of his wits.

"Thorry!" quoth Custer, alighting on the corpse. "He wath poaching."

Polydoor had never been so happy to see the quothing raven. A wave of relief filled him with oceanic thoughts of good will and Llama's Day feasts.

At the same time, his cunning, acolyte's mind thought of a plan.

"I have a treat for you, Custer," he said silkily.

"Do tell."

"I was keeping it safe but an evil canary popped out of that clump of mist and snatched it away before I could give it to you."

"The cad!" quoth Custer, and without a moment's hesitation, he plunged straight into the mist, his wings beating like chopper blades.

There was another scream, then an angry voice.

"What do you think you're doing you stupid crow. That was my lunch."

"Finderth keeperth. Bethidth; I'm a raven."

"Huh? What did you say?"

"I thaid I'm a raven."

"You're not from around here, are you! Can't you speak English?"

"Why should I? I'm a Thcot!"

"A Thcot?"

"You know--'Ye tak the high road and I'll tak the low road', etc."

That was the first Polydoor had heard of Custer's Scottish origins.

Shouldn't be surprised, he thought. Everybody who's anybody has Scottish origins!

Take Imhotep, the great pyramid designer, for instance.

Few people knew that Imhotep was the first Scottish engineer, and that, when he built the pyramids, he was merely trying to work out the correct shape for a lighthouse.

Just like Edison and his light bulbs. If at first you don't succeed, build a pyramid.

Polydoor, however, had other things on his mind now.

It must be safe on the other side of the magic mist, he thought. Custer made it!

Unless, of course, an evil shape shifter had devoured Custer, garbed himself in the raven's feathers, and taken on his voice.

"Are you there, Custer?" Polydoor called.

"I think tho. I might be thomewhere elth, though. Thankth for the treat, by the way. lth yummy."

"Is that really you?"

"Lath time I looked it was! Could be the Malteth Falcon, I thuppoth."

Polydoor was almost convinced, but not quite.

"Prove it's you," he said. "Tell me something only Custer would know; not something a terrifying beast would make up if it was pretending to be you."

"Hmmm. You could athk me what ith the firth rule of raventh?"

"I didn't know ravens had rules."

"A lot you know! Tho athk me!"

"Okay, what is the first rule of ravens?"

"There ithn't one! Rulth were made for victimth."

"It's you, old friend!" shouted Polydoor. "I've missed you!"

"And I've mitthted you. lth been five minuth already. I wath afraid you'd died and given yourthelf to thomeone elth."

"Never! I've been saving myself for you."

"Polydoor! I never knew! My dear, dear friend! Come and join the party!"

And with that, Polydoor closed his eyes, held his breath and stepped through the magic mist.

Then a terrifying monster attacked him.

"Arrrgggh!" he yelled, flailing at the beast with every appendage.

For a moment all he could see were vividly colored limbs--dozens of them. Then a sharp explosion nearly deafened him and the monster shot away with a hiss and a phhhht and a pfffflllbbbbb!

Polydoor staggered and blinked as a bewildering, ever-changing form zipped back and forth, growing smaller and smaller with every passing second. Then it fell to the ground, a tangle of shriveled balloons.

"Har, har, har!" quoth Custer. "That wath a good trick."

Polydoor drew a deep breath, shaken to the very core of his being.

"That was rude," he said. "I might have had a stroke."

"You! Ha! That'll be the day!"

Polydoor was getting ready to strangle his chum when a dulcet voice said, "Welcome to Rose Pink, home of Melissa Manners."

A perfectly dressed fairy appeared in a pink skirt and creamy white blouse with a pink ruff. Before Polydoor could manage so much as a sneer, she had touched him with her wand.

A pink cloud of glitter dust blinded him. When he opened his eyes, he saw, to his horror, that he was dressed in a navy blue blazer, a charcoal tie, snowy white shirt, gray flannels

with a razor-sharp crease, and polished black waffle-iron shoes.

His feathers were neatly combed, and he reeked of cologne.

Custer had been transformed into a respectable bird of omen, all toggled out in a cute little blue blazer with brass buttons.

The two friends gazed disgustedly at each other.

Then they gazed disgustedly at their surroundings.

The magic wand had transformed a perfectly good patch of eerie mist into an eighteenth-century romantic garden, complete with grottos, gazebos, and a rose-pink mansion.

There were masses of roses everywhere they looked. There was a bar, a buffet, and a decorative pool stocked with decorative carp.

In the center of the fountain was a statue of Heidi.

Men and women strolled back and forth, smoking cigars and discussing Henry James.

In a rose-pink gazebo, a quartet played 'How Much is That Doggie in the Window?'

A caterer brought a tray of goodies. Polydoor absently reached for a cigar. Custer took two, tucking one under his wing.

"For potherity," he quoth, grinning at Polydoor.

"Where are we?" said Polydoor. "And where is Angle Poise?"

"You have been invited to Melissa Manners' cottage for the weekend," said the fairy.

"This is a garden party to celebrate her engagement. There's the charming couple now!"

She motioned to a gazebo clotted with roses and orchids, where Freddy Manichean Heresy stood gazing ardently into his sweetheart's composure.

Polydoor couldn't believe his eyes. Freddy was decorated in a tuxedo, with a dazzling white shirt and a Fred Astaire hat.

The only thing distinguishing him from a penguin was a maroon scarf, which made him look vaguely exotic, as befitted a dangerous Persian heresy.

The object of his affections was a rather strict looking duck in an Edwardian dress.

Her hair had been arranged in an elaborate French coiffure, and set with carpenter's glue.

She looked like a glamorous Scottish elementary school teacher; the possessor of an invisible ruler that could snap out an ear-splitting tattoo at the slightest provocation.

But love had softened her, making her complexion glow like a fish tank under ultraviolet lights.

This was Melissa Manners.

Polydoor listened in astonishment as Freddy courted his beauty.

"I can only hope," said Freddy, "that on this special occasion, you will permit me to engage in the merest hint of osculation."

"You may," said Melissa, offering her cheek.

Polydoor felt sick.

"Where's Angle Poise?" he demanded. "This is disgusting!"

Miss Manners tapped her invisible ruler on an invisible desk.

Everyone fell silent, waiting to find out if there was going to be a test.

"I would like to announce my engagement to a wonderful heretical artifact," she said. "A duck among ducks."

"Pssst! Psst!" hissed a voice.

Polydoor nearly jumped out of his skin. Was he being attacked by another balloon monster?

"Psst! Over here!"

The only thing close to him was an enormous angel food cake perched on a rosewood table.

"Is that cake talking to me?" he demanded. "Did you hear it, Custer?"

"It wanth to be eaten, I thould imagine," quoth the raven.

"In honor of this happy day, and in keeping with our dear and ancient custom, I have

ordered a magnificent cake," said Melissa.

Polydoor gaped at her with his mouth open.

"She knew!" he exclaimed. "She knew Freddy was going to pop through a magical misty door and ask her to osculate. She had everything ready. She had the cake, the guests, the little cards announcing her engagement, and an optional extra balloon monster. Did she peek into the future? Has this disgusting event already happened at least once?"

"Nothing is impossible if you have good manners," said the fairy.

"Hsst! It's me!" said the cake.

"I don't talk to smarmy angel food cakes," said Polydoor. "I sit on them."

"You should try the icing before you complain; it's sinful."

This time, Polydoor recognized Angle Poise's voice.

"Is that you, Angle Poise. Have they turned you into a cake? Is that why you screamed?"

"I'm INSIDE the cake, you idiot!"

"But you were killed when you went through the mist! I heard you scream, I tell you!"

"That was because I fell into a bowl of vichyssoise. I hate cold soup. I was dripping with the stuff! I had to worm my way into the cake before anyone realized I didn't fit in. Now I'm covered with cake goo as well. Hate this! It doesn't go with my theology."

"Stop whining. Now that we're together, we can attack Freddy and kill him once and for all."

"Don't even think about it. Melissa has super powers. She can freeze you with a look. And one touch of that invisible ruler of hers and you won't have any knuckles left."

"What can we do?"

"Hmmm," said Angle Poise. "We could take action, lose the war, and spend the rest of our lives being forced to behave with perfect manners, or we could leave this place."

"If we leave, Freddy will kill me and tear my corpse to pieces," said Polydoor.

"YETH!" quoth Custer, his eyes shining. "Dinner at lath!"

Polydoor was shocked. "I thought you were my friend," he said. "One for all and all for one."

"Oh I am, I am! A good friend will never leave a dead comrade to rot on the pavement."

"What shall we do?" said Angle Poise. "I hate dilemmas! It's much easier just to anathemize people."

Polydoor was desperate now. Attacking Freddy was one thing, but fighting off a Scottish elementary school teacher in charge of manners and deportment was quite another.

He reached into his pocket for a pencil, and that was when he found the can of McBowel's Exploding Haggis.

"Gentlemen, I have a weapon," he said.

Everyone gathered around.

"You can't use that," said Angle Poise scandalized. "It's been outlawed by the Geneva Convention."

"Only when applied internally," said Polydoor.

"Give it to me," said Custer. "I'll dithpothe of it."

"We'll put it in the cake," said Polydoor, ignoring him. "When Melissa tries to cut it, the haggis will burst like a party balloon. Everyone will go crazy trying to stuff as much haggis into their gullets as possible. There'll be corpses everywhere! No one will have good manners! Her party will be ruined; she'll call off the engagement and make everybody memorize The Great Big Book of Perfect Manners."

"Thoundth good to me," said Custer.

Angle Poise was silent. The idea appealed to him, therefore it had to be sinful.

That's the trouble with being a priest--even a rebel priest. You're not allowed to have any fun unless you have guilt as well. They go together like a horse and carriage.

Melissa had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 95:FROGS ON PARADE

"You're going to stuff a whole can of McBowel's Exploding Haggis inside an angel food cake?" said Angle Poise. "Isn't that overkill?"

"Hey, don't knock it!" quoth Custer. "Road kill for everyone!"

"You can't be too careful where Freddy is concerned," said Polydoor.

"What's this little key on the can? Is it the opener?"

"Noooo!" yelled Polydoor. "That's the firing pin, you fool! Wait until we get it into the cake."

"How are we supposed to do that? It's a self-sealing cake; the hiding place I carved out of it is already gone."

Custer smirked and hopped up onto the cake. The icing sugar looked a little hard, but food was food, and it would make a nice appetizer.

"I'll dig a hole for the can, thall I?" he said, and he cocked his beak, aiming it at a spot near the middle of the cake.

Then he laughed maniacally and stabbed at the glittering prize.

There was a sound like a chisel hitting a brick.

"Owww my beak!" quoth Custer. "Thith cake ith made out of concrete, like a bunker."

"Try again!" yelled Angle Poise. "I can hear a clicking noise coming from inside the can. I must have accidentally pulled the firing pin. We're all doomed!"

"Idiot!" muttered Polydoor. "For a rebel priest, you're not very well prepared." Then he rummaged in his pockets and found an Acme cordless pneumatic drill, with extra bits in case one got lost.

"Hurry!" said Angle Poise. "I can hear the can ticking."

"I can't get this stupid bubble wrap off the drill," said Polydoor.

"Use this," said Angle Poise, handing him a pair of shears. "They're for sheep, actually, so try not to blunt the edges."

Polydoor cut the bubble wrap and extracted the pneumatic drill.

"Some assembly required," he muttered. "When I get back to civilization, I'm going to have a word with the Acme people."

"Acme ith bankrupt," quoth Custer. "Too many returned itemth."

Polydoor looked at the instructions.

"What language is this?" he asked.

Everyone gathered around and peered at the strange markings.

"Put part the A if B the lugs match C turning, being not careful the part D on top first."

"That can't be right," said Angle Poise. "There's a diagram here; maybe it makes more sense."

The diagram had been photocopied onto smudgy fax paper. It was an exploded view of the pneumatic drill, with most of the parts missing.

"Can't you just wing it?" said Angle Poise. "The ticking is getting louder."

"It'll never happen," quoth Custer.

Polydoor glared at him, but the wily bird had taken the precaution of flapping up to the top of a nearby grotto.

The can of McBowel's was about to go off with terrific force.

At the same time, Melissa Manners and Freddy were drawing near, smiling and nodding politely at their guests as they crossed their perfect lawn.

It's good manners to keep your lawn perfectly green and free of dandelions, by the way; otherwise the neighbors will wax wondrously wroth.

"Do something!" yelled Angle Poise.

"Okay, okay!" muttered Polydoor. Then, closing his eyes and holding his breath, he put part A on top of part B, added part C, and ignored part D.

Angle Poise eyed Polydoor's handiwork critically.

"That doesn't look anything like the pneumatic drill on the label," he said. "It looks like a turkey vulture with botulism."

"DIBS!" yelled Custer excitedly.

Polydoor ignored this. He hauled the drill over to the cake, took careful aim at the side, and pressed the 'on' button.

There was a sound like a jet engine with a sack of rocks caught in its fan blades, but the drill worked. Polydoor hung on for dear life as it roared and shook, plunging through the diamond-hard icing.

Moments later, a large quantity of vaporized angel-food cake shot out of the hole, covering everyone for a distance of twenty feet.

Polydoor hit the 'off' button and tossed away the drill.

Then he stuffed the McBowel's can deep inside the cake, and jumped down, shaken but not stirred.

The cake looked like the surface of the moon, with a crater where the drill had done its work.

"I thought you said it was self-sealing," said Polydoor. "How come the hole is still there?"

"Maybe it used up all its life points filling the first hole."

"I could teth it for you," said Custer. "If I eat one half of the cake, and it doethn't theal the hole, we'll know it doethn't work anymore."

Polydoor didn't bother replying to this. He rummaged in his pockets and found an Acme plasterer's trowel, an aluminum container, a bag of McBowel's Quick-Setting Icing Sugar (just add water and run away!), and a bottle of McBowel's Special Water for Icing Sugar (Ask about our discounts for bulk purchases).

Then he donned a plaster's cap, mixed the ingredients, and slathered a layer of the goop onto the cake.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" said Angle Poise.

"Relax; I've used this before. It's very strong and durable; you could plaster your walls with it if you wanted to."

"Well hurry it up, willyou! Melissa and Freddy are almost here!"

"Are they still osculating?"

"Like two leeches in a medical kit. They're holding hands too."

"I'm going to be sick," muttered Polydoor.

Angle Poise inspected Polydoor's masterpiece.

"That cake looks lopsided," he said.

"Of course it does; it's a magic cake! It's bigger on the inside than it is on the outside."

"It's the wrong color. Have you got any pink paint?"

"What's wrong with orange? I LIKE orange."

"I have some pink nail polish," said Angle Poise, and he handed a fancy bottle to Polydoor.

Polydoor gave Angle Poise a long, hard look.

"Just happened to have some, did we? In case we wanted to do our nails while we were preaching a sermon on the slaughter of the innocents?"

Angle Poise flushed. "I was going to use it to paint my model of the Babylonian ziggurat."

Custer, meanwhile, was salivating over the cake.

"Get away from there!" said Polydoor. "You can lick the bowl."

"It needth body parth."

"There'll be plenty of body parts soon enough if we don't take cover," said Angle Poise.

"I hope the two lovebirds get over here before it explodes," said Polydoor. "What are they doing now?"

"Politely disengaging themselves from a chatty old woman."

Polydoor turned to look, and his mouth dropped open in shock.

"That isn't just any old woman!" he gasped. "Look at her shoes!"

"What about them?" said Angle Poise.

"Red shoes! Do you know what that means?"

"Isn't there a TV show about lascivious women with red shoes?" said Angle Poise. "I've never seen it, of course, because Hank hasn't invented TV yet, but--"

"No, no, no!" yelled Polydoor. "Don't you know anything? Haven't you read 'The Wizard of Oz?'"

"Oh my gosh!" said Angle Poise. "The Wicked Witch of the West. What's she doing here?"

"The Wicked Witch of the East you mean," said Polydoor. "The Witch of the West is good."

"No, it's the Wicked Witch of the North," quoth Custer. "The Witch of the East liveth in the Land of Nod, where all good boyth and girlth go to meet the Jolly Fat Llama."

"The Jolly Fat Llama lives at the North Pole," said Polydoor. "Everybody knows that."

"Look, look; see, see!" yelled Angle Poise. "What's the Red Shoe Witch doing NOW?"

"She's putting a curse on Freddy," said Polydoor, awed.

"Here they come; they finally broke away."

"I like red shoes," said Polydoor. "I wonder if she'd let me borrow them. Melissa Manners wears snow-white shoes with little stars on them. What sort of a person wears snow-white shoes? And a snow-white dress, and a snow-white scarf? Who does she think she is, an albino?"

"Maybe she's a virgin," said Angle Poise. "People with excessive manners hardly ever get beyond the osculation stage you know."

"She couldn't be a virgin," said Polydoor. "Disser's got them all in the Underworld."

"Look out!" yelled Angle Poise. "She's going to cut the cake. We have to save the Red Shoe Witch from a fate worse than death!"

"Angle Poise!" said Polydoor, shocked. "What happened to you? Have you fallen in love?"

Just then, Nurse Jane materialized, smirking like a capuchin monkey at a tea party. She reached over and snatched away her magic cap, which had been perched like a robber fly on Angle Poise's head.

"Excuse me; this is mine," she said.

"You touched me with your magic cap!" wailed Angle Poise. "Now I'm in love with the Red Shoe Witch!"

"I love this job," said Nurse Jane, winking at Polydoor.

"Get away from me!" yelled Polydoor, making the sign to ward off evil.

"Got a problem with love, humpy? It makes the world go around, you know. Besides, I happen to know about a cute spider who's pining away, waiting for her sweetheart."

Polydoor shrank from her and hissed.

"Don't worry, lover boy! You don't need a magic cap. You're just naturally overflowing with tender feelings."

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me," said Polydoor.

Nurse Jane shook her head. "I see. The Gary Cooper of the acolytes, are we? Strong, silent, and wooden. Well I wish you all the happiness of your suppressed emotions."

Then she eyed Custer.

Custer made the sign to ward off evil. "Get away from me," he quothed. "I'm a rethpectable bird of ill omen. Bethidth; I have bad breath; I'm a carrion eater."

Before he could utter another quoth, the magic cap sailed past him, brushing the top of his head.

"Ha, ha, ha!" he cawed. "Didn't work! I'm not in love! I'm..."

His voice trailed off as a large, pink dodo bird stepped out from behind a billboard advertising Mister Tasty Chocolate Day cards.

"I'm extinct, you know," she said, batting her eyes at Custer.

"Thath how I like them," said Custer, feeling his chest. There was something wrong with his heart; it was beating. He felt dizzy. He felt hot and uncomfortable, and he couldn't take his eyes of the dodo's remarkably big....

"The name is Tasty Bits," she said. "You're such a cutie, Custer, but you really need to do something about your breath."

Custer curled up his toes and hid his head under his wing. "I can't help it; I'm a carrion-eater."

"You could try these," said Tasty Bits, handing him a package of McBowel's Paint Thinner Breath Mints.

Custer popped one into his mouth, and Tasty Bits snuggled closer.

"Aren't you going to show me your etchings?" she said.

"I don't have any," quoth Custer. "I don't like tattooth. But I do have a cabinet of curiothitieth where I keep the indigethtible bith from my road kill. Thereth prothetic devitheth, pacemakerth, falth teeth, and all thorth of thrange toyth for adulth."

"Oh you!" said Tasty Bits. "Show me!"

Unfortunately, there was no time for billing and cooing; Melissa Manners had applied a silver cake knife to the angel food cake.

"My what very hard icing you have," she said to the cake.

There was no reply from the cake.

Angle Poise took this opportunity to step out from behind the cake and approach the Red Shoe Witch.

"I've been admiring your shoes," he said. "Can I touch them?"

"You like them?" The witch smiled radiantly at him. "Do you have any etchings I can admire? I feel strangely attracted to you."

Meanwhile, Melissa finally broke through the icing with a hammer and chisel.

Polydoor heard a loud click. "Fore!" he yelled, and he threw himself to the ground just as the can of McBowel's went off with a terrific POOF!

There was a pink cloud of glitter dust, and bits of cake and haggis flew everywhere.

Then he heard a loud 'ribbit, ribbit' as he picked himself up and brushed himself off.

Someone had turned the guests into a lot of jubilant frogs, and they were hopping around and around the cake.

"Hooray, hooray!" they shouted. "The wicked witch is dead. The wicked witch has croaked!"

"Huh?" said Polydoor.

"Free at last!" yelled the frogs. "No more osculating weirdos trying to turn us into handsome princes and princesses. We're free, we're free!"

All at once, Polydoor noticed a pair of white shoes sticking out from under a smoking mound of angel food cake, pink icing, and haggis.

Melissa Manners had been blown right out of her shoes, landing upright on a plinth a little distance away, entirely covered in quick-setting haggis.

She looked like one of Sally Popoff's creations.

"Food fight everyone!" the frogs yelled. "The Wicked Witch of Manners has been turned into a statue. No more decorum! Belch all you want. Put your elbows on the table. Chew with your mouth wide open. Eat with your fingers. Hooray!"

Custer looked up from a long smooch session with Tasty Bits and winked at Polydoor.

"It doethn't get any better than thith," he quoth.

"Oh you!" said Tasty Bits, yanking him back.

Angle Poise danced a tango with the Red Shoe Witch. The quartet, meanwhile, had traded its instruments for an electric harp, an electric cello, electric bongo drums and a diesel locomotive.

Freddy was hanging upside down from a monkey puzzle tree while a considerate eagle pecked off bits of haggis.

"It isn't over until it's over, Polydoor!" he yelled.

Then the frogs began filing past the Melissa Manners action-art compilation, touching it as they drew near.

Like all sensible mortals, they knew that ostensibly dead enemies can sometimes come back as evil demons.

Some of the frogs began to place little votive objects in front of the statue--tiny clay figures of the Great Big Book of Adjustable Manners.

Angle Poise grew interested.

"I do believe the frogs are in the market for a new religion," he said, winking at Polydoor. "They have an image of a terrifying demon and they have fear and anxiety--all they need is a priest."

Then he approached their leader, Bladder Belly.

"Care to indulge in a new religion?" he said.

"Hmmm," said Bladder Belly. "We do have a religion, but it's kind of ratty and broken."

"Yeah," said his acolyte, Blast Shield. "Our priests were all turned into handsome princes and got jobs on game shows. So we don't actually have a religion as such. We worship warts and flies."

Angle Poise smiled inwardly. "Have I got a religion for you!" he said.

"You do?" said Bladder Belly.

"It's quite a good one, actually. It has an angry and irrational god, thousands of food rules, and there'll be a test at the end, when you die."

"Sounds good to me," said Bladder Belly. "Does it have an Underworld?"

"Of course it does! It has an Underworld full of fishermen looking for bait."

"And where do we go when we've been good?" said Blast Shield.

"The Frog Palace. It's got beautiful naked frogs, lily pads crawling with flies, and the fish and snakes are all two inches long."

"Better and better!" said Bladder Belly. "What about initiation rites?"

"You could sacrifice a virgin, if you like," said Angle Poise.

"What's a virgin?" said Blast Shield.

"An academic, I think," said Bladder Belly. "No practical experience."

"Experience in what?"

"Catching flies."

"Well, technically they do have experience in that," said Angle Poise. "It's called applying for a grant. If you want a real virgin, you have to go to the Magic Shop (It Used to be a Tent)."

The frogs belched and thrummed among themselves, discussing this new opportunity.

Polydoor slapped Angle Poise on the back.

"That was very fast footwork," he said. "A whole new religion in two minutes. It's like fast food."

Angle Poise turned away to hide his tears.

"They like me!" he said, amazed. "They really like me!"

"Can we get back to the search for ancient Babylon and the Power of Durable Evil now?" said Polydoor.

Angle Poise cleared his throat.

"I'm through with quests," he said. "I'm staying here with the Red Shoe Witch. I'm going to help the frogs get their new religion going."

"It needs more evil," said Polydoor. "Good is useful from time to time, but evil is what keeps people coming back to the collection plate."

"Don't I know it!" said Angle Poise.

Then the Red Shoe Witch yanked him off his feet and hauled him away to a smooching place.

Polydoor sighed and began looking for the exit. With Freddy down and out, it was time to look for the Power of Durable Evil.

"Alone again," he sighed.

Angle Poise had found his niche and was happy. Even Custer had found someone to be happy with.

Polydoor trudged wearily off into the sunset with his hump, wishing he could hold his lovely Babette in his arms.

Then a voice called to him.

"Hey, Polydoor; were you going to do it all by yourself?"

And there was Custer, flapping along beside him.

"Magic capth don't work on ravenh," he said. "Not for long. Bethidh, the dodo wath really a big frog in diguithe. I hate frogth; they belch in bed."

Suddenly Polydoor was happy again; he had a friend!

Melissa Manners had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 96:KANGAROO COURT

Meanwhile, in ancient Egypt, the Camels of the Negev were once again growing restive.

"Making mud bricks is hard work," they said. "We want to go home."

"We were home last year," said Thunderbags. "You complained all the time because there were too many people trying to kill us and you were starving."

"We can handle it."

"The grass is always greener," said Amen's Tooter.

"Easy for you to say!" said Brubaker. "All you have to do is walk around with a whip and look impressive."

"You think that's easy in this stupid nearly transparent kilt!" said Amen's Tutor.

"Anyway, it says here in Pharaoh Petrie Dish's contract that we are contractually bound as slaves for four hundred years," said Thunderbags.

Then he noticed Hank deep in conversation with an Assyrian dressed up in a governess's outfit.

"Oh, oh; Hank must be having a mid-life crisis," he said.

Hank motioned to him and Thunderbags went over reluctantly, making the sign against evil.

"This is Bad Cabbage," said Hank. "Governess to Secrets of the Pyramids. She's really a HE."

"Aren't you the pesky Assyrian archer who shot the gym teacher?" said Thunderbags.

"That wasn't my fault; I was cleaning my bow and it went off."

"You were AIMING."

"You have to aim your bow when you clean it; otherwise, how will you know it's working properly? Anyway, how do you know it was me? Lots of guys wear enormous beards and dress up like governesses."

"Umm...Hank?" said Thunderbags. "Could I have a word with you?"

"You can relax; it's not infectious," said Bad Cabbage. "Anyway, I want to help you."

Thunderbags eyed the Assyrian suspiciously.

"What's in it for you?" he said. "Curriculum materials?"

"I want to help you because I'm in love with Secrets of the Pyramids," said Bad Cabbage. "I'll help you escape if you'll let me and Secrets join you in your trek to the New World."

"We're not going to the New World. We're going to the Land of Milk and Honey where we can be harassed by enemies and given lots of punishment. And NOT by governesses."

"Hmmm," said Hank. "You could join us, but there's just one thing."

"Yes?" said Bad Cabbage. "I suppose you're thinking of some sort of initiation rite?"

Thunderbags grinned. "Who's got the scissors?" he yelled.

Bad Cabbage went pale.

"No, wait! I need that!"

"Relax; we only cut the drawstring, not the loot bag."

"But it'll be cold without its protective wrapping!"

"You can make little toques and put product placements on them," said Brubaker. "You'll make a fortune! I'll be your agent."

"Really?"

"Sure. Lots of big companies will pay for a spot on your billboard."

"But who will see these ads?"

"Well sometimes you have to go the extra mile to get noticed...."

Thus it was Bad Cabbage was initiated into the Camels of the Negev, and given the standard FAQ and food rules.

Amen's Tutor commiserated with him.

"It could be worse," he said. "You could be flash-roasted by brimstone and fire falling out of the sky."

"I'll have nightmares about this for the rest of my life," moaned Bad Cabbage. "What if Thunderbags' hand had slipped?"

"Quit complaining and get to work," said Thunderbags. "Hank wants a secret plan to get out of this place."

Thus it was, the new recruits worked on a secret plan to cut short the camels' stay ancient Egypt.

"What kind of a secret plan do you want, Hank?" asked Bad Cabbage.

"I was thinking along the lines of an exodus," said Hank.

"Shouldn't that be capitalized?" said Thunderbags.

"That was a different Exodus, with humans, not camels, and anyway, the humans blew up their planet and poisoned it with toxic waste and plague bacteria, so it doesn't concern us."

"Exoduses are dangerous things," said Brubaker. "We've only got three hundred and ninety-nine more years to go. Why don't we just stick it out and wait until we're paroled."

"I like to plan ahead," said Hank. Besides, with Bad Cabbage and Amen's Tooter on our side, we can't lose."

Thunderbags rolled his eyes.

"I'm only going to help if I can bring Secrets of the Pyramids," said Bad Cabbage.

"Oh that's just ducky!" said Thunderbags. "Secrets of the Pyramids is going to be a real problem. For one thing, she has funny ideas about the economy. We're all supposed to give up making mud bricks, for instance, and build tractor factories. And the males are supposed to take their turn fetching water and washing clothes."

"Stranger things have happened," said Hank.

"Everyone knows males mix up coloreds and whites and ruin them," said Thunderbags. "And no male has ever been able to master the art of balancing water jugs or baskets on his head. Give the females equality and civilization will--"

Thunderbags broke off in mid-tirade and turned as white as a slab of Alpine goat cheese.

He had seen a pillar of smoke.

Sari, towering in her wrath, had heard enough. She folded her arms and waited.

"And civilization will...erm...." Thunderbags croaked, "...um...become more...modern and forward-looking, and we'll all get to...listen to interesting poems about relationships...instead of action epics all the time...and...."

Hank was fascinated. He had never seen a high priest writhe in torment before.

Meanwhile, Pharaoh Petrie Dish was growing impatient.

"What's taking Bad Cabbage so long?" he demanded. "Now my pesky daughter is organizing the embalmers! They're all going on strike."

"Bad Cabbage joined the Camels of the Negev, sire. He won't leave without them."

"Good, good, fine, fine! The camels are even worse than my daughter. I've never met

people with so many food rules. It's driving our chefs crazy. Why haven't they left?"

"They're suspicious. You have to menace them so they'll think you want them to stay. Otherwise they'll suspect a trap."

"Why on Tockworld would I want them to stay! They're a plague and a menace. They keep talking about democracy and freedom! I ask you! As if I don't have enough problems with the Assyrians."

"You could send out some chariots to menace them, sire. That would fool them into thinking you wanted them to stay."

"I don't have any chariots to spare. I sold the army to a Pictish millionaire. His rental rates are as high as the pyramids."

"Surely we could lease two or three chariots, sire? We could use mirrors to make them seem like a multitude. It looks more epic and satisfying that way. You round off the body count a little. Upwards of course."

"We've been doing that for centuries."

"Exactly. We have lots of experience."

"Okay, but isn't there a ritual first? Shouldn't we be forced to let them go by some horrible event, to make it look authentic?"

"We could flip coins. Double or nothing."

"I don't like flipping coins. How about blackjack?"

"The best thing would be a wizard contest, sire. We could fix the match so our wizard loses and we could take bets on the other side. That way we win three ways: we convince the Camels of the Negev it was their idea to leave early; we make a ton of shekels, and we humiliate Mad Cow Disease, our chief wizard. He's been acting up lately."

"See to it then."

Thus it was, on the appointed day, Pharaoh Petrie Dish's chief wizard, Mad Cow Disease, met Hank of Ur in a contest that would go down in history.

They met in the palace courtyard.

Hank, ever the considerate one, had brought pot-luck supper.

Actually, Sari had whipped it up in her mechanical blender--two guys from Gath with some large rocks.

Hank and Mad Cow Disease stepped into the ring.

Thunderbags towed Hank, helped him slip in his mouth guard, and gave him some last-minute advice.

"Remember, Hank, watch his left hook. He'll feint with an armadillo and then pop you one with a big serpent. "

"The Supreme Being will guide me," said Hank.

"Okay," said Thunderbags. "But all the same, keep your eye on his left. "

Mad Cow Disease, girded his loins and waved his staff. There was a flash and a bang, and Hank sprang back.

When the smoke cleared, a very fast chicken raced across the ring and between Hank's legs.

MCD gaped at it in surprise.

"I meant to do that," he said. "It was comic relief, before the real stuff begins."

Now it was Hank's turn.

"Let him have it!" said Thunderbags. "Show him what a camel can do! Turn their water red. Rain fire and brimstone on them. Destroy their crops. Kill their first born. Give them plagues, boils, grasshoppers, frogs and hemorrhoids."

Hank eyed his chief priest in surprise. "You've been reading too many cheap Babylonian epics!" he said.

Then he leveled his staff at MCD and said, "Here is a sample of what you can expect if you continue to hold the Camels of the Negev against their will."

There was a flash and a bang, and a green cloud formed.

Moments later, a fierce Scottish warrior stepped out of the cloud, bagpipes skirling as

he played 'The Song of India'.

Several junior wizards collapsed in a heap. The Egyptian throng grew nervous.

At length, the Scot vanished, still piping as he marched through an invisible door into a doomed world.

"Give up?" said Hank.

The shaken Mad Cow Disease tried to think, but his mind was whirling.

"Take that!" he said.

There was a flash and a bang, and a brown cloud.

A kangaroo hopped out of the cloud and glared at the assembled company.

A number of junior wizards fainted.

Pharaoh Petrie Dish was upset.

"I thought you told me this match was fixed," he said.

"It was sire. But you know MCD; he doesn't always play by the rules. He wants to win."

"What is that hopping thing?" said Brubaker.

"It's a big duck," said Thunderbags.

"No it isn't. Where's its beak then?"

"It doesn't need a beak because it can hop."

"It can't be a duck; it doesn't have any feathers!"

Hank stared at the creature in amazement. Then he glowered at MCD. "Listen; if you can't take this match seriously, we'll call it off right now."

Mad Cow Disease was as surprised as everyone else.

"Relax," he said. "It's a big duck that lost all of its feathers. That's why it's hopping around. It's looking for more feathers."

"This is the best you can do?" said Hank. "A featherless duck?"

MCD was growing nervous. "Come on!" he said, poking the kangaroo. "Show the nasty camel what you can do! Give us a nice quack."

MCD's acolyte, Borked, urgently shook his head. "Umm, I don't think you should do that, MCD. It looks angry."

But MCD was in a frenzy now. "Come on, you stupid duck! Show them you aren't a wuss."

"You really want me to?" said the kangaroo.

"Yes, right here, right now! A big quack will do."

The kangaroo turned and belted him three times. There was a quacking noise and MCD slumped to the ground."

"Hooray!" yelled Pharaoh Petrie Dish. "We win!"

"Psst, sire. You're not supposed to let anyone know you bet against your own side."

"Oh. Yes, of course," he said. Then he smirked into his sleeve. "Drat!" he said, trying to conceal his hilarity. "I'll have to let you camels go now. Better hurry before I change my mind and decide to keep you."

Hank was staring at the fallen MCD in a daze when Thunderbags dragged him away.

"We should run away now, taking advantage of confusion in Pharaoh Petrie's ranks to make our escape," he said. "We can follow the pillar of smoke and fire."

"What pillar?" said Hank. Then he looked in the direction Thunderbags was pointing and lifted an eyebrow. "Oh, THAT pillar."

"Great Scott; what is that thing?" said Brubaker.

"It's a pillar of smoke and fire," said Thunderbags. "Haven't you ever seen one before?"

"It's a sign from the Supreme Being," said Hank.

"I liked the twinkling platypus better," said Brubaker.

"We're saved," said Hank. "All we have to do is follow that pillar."

"Follow THAT?" said Brubaker. "Are you crazy? What if the wind shifts and it comes back at us?"

"The Supreme Being will look after us."

"You know, Hank," said Brubaker, "everyone admires your faith and your courage, but

isn't this stretching it a bit? Why don't we wait for Bad Cabbage and Amen's Tooter to finish their plan?"

"They can work on it while we're on the road," said Hank.

"But Pharaoh has changed his mind," said Brubaker. "He's gathering his chariots together for an assault on our position."

"What position?" said Hank. "We're milling around like a lot of sheep. To me, everyone! Let's leave this place!"

Thus it was, the Camels of the Negev hastily gathered up their possession and readied themselves for the long journey to the land of milk and honey.

And Pharaoh Petrie Dish gathered up his winnings from the fools who'd bet on the wizard.

"That worked out well," he said. "But we still have Secrets of the Pyramids."

"Don't worry, sire. Bad Cabbage is sneaking into the palace even now to abduct her. We've put out special signs showing the way to the princess's chamber, but he keeps getting lost."

Bad Cabbage, meanwhile, was growing anxious. The camels were leaving without him. He had to find Secrets of the Pyramids, but Pharaoh's palace was a maze of twisting corridors, and all of the signs were done up in hieroglyphics.

He glanced through an open door and saw the sky turning a dull red as a pillar of smoke and fire arose in the east.

Bad Cabbage had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 97: GILDA THE FITNESS PENGUIN

Polydoor kept looking back, checking to make sure Nurse Jane wasn't following him in a patch of mist.

Not that he was afraid; Nurse Jane was a bit wild with her magic cap, but she was just a bunny rabbit, after all.

A goddess bunny rabbit, maybe, but what was that to him?

Live and let live. If people wanted to hop around in carrot patches, twitching their ears and multiplying, that was their business!

There was nothing to be afraid of really.

Still, you had to be careful around the immortals.

Angle Poise should never have summoned her. People didn't need her really; they were quite capable of achieving temporary insanity all by themselves.

Now that Nurse Jane was out of her hutch, she'd probably keep making mischief for awhile. There was bound to be a population explosion, followed by a surge in divorce actions.

Maybe the lawyers had set this whole thing up; maybe they were paying Angle Poise under the table, hoping for a sudden flux of breakable marriages.

Thinking about lawyers made Polydoor edgy. Lawyers were dangerous and unpredictable.

He cast another backward glance at the patch of mist, which was now little more than a memory of turbulence. He couldn't wait to get out of this place!

It was a short walk to the nearest Orient Express station, but many things could happen in the interval.

"Relax!" quoth Custer. "You're free as a bird."

"No one is free as long as Nurse Jane is active," said Polydoor. "I could be infected by her magic cap at any time."

"It'll never happen."

Polydoor shook his head. "I envy you your care-free attitude to matters of the heart," he said.

"Love ith good for the tummy," said Custer. "Love and marriage, jealousy and hate, murder and corptheth. Ethpethially corptheth. Yum, yum."

"I wonder if Nurse Jane will go after Vlod now," said Polydoor. "That was the whole point of summoning her, I think. I wonder why she hasn't touched him with her magic cap."

"It'll never happen," quoth Custer. "Vlod would charge her an entertainment tax."

But Polydoor was uneasy. There was a reason for everything the immortals did, whether they spared someone, or cursed them.

"Relax," quoth Custer. "No one mettheth with Vlod. Not if they value their tripeth."

"Maybe not," said Polydoor, trying to cheer himself up. After all, he was an acolyte, and acolytes were tough!

What ever kills you, makes you stronger.

"Vlod is a one-duck vampire if ever there was one," he said. "His love runs deep and true for Lenore McBeauty, like a buried haggis. Maybe Nurse Jane is afraid of him; maybe her magic cap has no power over him."

Without consciously intending to, Custer put a little distance between himself and Polydoor.

It's one thing to have doubts about a goddess; it's quite another thing to insult her.

"Love is powerful, like leprothy," quoth Custer, just to be on the safe side.

"Ha!" said Polydoor, working himself up to false bravado. "I laugh at love! I laugh at Nurse Jane's magic cap! Love has no power over Polydoor."

One should never insult an immortal, particularly a goddess.

Some people think Tockworld would be a kinder, gentler place if females were in charge.

Ha!

Nurse Jane had been reading a Barbara Cartland novel in the shade of a tum-tum tree when she overheard Polydoor's remarks.

Nurse Jane, as you know, is a little like the Jolly Fat Llama--she knows who's been bad and who's been good, and she has the power to dispense gifts.

The sort of gifts you might not have coveted.

Nurse Jane was angry now. So Polydoor laughed at love, did he! It had no power over him, did it!

Ha!

Thus it was, just as Polydoor reached the Orient Express station, Nurse Jane stepped out from behind a billboard advertising Mister Tasty Chocolate Day.

When Polydoor spotted her, he turned an odd color, like verdure, and mumbled something ingratiating.

"This is for you," said Nurse Jane, holding out a black-bordered letter for him. "From your sweetheart, I believe."

Polydoor took it reluctantly and eyed it with something like horror.

He had never seen a 'Dear John' letter before, but this had the aura of doom associated with such things.

Nurse Jane smiled and began to vanish.

"Wait!" yelled Polydoor. "Aren't you going to touch me with your magic cap? I could use a refresher, and so could Babette. Does your cap have a wireless mode for long-distance touching?"

"You mean the magic cap that doesn't have any power over Vlod?"

"No! I meant to say it does have power--"

"This old thing?" She held it up, a shimmering form on the point of merging into thin air. Then she was gone.

Polydoor tore open the envelope with a sick sense of foreboding and a few dead flies fell out.

"Can I have the flieth?" quoth Custer.

Polydoor handed him the envelope and examined the letter.

The ink was blotched, perhaps from tears.

"Dear Polydoor," it began.

Polydoor read on with increasing despair. He felt his heart grow cold and small in his chest.

Well, colder and smaller, actually.

"I have been a naughty girl," wrote Babette. "I could not wait any longer for you, so I remarried. I do regret this with all my heart; I am so terribly sorry, I could just burst into tears. I killed him right away, of course, and sucked all of the juices out of his body, but still, I am going to have his babies. I am so sorry, Polydoor! I suppose you won't want to have anything to do with me now. I love you passionately, if not with the fidelity you deserve."

"Your remorseful sweetheart, Babette."

Polydoor read the letter again, very carefully, in case it had changed into a different letter while he was busy going into shock.

But the more he read it, the more it stayed the same.

And yet, she had written that she loved him. She had called herself his remorseful sweetheart.

Was there no end to the guile and treachery of female spiders?

Polydoor watched in blank despair as Custer picked a bit of rail kill from the tracks. It was a squashed toad by the look of it.

"I envy you, Custer," he said.

"Can't have it!" snapped Custer. "Ith mine, mine, mine!"

"I meant, I envy your immunity to love."

"Oh that! The old black magic they know tho well. Thweet, thavage thurrender."

"How lucky you are to be immune!"

"Oh Cuther hath loved and loth. Why do you think I go around quothing, 'It'll never happen!'"

"Because you're a stupid raven?"

"Thum friend you are! Never even bothered to find out about my tragic path."

"What tragic path?"

"It happened like thith...."

Polydoor groaned and covered his ears.

"Wunth upon a time," Custer began, but that was as far as he got, because just in the nick of time, Nurse Jane rematerialized and threatened him with her magic cap.

Then she gazed on the wounded Polydoor.

"Comfy?" she said.

Polydoor was too stricken to speak.

"It's a lucky thing you don't believe in the power of love, my boy. Otherwise you might suffer over a thing like this."

Polydoor gritted his teeth. No matter how terrible he felt, he wasn't going to give her the satisfaction of gloating over it.

Nurse Jane contemplated him for a time, then, because she was one of the kinder goddesses, she took pity on him.

"Pull yourself together, Polydoor," she said. "You're The Duck in Babette's Life! So she had an affair; so what! It meant nothing to her; it was just a reflex action, like two tractors in a motel room."

"I hate her!" sniffed Polydoor.

"No you don't. You love her. Admit it to yourself and you'll feel much better; you can drop this nonsense and go off and console yourself with old Hank Williams records."

"My life is over," wailed Polydoor. "I'm full of bitterness and gall now. I want to bite someone."

"Thith ith new?" quoth Custer.

"Dearie, dearie me," said Nurse Jane. "You do have it bad, don't you! So much poison and bile in one so young!"

"Right on!" quoth Custer.

"It can't be MY handiwork, Polydoor. I only deal in true love. Let me have a look at your wound."

Polydoor made the sign to ward off evil, but it was too late. Before you could say Doctor Kildare, Nurse Jane had reached inside his chest and plucked out his heart.

There was an arrow in it.

"Now I wonder who did this?" she said. "It's certainly not one of mine."

"Cupid?" quoth Custer, smirking.

"That imposter!" snorted Nurse Jane. "What do males know about love! What's this inside the arrowhead? A little bottle with a tiny scorpion in it. Tsk, tsk. I've heard of puppy dog's tails before, but this is ridiculous!"

"Dibth!" yelled Custer. "Can I have hith heart?"

"You'd eat your friend's heart, Custer?"

Cuther shuffled a claw. "Well, you did pluck it out, you know. That voidth the warranty. Bethidh, I only want to recycle it before it blockth the drainth."

Nurse Jane stared at him until he blushed through his feathers.

"the zeitgeith made me do it," he said. "Everybody ith mean and dithloyal now; ith a feature!"

Nurse Jane replaced the heart in Polydoor's chest and tossed Custer the scorpion.

"You be careful my friend, or I'll make you fall in love with a human," she said. "Humans are a lot dumber than dodo birds."

"Noooo!" wailed Custer. "Humanth are full of chemicalth! They make me break out in warth."

Polydoor looked at Nurse Jane with new respect.

"Where did you get such power?" he said.

Nurse Jane smiled knowingly. "People think those old gods and goddesses up in Bracebridge are all powerful--the gods of this and that, bickering and yapping. If only they knew that Love is the real power! Love makes the world go 'round. It makes this banal vale of tears almost endurable."

"That's not true," said Polydoor. "Chocolate makes the world go 'round. Chocolate is much stronger than love."

"Really?" said Nurse Jane. "Does chocolate make your spirits soar? Do you ever want to do things for chocolate just to make it happy? Do you ever take it bowling, for instance?"

"I like to rub it all over my feathers," said Polydoor. "I like to roll around in it and absorb it through the pores in my skin."

"But what about little ones?" said Nurse Jane. "You can't make babies with chocolate."

"Oh yes I can! I can make molds and pour chocolate from a vat into the molds. It's much better than messy reproductive activities involving plumbing and hydraulics."

Nurse Jane was shocked. "Does chocolate look after you in your old age?" she said.

Polydoor scoffed at this. "Do children look after you in your old age?" he said.

"Cynic!" said Nurse Jane.

"Chocolate is always there," said Polydoor. "It's dependable and friendly. Lovers and children are unpredictable and treacherous, like politicians."

Nurse Jane shook her head. "Well I'm on friendly terms with Mister Tasty Chocolate, so I won't smite you for this, but I do hope you learn the true meaning of love before you become a bitter, dried-up, ironic old fart living in a mouldy cell."

"Been there, done that," quoth Custer.

"I'm off to Toronto to pay a visit to Vlod," said Nurse Jane. "You behave yourself, Custer. Be nice to young lovers everywhere, or I'll make you fall in love with a telemarketer."

"Aaaaaaargh!" moaned Custer.

With that, Nurse Jane vanished again.

Polydoor felt revived now that his heart had been returned to its cavity.

"I'm much better now," he said. "Nurse Jane was right. Babette still loves me, and her

infidelity was just a mechanical thing, like a demolition project.

Custer stared at him in shock.

"I'm waiting," he said, tapping a claw.

"For what?" said Polydoor innocently.

"The other thoo to drop."

"You mean the one about me cheating on Babette with Lucy Borden, as soon as I can find her?"

"Ah, true love," quoth Custer.

"The emotions aren't involved, Custer. It's just a mechanical thing."

"Like two tractoroth in a motel."

"Babette and I were meant for each other; as soon as I find Demo, I'll return to her and we'll be happy ever after."

"It'll never happen."

Polydoor ignored this; he was happy.

He hadn't read the part in the BIG CUNEIFORM BOOK OF THINGS SPIDERS LIKE TO DO about female spiders killing and eating their husbands after the initial mating session.

He thought females got it out of their system after the first husband.

He hadn't read about the Wife of Bath either.

Meanwhile, Vlod was busy jumping up and down on his keyboard, trying to make Sparkles the Wonder Computer work, when Nurse Jane showed up.

Nurse Jane didn't show up in her normal guise; Vlod would have recognized her right away and taken countermeasures, using a missile shield, or a rabbit hutch.

So only her cap was visible, disguised as a blood pudding.

"Is this a blood pudding I see before me?" Vlod said. "Who made this disgusting thing? Polydoor? Was it you? Are you back again, old friend?"

A pair of rabbit ears wiggled in thin air.

"I don't need these anymore Polydoor; I have satellite TV now."

"Ha, ha! Got you!" said Nurse Jane.

"Oh it's you," said Vlod mildly. "I laugh at love."

Just then, a penguin jogged down the hall and into Vlod's rec room.

"Hi there!" she said. "My name is Gilda the Fitness Penguin, and I'll be your love interest this week. I'm jogging around the world to raise money for bankrupt corporations. My aren't you the handsome one!"

Vlod was speechless. His eyes grew as big as soup plates.

This was one beautiful penguin! She was dressed in matching jogging suit and Nikes, and wore one of those really complicated watches with lap timers and a red 'nuke' button.

His heart started beating. It hadn't worked for six hundred years, and now this!

"Welcome to Toronto," he gasped.

"What a duck!" said Gilda. "You're a bit out of shape, though. Let me take your pulse."

She put a hand on his wrist and he nearly fainted.

"Hmm," she said. "Once every sixty seconds is a little slow. You'll need an exercise regime, and plenty of raw vegetables and brewer's yeast."

"I'll never wash this wrist again," said Vlod.

Then he fainted.

Polydoor had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 98:RED TSE

Meanwhile, back on the Egyptian Range, the bumbling, incompetent Bad Cabbage was holding up the impending Exodus.

"What's the matter with him?" hissed Pharaoh Petrie Dish irritably. "How many hints does he need? He should have found Secrets by now. Why's he creeping towards the

privy?"

"He's only ever seen the classrooms and the mess hall for foreign jackals and dogs, sire," said Canaanite Jack, the duck in charge of foreign spies and traitors. "I'll send someone in to help him."

This it was, while Bad Cabbage was about to sneak into the indoor privy, a figure dressed up as a canopic jar whispered: "This way, you idiot! That's the wrong door!"

"Oh thank you!" said Bad Cabbage. Then he peered at the jar. "Um...do I know you?"

"I'm the duck who knows where Secrets of the Pyramids is."

Bad Cabbage nodded. That was a good answer. He was a little puzzled by his new friend's choice of makeup and accessories, but it took all kinds.

"Pleased to meet you," he said. "Um, there is just one other thing...."

"Forget about it!" said the jar. "I'm not going to look after your internal organs. I only do royalty."

"Oh! I'll certainly keep that in mind. Actually I was wondering if--"

"Shouldn't wonder, if I were you. Not when you're on a secret mission to elope with Secrets of the Pyramids. She might get tired of waiting and run off with a pre-Columbian warrior from the Land Over the Shining Waters."

Bad Cabbage shuddered. He had no idea what a pre-Colombian was, but it sounded worse than a guy from Gath.

"Point me in the right direction, please," he said.

"First door on your left. You can't miss it."

"Thank you, Mister Jar. Umm, just out of curiosity; why are you helping me?"

The jar went as pale as a frog in formaldehyde. Why am I helping you?" it said.

"Erm...because...because I Have Doubts."

"Really?" said Bad Cabbage, growing interested. "I've had those--"

"My doubts are worse than your doubts. They're about internal organs."

"You don't think we have any?"

"Of course we do!" hissed the jar. "The tech guys extract them from people like you all the time. It's the next part I have doubts about. How do you stick them back inside their original owners when they're needed again? It's not as if you can just take out a few screws, slide out the motherboard and stick them back into the appropriate slots."

"Hmmm," said Bad Cabbage, hugging himself in case any evil tech guy was planning on removing his internal organs.

"You see what I mean?" said the canopic jar. "It's bad enough having to sit around in a dusty case, breaded like a schnitzel in natrium, trussed up in bandages and forced to listen to a lot of Edwardian tomb raiders babbling about ancient curses! But to wake up in the afterlife without any organs at all! I mean, really! Instead of frisking about in green meadows with lovely ladies, the very first thing you have to do is go call tech support and have a bunch of smelly old organs inserted into your body! What kind of a religion is this, anyway?"

"You could always join the Camels of the Negev," said Bad Cabbage. "They leave all that tech support stuff to the Supreme Being. It gives them more time for suffering, hardship, and guilt."

"Sounds good to me. Who could resist?"

"There is one little thing...."

"Oh no you don't! You're not snipping that off! I need it."

"Not the thing itself; just the trimming. You don't keep the ribbons and bows after you've opened the present, do you? Well, I suppose some people do, but--"

"First door on the left!" yelled the jar. "I'd get in there fast, if I were you. Pharaoh Petrie Dish is probably getting ready to change his mind about the camels right now. In fact, I think I can hear the gears clashing inside his head."

At these words, Bad Cabbage bethought himself of present danger and girded his loins for action.

He tried to shake hands with the jar, but there WERE no hands, of course, so he patted

it on the lid.

The jar hissed and exhaled a fragrant aroma of ancient rotten eggs.

Canopic jars, as you know, are quite important and dignified; they're secret portals into other dimensions, which is why the curators at the Royal Ontario Museum are so anxious to gather them up and secure them under lock and key.

Secret portals can be very dangerous in the wrong hands. Look what happened to Lewis Carroll.

Then Bad Cabbage made his way through a door marked 'People's Collective and Tractor Factory', and found himself in Secrets' private suite of rooms.

Her regulation New Bright People's Duffel Bag was packed and ready. Secrets herself was sitting at an overturned carton of Little Red Papyrus Books, writing an essay on the destructive effect on workers pensions of the futures market in internal organs.

Bad Cabbage gaped at her strange costume. She wore baggy khaki trousers, a blue shirt, a quilted jacket, and an odd sort of quilted hat with ear flaps.

A badge pinned to her jacket said: Kill the Capitalist Plutarchrocy.

"Plutarchrocy?" said Bad Cabbage. "I think something got lost in the translation...."

"Spelling is a bourgeois activity," Secrets said irritably. "It's just another means of keeping honest workers down."

Bad Cabbage was too stunned to speak for a moment. He listened to the sound of Secrets' pen scratching the rough, worker-blue papyrus.

Then he said, "I've come to take you away my darling."

Secrets put away her pen and her papyrus and grabbed her duffel bag.

"What took you so long?" she snapped. "October is almost here and we haven't even armed the peasants yet."

Bad Cabbage wasn't sure what October was, so he pretended Secrets was quite normal and he picked up another duffle bag marked: Propaganda Leaflets for Bloomsbury Intellectuals, plus Manuals on Cultivation and Tractors.

Bad Cabbage groaned under the weight of it. This wasn't going the way he'd foreseen, with romantic smoochings amid desperate dangers, and the last airplane getting ready to take off in a fog as Rick despaired....

"You'll have to get rid of that silly governess costume," said Secrets. "There's a worker's outfit on a peg by the door. Change into that and you can pretend to be one of the exploited workers. A plumber, for instance."

"Exploited!" snorted Pharaoh Petrie Dish, who was listening through a secret tube.

"Does she have any idea how much plumbers charge! I had a guy in here to fix the hot tub yesterday, and I had to sell my entire war fleet to pay his bill!"

Bad Cabbage and Secrets didn't hear this lament because they were striding out to the sandy field where the Camels of the Negev had gathered.

Bad Cabbage started to fumble his way through a greeting ritual, but Secrets thrust him aside. She had spotted Sari, and she went straight towards her, recognizing a true leader immediately.

"Do you have an action committee?" she asked. "I'd like to join. I've got lots of experience."

Sari concealed her smile.

"We don't have any action committees," she said. "We do have lots of work details. We have some spots available in the pounding-clothes-in-the-river squad, if you'd like to join. It's co-ed; males don't escape housework here."

Hank, meanwhile, mistaking Bad Cabbage for the senior partner of the escaping pair, patted him on the back. "Good show!" he said. "Now what's your plan, old fellow? It's time we were off. The Supreme Being waits for no camel. The pillar of smoke and fire is already in motion."

Bad Cabbage blinked. No one had told him about a pillar of smoke and fire. He hated fireworks; ever since that time the neighborhood bully had set off a string of ladyfingers

under his desk at school....

"Plan?" he said, because in the excitement of creeping around the castle, looking for Secrets' private apartments, he'd forgotten all about making a plan.

Secrets rolled her eyes. "This is what happens when you let the bourgeoisie run things," she said.

"Relax," said Bad Cabbage, thinking quickly. "There's this fellow I know about who mentioned he'd be more than willing to help if we ever took an interest in getting away from Pharaoh's army and wandering off into the desert for a bit of fun. His name is Red Tse."

"Red Tse?" snorted Hank. "What kind of a name is that? Is he a Viking?"

"Chinese, actually," said Bad Cabbage. "The ancient Egyptians can't say 'China', so they ignore it and pretend Red Tse comes from the land of Nod. He's on a trade mission."

"Why will he help us?" said Hank.

"Because the temple artists offended him. They painted his picture on a tomb, but they botched it. They made him look like a Canaanite in a dressing gown."

Just then, Red Tse showed up, making an elaborate pretense of nonchalance, as though he hadn't been waiting for that fool Bad Cabbage to get to the point.

"I just happened to be out admiring the sand," he said. "We don't get a lot of it in China; too many factories, production lines, soldiers, weapons, and wealthy workers. No one would dare attack our country, ever, because we'd annihilate the running dogs and capitalist jellyfish mongrels."

"Huh?" said Hank.

"Red Tse will help us escape," said Bad Cabbage. "I met him when he told me I looked like Madame Butterflies and he could help me get an operation if I passed on interesting tidbits of gossip and military information to him."

Everyone looked at Bad Cabbage for awhile. Then they looked at Red Tse.

"Why are you here, really?" said Thunderbags. "Who do you work for?"

"I'm a trader and a diplomat. I work for a collective."

"What's a collective?" said Hank.

"It's a group of things treated as a singular noun," said the gym teacher. "I learned that in Scotland, during the Enlightenment."

"I'm going to help you because Egypt is too powerful," said Red Tse. "We have decided to play the Camels card. We want a strong nation to distract the Egyptians while we build up our army. Then we pounce."

"It's a long way to pounce, isn't it?" said Hank. "Where did you say you lived?"

"Umm...it's about seven thousand miles away, give or take a few thousand. I wasn't really counting."

"That's quite a lot of sneaking up to do before you can pounce," said Hank.

"A journey of seven thousand miles begins with a single step," said Red Tse.

"Who told you that?" snorted Brubaker. "Some wiseacre who never marched a step in his life?"

"I don't trust him, Hank," said Thunderbags. "What's a collective, really? Is it a kind of tent? Or is it a gang of Philistines with a new kind of slingshot?"

"It's a lot of people getting together to make tractors," said Secrets. "Leave this to me; I know how to deal with honorable representatives of workers' collectives."

Then she turned to Red Tse and pronounced the ritual of meaningless courtesy.

"Greetings from the downtrodden workers of Egypt, comrade. We wish you continued increases in gross domestic product."

Red Tse eyed Secrets warily. He knew her type. She was one of the enthusiasts; the troublesome ones who were intense about adopting the correct attitude while drying dishes or planting millet. There were several people like Secrets in his collective, and he hated every one of them.

They were the first to complain when he got out of doing the chores by organizing yet another diplomatic mission, or a trade delegation.

Fortunately, the chairman always took his side.

After all, something had to be done with the great quantities of tractors piling up in the warehouse.

What's a tractor, anyway?" said Hank.

"Three guys from Shanghai pulling a plow," said Red Tse.

"We have those here," said Hank. "Our tractors are more advanced; we use two guys from Gath."

"Shhh, don't tell him that," said Thunderbags. "He's the competition, you know."

"You exploit the guys from Gath because it's a capitalist system, using shekels," said Red Tse. "We share the work and the benefits of production."

"In other words, you don't pay the guys from Shanghai," said Thunderbags.

"They don't need pay," said Red Tse. "We are all brothers and sisters, sharing equally, each according to his needs."

Sari, an expert in the ins and outs of sharing and equality, smirked in her sleeve.

Red Tse immediately became inscrutable.

"I will conduct you to safety," he said. "I am doing this because I wish to be remembered properly, so that my descendants will know who I was and what a bold thing I did in saving the Camels of the Negev from another four hundred years of toil. It's either that or oblivion in a stupid factory, where I'll have to spend my golden years listening to a lot of idiots talk about heroic feats of putting together tractor parts."

"Hey, he's practically one of us!" said Brubaker. "Now we're talking turkey!"

The camels murmured their agreement. In a trice, everyone had set out for the Land of Milk and Honey, which lay quite a long way to the east, across vast quantities of utterly useless sand.

Meanwhile, as the camels set out, Pharaoh's charioteers rode out.

And the number of chariots was three.

"Are you sure this is going to work?" said Vibration, the first driver.

"Of course it will!" said Rattle, the second driver. "Break out the mirrors and hold them up as high as you can so they reflect into each other. When the camels look at us, they'll see chariots all the way back to infinity. It's an old model railroading trick."

"A what?"

"Don't get around much, do you? Just do as I say."

"There's so much dust, they'll never be able to see the chariots; let alone the mirrors."

"Dust is important; it makes people think there are a lot of chariots milling about."

Pharaoh sent two guys from Gath with an elephant to stir it up."

Meanwhile, the camels looked back.

"Hank, Hank; look, look; see, see!" they yelled. "Pharaoh Petrie Dish has changed his mind. He sent his army after us."

"That corrupt, running-zebra exploiter of noble workers!" muttered Secrets.

Hank held up his hands to steady the wavering souls in his tribe.

"I'm getting a little tired of this," he said. "I don't see why I have to do everything myself. I did the hard part; I led everyone to the Land of Milk and Honey. Then I had to lead you all back into the desert, a task that should have been assigned to the second shift. And now I have to lead you out again. I ask you!"

Red Tse, meanwhile, pointed to a sea which lay across their path.

"Behold, and Lo!" he said. "This is your escape route."

"He's kidding, right?" said Brubaker. "That's not really a sea; it's a secret passage to an alternate world."

Hank and Thunderbags walked towards the sea. It was quite a good one, with lots of tangy water, and it reflected the pillar of smoke and fire very nicely.

"Hmmm," said Hank.

Just then someone screamed, "Look, look, see, see! Up in the sky! Is it a bird? Is it a crocodile? Is it an advertising gimmick?"

"That?" said Hank, peering up at the mysterious object. "Relax. It's a Russian-born doctor and historian having a near collision with Tockworld after erupting from Jupiter during a severe perturbation."

"Huh?"

"See the hydrocarbons tumbling out of his oil can? Those will burn down Egypt and create such havoc, the Egyptian scribes will be too embarrassed to even mention it in their chronicles."

"Just like they're too embarrassed to mention US," muttered Brubaker.

"We'd better take cover," said Thunderbags. "It's going to rain cats and dogs in a minute."

"Fire and brimstone, you mean," said Hank.

"Whatever."

"My compass isn't working," said the gym teacher. "I have no idea where we are."

"It's that Russian doctor," said Red Tse. "His powerful magnetic field is pushing back the waters. See the way they retreat from that treacherous strip of mud and quicksand, and pile up in two massive columns of darkness. You can cross over now, but hurry!"

Hank looked up at the sky. "I don't know," he said. "Can we trust the Russians?"

"Of course we can!" said Thunderbags. "They're part of NATO now. They just want to be free to live their lives and shop in malls, like us."

Hank eyed Red Tse.

"Who are you, really?"

Red Tse was just a grin in the darkness. "This time when you cross over, write it up on acid-free papyrus," he said. "And make sure you spell my name properly. And leave something for the archaeologists. They'll be coming here from the Royal Ontario Museum soon. You could leave them a tablet inscribed with something like, 'Here in this ridiculous desert, Hank of Ur parted from Red Tse and crossed over to the Land of Milk and Honey.'"

"Sounds good to me," said Hank.

"Don't leave it to a bunch of priests writing up old memories five hundred years from now," said Red Tse. "Nobody will believe them. Maybe you should mention the Russian doctor zooming through the sky dumping volatile hydrocarbons, just to make it authentic."

Hank shook hands with Red Tse.

"You're sure you won't join us?"

"Are you kidding? I heard what you do to people who join you! I'm keeping mine."

So Hank and Red Tse parted, and the camels began crossing a slippery, muddy strip of recently exposed beach while the good Russian doctor lit up the heavens.

The Egyptian chariot drivers, meanwhile, contemplated the scene nervously.

"I'm not crossing that!" said Vibration. "Pharaoh Petrie Dish doesn't pay me enough for certain death."

"Pharaoh expects every duck to do his duty," said Rattle.

"Tell you what; you take the lead and we'll follow," said Vibration.

"You wanna live forever?" yelled Rattle, and he urged his horses into a gallop, making for the exposed beach.

Vibration motioned to the other charioteer to wait.

"Let that idiot go on ahead," he said. "By the time he notices we're not following him, he'll already be dead."

"What about the camels?"

"We'll tell PD the camels drowned."

"He won't believe that."

"Okay, so we'll tell him the lions ate them."

"He won't believe that either. We can't go back home now."

"So? We'll go into exile. We'll travel. I've always wanted to see the pyramids."

"That's where we came from, you idiot!"

"Okay, okay! We'll go to Nubia and play the slots."

Hank, meanwhile, held up his staff, which shone like a beacon in the darkness for the fearful camels.

Just then, a lot of aliens spotted the light and descended, for a better look.

The aliens, of course, were driving the Packard Trilobites of the gods.

Hank had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 99:THE SAND IS GREENER ON THE OTHER SIDE

Hank of Ur's tribe stood gazing up at the aliens in awe while the Russian-born scientist continued holding off the dark waters with his powerful magnetic field.

Or perhaps it was the Supreme Being who was doing the holding off.

Magnetic fields, after all, were not invented by scientists; not even by mad scientists.

"Look, look, see, see!" yelled the camels. "It's the Packard Trilobites of the Gods!"

"No it isn't!" said Thunderbags. "It's a divine afflatus."

"A what?"

"Afflatus," said Brubaker. "A disease. A form of erysipelas, often called St. Anthony's fire. That fellow certainly has a bad case of it."

"Blasphemy!" roared Thunderbags. "The divine afflatus is not a skin condition; it's a form of inspiration. Poets get it all the time."

"I rest my case," said Brubaker. "A disease. Of the making of books--"

"This is DIVINE inspiration, Brubaker; so watch your tongue or you'll be afflated straight into a bottomless pit of fire and brimstone, where boils and plagues will torment you, and armadillos will eat your liver."

"As long as I don't have to do any more trekking through the desert," said Brubaker. "I draw the line at more trekking."

"Enough small talk," said Hank. "Any minute now the Supreme Being will release the waters, and I'm sure they'll be angry. Anyone who doesn't have his bronze medal in swimming should immediately follow me to the other side."

"Trekking, trekking, trekking," muttered Brubaker. "It never ends! Why can't we hitch a ride with the aliens? They're just lounging about up there, with nothing to do...."

"I'm sure they'll abduct you if you ask them nicely," said the gym teacher.

Bad Cabbage, meanwhile, was beginning to have second thoughts about the extra-curricular activities he'd signed up for. For one thing, he now knew that his sweetheart preferred tractor factories to smooching, and for another, he was quite sure that wallowing in mud and quicksand was not part of an archer's job description.

Was it for this he had dressed up like a governess, endured the mocking laughter of Egyptian jackals, and abandoned his wonderful horse, Buckyball?"

He missed his horse.

"Hearts be the stronger though mud the more viscous is and enemies not mead halls menace ringless bearers with wretched wolves and telemarketers," said Hank.

"Huh?" said Brubaker.

"I was quoting," said Hank. "To cheer you up."

"I think you need a better reading light in your staff, sir," said the gym teacher. "That was a bit...um...."

"Why not quote from the Great Big Book of Useful Facts," said Thunderbags, perusing his own copy of the wondrous artifact. "Something inspiring, like this: 'Because drainage is so vital to railroad right-of-ways, the handling and hauling of big pipe, or culvert sections is playing an increasingly important part in model train operations.'"

Everyone was silent for a moment, thinking about big pipe, or culvert sections.

"Does it really say that in The Book?" said Hank.

"If you don't like that item, I could quote from the exhortations of Idrimi, King of Mukish, who, as you know, spent seven years in the desert, in exile," said Thunderbags.

"He was a minor king," said the gym teacher. "And they didn't let him come out of the desert until he swore allegiance to Madame de Stael."

"Not a stirring example," said Hank. "What was that bit about drainage? We could use a little drainage. What else does the Book say?"

"It is written," said Thunderbags, "The two accessories shown on the next page have been especially designed to meet this trend."

"What's on the next page?"

"There's a picture of a temple on a platform. There's a very long box on wheels in front of the temple--probably a special, mobile receptacle for large sacrificial offerings. There's a portal at one end of the temple with a lintel across the top, and a hook hanging from the lintel--probably for holding sacrificial objects before the priest eviscerates them. It says under the picture: 'Lionel No. 345 Unloading Station.'"

"Who is this Lionel?" said Hank. "He can't be the Supreme Being!"

"Perhaps a temple priest?" said Thunderbags.

"Who contributed this item?" said Hank.

"Erm...I did, sir," said the gym teacher.

"You did?" said Hank. "I should have thought you'd be more interested in tidbits about pushups and bowel movements--"

"The two don't necessarily go together, sir."

"They don't? Isn't that interesting! I would have thought there was a direct correlation. Isn't there something in Newton about action and reaction."

"Different subject, Hank," said Thunderbags. "Having to do with apples and noggins."

"Comrade Hank; I think we should finish crossing over," said Secrets. "The water won't stay piled up forever. Hegel warned us about the antithesis."

"Of course, my dear. But I wonder where the gym teacher found this odd item?"

"It was on a large cuneiform tablet, sir, in the library at Nippur. It's listed in the catalog as 'Model Railroading', and it was prepared by the Editorial Staff of the Lionel Corporation. I don't think they're in the king list."

"Fascinating! And the date?"

"Erm...1950, sir. Bantam Books, Inc., New York. I believe New York is part of Babylon."

"Aha! A book from the planet Earth, written by humans before they blew up their planet, gassed it, poisoned it, and distributed plague germs over the fuming remains."

"And spammed it, sir. Don't forget the spam. They were knee-deep in it before they expired."

"Humans are a bad example, Gym Teacher. They blamed every silly thing they did on the Supreme Being. Whenever they indulged in wars, for instance, they would tell each other the Supreme Being had arranged the slaughter because someone wasn't behaving properly."

"Sounds familiar," muttered Brubaker.

"We shall allow an item about humans just this one time," said Hank. "But no more items from Earth. Please make a note of this, everyone. Humans are a bad example to all of us and could very well corrupt our children."

"Comrade Hank," said Secrets, who was eyeing the dark waters piled up on either side. "I think we should cross over before the historical necessity sweeps us away."

Hank nodded and started out again.

It was tough going, of course, because land that has only just that instant been abandoned by a turbulent sea is muddy, slippery and treacherous.

The chariots, however, were struggling hard as well, and soon bogged down.

Actually it was only one chariot, as you know. The other two drivers had more common sense.

Besides, someone had to hold up the mirrors so the camels would be fooled into thinking the model railroad was much larger than it in fact was.

The aliens, meanwhile, were debating what to do, and how many times they should do it, when Hank's light winked out.

"Lost them!" said their captain, Limited Edition. "They vanished into the darkness. I wonder if they were real."

"We can't be sure, sir," said his acolyte. "They might have been crop circles."

"I suppose you're right, Igor. The truth is out there."

"Yes sir; very amusing sir. I've seen the reruns from Earth too, you know."

"Well we don't have any more time for larking about; we're supposed to be invading the Alien Planet."

"But that's our own planet."

"Standing orders, Igor. When we run out of places to invade, we're supposed to invade our own planet. It keeps us in fighting trim and prevents flatulence."

Everyone thought about this for awhile.

Meanwhile, Hank was perplexed by the sudden darkness around him. What had happened to the light in his staff?

"It could be a short circuit," said the gym teacher. "Would you like me to check, sir?"

Hank clutched his staff unto himself.

"If the light went out, it was meant to go out," he said. "Besides, we still have quite a nice light from the Russian-born scientist."

"It might be the operating system," said the gym teacher. "Sometimes you have to download a patch or it crashes all the time."

Thunderbags eyed him suspiciously. "Are you sure you aren't a human in disguise?" he said.

"I've been studying humans," said the gym teacher. "We could learn a few tricks from them. They were very good at attributing blame to mistakes the customer made."

Just then, Hank reached the other side of the muddy bridge of land. He turned and motioned to the others, and the light in his staff shone out once more, a beacon to his weary flock.

"There you have it," said Thunderbags. "Aliens and tractor factories come and go, but the Supreme Being is always with us."

"If the Supreme Being is always with us, then we don't have to go trekking through the desert," said Brubaker. "Every spot in the Tockworld is numinous and wirelessly connected to the immortals."

"Nice try, but no haggis," said Hank. "It's our duty to go forth and multiply."

"I hate math homework," said Brubaker. "If anyone else ever says to me--'Jane starts out in Car A going east at fifty kilometers an hour, and Dick starts out in Car B going west at forty miles an hour--how many kilometers will Jane have traveled by the time Dick gets to the half-way point?'--I'll insert a newly baked clay brick--"

"Ahem!" said Thunderbags. "We're all agreed then; the Supreme Being is watching over us and expects every camel to do his duty."

The camels, who had all crossed over by now, voiced their agreement.

Then the waters rushed back, covering the most reckless of Pharaoh's chariot drivers.

"Oooh, that was messy," said Vibration. "Shake your fists at the camels to make it look like you care."

So the two survivors shook their fists and rattled their spears.

Then they tossed away their big mirrors and rode off to Nubia.

Hank, meanwhile, gazed ruefully down at the oily mud on his sandals.

"Well, that's over with," he said. "What's next on the agenda? Let's see...forty years of wandering in the desert, then we get war and tribulation."

"Sounds good to me," said Brubaker in a whiny voice. "Who could resist?"

Meanwhile, Vlod Ironbeak Dracula was perplexed.

Falling in love can be the beginning of a great deal of hard work, trouble and indigestion, particularly if your sweetheart is someone completely different.

Early one morning--five am to be exact--when many of Toronto's prominent citizens were sweating and toiling through guilty dreams, Vlod was out in his nettle gardens, in gym shorts and a T-shirt, jogging along the werewolf path.

A slogan in fiery red letters on his T-shirt invited passers-by to honk if they liked fitness.

A truck driver, upon seeing this slogan emblazoned on the chest of Toronto's mayor, burst into hysterical laughter and crashed into Death's van, which had broken down in the center lane.

Death was not amused.

Gilda's T-shirt, by the way, advised everyone to exercise before the world came to an end.

"Isn't this fun," she said.

Vlod made no reply to this; he was trying to cope with the remains of some peach-bottom yogurt slopping around in his stomach.

It wasn't as if he never ate. Most vampires refuse solids on principle, preferring direct hemoglobin transfer, but Vlod would eat from time to time to show he was just one of the guys and had internal organs like everyone else.

But yogurt early in the morning, after a cold shower, is a different matter.

The yogurt had been a problem from the moment he'd spotted it lurking in his Thomas the Tank Engine bowl.

It was the little slice of peach floating on top that had bothered him.

"What is this?" he had demanded. "Was someone ill?"

"I made it myself sweetheart," said Gilda.

"I see. What does one do with it?"

"People eat it."

"They do? And the little bits of grit? These are dead flies?"

"Fibrous matter, so you won't have any trouble on the potty."

"I haven't used a potty in six hundred years."

"Then it's high time you did. You must be as solid as the Rock of Gibraltar."

"Actually--"

"And I've got some mineral oil, in case the fiber doesn't work. It lubricates the internal organs."

"I see. Was I squeaking?"

Gilda patted him on the beak. "You're so silly, sweetie!"

Then she surveyed his jogging outfit.

Vlod was never at his best early in the morning. It wasn't a question of getting up; he'd been up all night, as was his custom.

But he was tired. The previous evening, Gilda had tested him on every fitness machine in the City Hall gym and dungeon.

The clerks who had ordered the equipment were going to be in for a nasty surprise later that day.

Gilda had even forced Bagman Gladhand to take part in the torture.

"I'm an acolyte," Bagman had protested. "I don't need to exercise; I have a hump."

"That's no excuse."

"It's not an excuse; it's a job requirement."

Vlod was secretly pleased. He found Bagman officious and bureaucratic; not at all like Polydoor.

Oh how he missed Polydoor! His rotten old friend would know exactly what to do with this absurd love sickness.

Bagman, meanwhile, was growing worried as he puffed along beside Vlod on the wretched jogging track.

"Boss, puff, puff, what about the model railroad? What about Lenore McBeauty?"

"I loved Lenore for six hundred years," said Vlod. "I never even got a Mister Tasty Chocolate Day card from her. She doesn't care about me."

"When did that ever matter to a vampire? It's the obsession that counts."

"I'm not like other vampires, Bagman. If she doesn't want me, I won't force myself on her."

"But what about the Power of Durable Evil? Even if Polydoor finds it, it will take a strong, brilliant vampire to release it from the matrix in which it resides. All of Tockworld depends upon you."

At these words, Gilda stopped, put an arm on Vlod's and gazed deeply into his eyes.

"Sweetheart! You never told me. Tockworld is in danger and you're going to save it?"

"Of course he is, you silly fitness monster!" Bagman snapped.

A sharp blast on Gilda's whistle pierced his eardrums.

"There'll be none of that nastiness around me, Mister Gladhand," said Gilda. "It's time you went out for sensitivity training."

"What?" screeched Bagman. "MOI?"

He looked imploringly at Vlod, who was smirking into his sleeve.

"Tell her she's nuts, boss," he said. "I'm an acolyte! Sensitivity would ruin me."

"Gilda may have a point," said Vlod. "It would confuse our enemies."

"Bite her, boss. Make her fill out forms in triplicate and stand in long lines at counters. Does she even have a permit to live here? This isn't some little village like New York; it's Toronto, the center of the Universe."

Gilda whistled again, and a very large duck with a net leaped out of a passing van.

Red letters on the side of the van spelled out the words:

Donna Darling's Sensitivity Training. No villain too irredeemable.

Donna netted the protesting Bagman and hauled him away.

"You can't do this!" screamed Bagman. "I'm an acolyte! Who will stand around and drool when I'm gone? Who will audit the tax payers?"

Vlod felt a little better now, watching Donna haul the kicking and screaming Bagman into her van. Now that the jogging was over, he could relax.

And yet, there was unaccustomed heat in his veins.

"I think I'm on fire," he said.

Gilda touched his arm and the heat increased.

"No you aren't," she said. "That's the glow of health and...umm....oh my!"

Then she grabbed him and hauled him off to a bedroom.

An hour later she carried him back downstairs and placed a salad in front of him.

It was organic.

Vlod gazed blearily into its mysterious depths.

This had to stop! He couldn't imagine why he was attracted to Gilda. He wanted his freedom back, and yet he seemed unable to stop loving her. She was ruining his life! She'd already replaced his Salvador Dali paintings with a picture of Heidi.

What would she think of next?

He gazed in disgust at the salad. It looked a bowl of lawn trimmings mixed with autumn leaves and unspeakable things scraped from dry reeds.

"I think the gardener left his droppings in here," he said. "I'll have him disemboweled, shall I?"

"Where are you going, silly? That's your strengthening medicine. Green grass, chopped spinach, willow bark, juniper, pine nuts and granola."

Vlod stared in horror at his pottage.

"I'm not a cow, you know, my dear. I don't have four stomachs."

"Silly! Just eat it! You can wash it down with a juice cocktail; I whipped it up myself in the blender."

She presented him with a glass of juice.

It was the color of water that had dripped slowly down through a lot of rusty machinery. He watched with fascinated attention as various little particles rose and fell within.

Then, because she was watching him expectantly, he took a sip.

It tasted like battery acid. It smoked its way down his gullet and thumped into the stubborn blob of yogurt left over from breakfast.

"Did you like it?" Gilda asked.

"I think I'm a bit queasy. A stiff scotch would help."

This relief was denied him, of course, and he resigned himself to a meal of lawn trimmings.

The yogurt seemed to resent this new addition to the mix and put up a vigorous fight, but at length, Vlod got everything down.

Gilda kissed him on the cheek.

"Now tell me all about the Power of Durable Evil," she said. "This is going to be such fun. I do think one should always look on a problem as a solution waiting to happen. Are there any other threats to world peace and the environment on the agenda?"

"Well there's always the matter of the invasion."

"Who's coming?"

"The Franks and the Visigoths."

"That's easily solved," said Gilda. "We can invite the invaders to a series of games and feats of strength and endurance. Winners take all."

Vlod turned to stare at her, wondering who she worked for really.

Babette had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 100:REALITY TV

Meanwhile, in another part of the theme park, Neville the famous academic, Sweet Gas, Chester and the others were enjoying a terrifying ride on Merlin's game show.

They were strapped into mobile devices that had begun moving quite rapidly along a set of tracks.

The tracks dipped and curved playfully for awhile, then plunged in earnest.

Neville, who was seated in front as befitting an academic with a curious and wide-ranging intellect, screamed.

Then he clutched the little bobo bunny key chain in his pocket and got control of himself.

"We seem to be on a roller coaster," he said. "I don't see what roller coasters have to do with game shows."

It was hard to hear him, because an invisible audience had begun clapping, cheering, and yelling for more.

"Faster, faster!" yelled the audience. "More pain, more blood!"

"Kill that one!"

"Are we there yet, mommy?"

"Look at the miner standing up in his seat and shaking his fist! Is he going to fall out and plunge hundreds of feet to his death?"

"It says here in the program his name is Jones. They call him Digger Jones because there are too many Joneses in the world. He's a union organizer and campaigner for social justice."

"Kill all commies!"

"And the one who's turning green is Jones to the Tenth. They call him Edwardian Jones in the program because they don't allow anyone to have ridiculous names. He's an Edwardian poet who writes poems about Tewksbury in the rain."

"Kill all poets, unless there's smooching and soccer in their poetry. And where is Tewksbury? Is it in Brooklyn?"

The voices began to fade. The roller coaster shot through a patch of mist, jerked and twisted its way down a lightless shaft, and popped into an eerily glowing immensity.

Neville gazed in horror upon a vast carnival spread out below them. Neon lights spelled out the words, 'Welcome to the Underworld', and, in smaller letters beneath this, 'Under new

Management.'

The roller coaster zoomed past the lights, twisted around once more, and focused on a volcano.

"Is that a volcano I see before me?" said Edwardian.

"Aye lad," said Digger. "And it's not just any volcano, mind you; it's a bubbling, steaming, capitalist volcano spewing toxic gases and nasty lava over all and sundry."

"Hmmm....," said Neville. "I don't think we're in Tockworld anymore, Dorothy."

"I'm not Dorothy," said Edwardian.

"Merlin tricked us," said Digger. "That bourgeois capitalist exploiting wizard!"

"I wonder why he sent us here," said Sweet Gas. "Are there any bowels in the Underworld?"

"We Welsh miners know all about this sort of thing," said Digger. "It's a reality game. Only one of us will survive. The rest will be eaten by alligators. It's called competition."

"Crocodiles," said Chester. "The alligators live in Florida, with the mouse."

"I thought the mouse lived in California," said Digger.

"Some people can live in two places at the same time," said Chester. "They do it with remotes."

"That volcano is getting closer," said Neville. "Our rate of descent seems to be a function of emotional intensity. The more terrified you are, the faster you go."

"Everyone think clean, wholesome thoughts about Bavarian gentians," said Edwardian. "Try not to think about dying horribly, burned up in a nasty volcano full of lava and toxic sulfur."

"At least we know the enemy," said Digger grimly. "That's ninety percent of the battle."

"What about the other ten percent of the battle?" said Edwardian. "What's included in that?"

"Nothing much," said Neville airily. "We cut through these straps and belts, leap out of the roller coaster car and land safely on the ground, about five hundred feet down."

"Yes!" shouted Sweet Gas.

Then they all looked down.

"This car seems to in a bit of a rush," said Edwardian nervously.

"It's doing fifty kilometers an hour," said Digger, outraged. "That's against the Geneva Convention. I'll file a grievance."

"With Merlin?" said Chester.

"He's bound by the rules; all mine cars are to be equipped with brakes and operated at safe speeds."

"Anyway," said Neville, pushing an imaginary brake pedal with his foot. "We get to choose now. We can be flash-broiled in a volcano, or we can leap out of this car and be dashed to pieces on the rocks below."

"Chester can fly us down," said Edwardian. "He's a dragon, after all. Flying is what dragons do best."

"Flash-roasting virgin princesses is what dragons do best," muttered Digger. "The rotters!"

"Hmmm," said Neville.

"I'm not a dragon; I'm a parrot!" said Chester. "I'm not big enough to carry all of you. Besides, who could carry Sweet Gas? I don't do mountains!"

"I can look after myself," said Sweet Gas. "I'll just fall down on top of you and crush you into infamous marmalade."

Everyone was silent for a time, thinking about infamous marmalade. Jean-Paul Sartre was pleased.

"I don't like marmalade," said Chester.

"Enough small talk," said Digger. "We have to get out of these restraints."

"Any ideas anyone?" said Edwardian.

"Haven't you people seen any action movies?" said Neville. "You just struggle and

squirm."

"Academics watch action movies?" said Edwardian. "What about art? What about spiritual things?"

"You mean poems about trams in the rain?" said Neville.

"My poems are not about trams as such," sniffed Edwardian. "They're about the BEAUTY of trams. A poet can distill beauty from the most banal of things."

"Someone always has a cigarette lighter in action movies," said Neville. "You can't burn through ropes with Edwardian poems; you need practical things."

"That's not the point!" said Edwardian. "Poetry takes you beyond the mundane to higher realms."

"Aye, and while you poets are prancing around in the higher realms, the capitalists eat your haggis," muttered Digger.

"Any smokers here?" said Neville.

"Not me!" said Chester. "Haven't you read Smoky the Bear? Light up a cigarette and you could burn down a whole forest!"

"I only smoke when I'm going to erupt," said Sweet Gas.

"Well that's it then," said Neville. "We stick with option one--the volcano."

"Isn't there something about dragons and burning villages in your HANDBOOK OF BORING LECTURES?" said Digger.

"Hmmm," said Neville.

Everyone looked at Chester.

"What are you staring at me for?" he demanded.

"You're a dragon," said Digger. "Dragons breathe fire."

"No I'm not! I'm a parrot!"

"You don't look like a parrot."

"Appearances are superficial. I'm a parrot inside, where it counts. Besides, Merlin said he'd do the operation himself, as soon as we help him get higher ratings for his game show."

"You have certain dragon-like features," said Neville, consulting his copy of the Handbook.

"Such as?"

"A pilot light in the back of your throat, and sublimated elements of a volatile nature."

"So what!" sniffed Chester. "I'm still a parrot."

"You could pretend to be a dragon," said Neville.

"Possibly."

"Just for a minute or two, until you burn through these restraints."

"What's in it for me?"

"I'll write a nice poem about you," said Edwardian. "Dragons on the trams in Tewksbury, in the rain."

"Are you sure Tewksbury even HAS trams?" said Neville.

"It depends on what you mean by Tewksbury," said Edwardian.

"The one that has people in it."

"Why don't you arty intellectuals get practical?" said Digger. "Why don't we ask Sweet Gas to break these restraints? He's very strong. Why can't he just break the straps?"

Everyone looked at Sweet Gas.

"These are magic restraints," he said.

"Oh that explains everything," said Neville.

"Well couldn't you just sort of have an earthquake?" said Digger. "Or a rockslide?"

"I'm not a troll anymore; I'm an Edwardian poet," said Sweet Gas. "Besides, I'm being extra careful so Merlin will give me a bowel."

"But Merlin wants us all to fulfill ourselves and be the best we can be," said Edwardian.

"I think he wants us to drop into that volcano," said Digger. "Can't you hear the cheering and yelling?"

"Those are humans in his audience," said Neville. "They love it when people get hurt. Merlin wants higher ratings."

"If he wanted higher ratings, he'd start a porn channel," said Edwardian.

"I'm not hearing this!" yelled Chester.

"Naked ducks doing things to each other with feathers," said Neville. "Sounds interesting, in an intellectual way, of course."

"You'll go to the Underworld for this!" shouted Chester.

"In for a penny, in for a pound!" said Edwardian.

"That settles it," said Neville. "Option one it is! Sweet Gas will melt, Chester will dissolve. The rest of us will wind up floating on the lava--a bit of discoloration in life's stomach acid."

"I'll tell you what I'm going to do for you," said Sweet Gas. "I'm going to let out a bit of methane."

"Fart, you mean," said Neville.

"Well, if you want to be like that...."

"I can't help it; I'm a modernist duck; I don't use Victorian circumlocutions."

"What will farting accomplish, aside from making us faint so we don't feel a thing when we die horribly in pools of lava?" said Edwardian.

"It will make me swell up."

"No, wait!"

It was too late. The process had already started. Everyone tried to lean away from Sweet Gas.

"Look, his face is turning red!" said Digger.

"That's red algae," said Neville.

"No it isn't; it's iron," said Digger. "He's rusting."

A vast, eldritch smell arose.

"That's not pure methane; it's mixed with sulfur," said Digger nervously.

"Great Scot!" said Chester. "I'm allergic to horrible stinks. I'm going to sneeze."

His jaw gaped open and Neville turned pale.

"Hey; look, his pilot light is changing color. It's flickering; it's going to--"

It was quite a good explosion. Everyone had an excellent near-death Experience. Sweet Gas rolled through a tunnel of darkness into a fleecy cloud of stones high up in the Alps where lots of dead trolls were singing the Edelweiss song and playing the bagpipes.

Chester zoomed into a fleecy jungle and landed on Long John Silver's shoulder.

You might think paradise was no place for a chap like Long John Silver, but that's the thing about the afterlife; you just never know.

Some famous shrinks and priests have found themselves, following their dates of expiry, trapped in the Underworld, strapped to couches or pews where they enjoy in perpetuity the airy demons they summoned into existence while alive.

Anyway, everyone in Neville's little group explored some fact of the Near-Death experience. Neville, for instance, found himself in a fleecy faculty lounge, cavorting with a flock of naked editors who all wanted more.

Books, that is.

Edwardian found himself riding around in a fleecy tram, declaiming rhymes to adoring poetasters, each of whom wished to commit osculation with him, in a tasteful manner, of course.

And Digger entered a fleecy union hall where thousands cheered as a chastened mine owner signed a generous contract and everyone was saved from exploitation and hunger.

No one really wanted to return to their bodies, but people usually have little choice in these matters.

One of the features of a Near-Death Experience is that it is not in fact a DEATH Experience. You can usually tell because Grimsy doesn't show up in his ice-cream van and ask you what flavor you'd like before you start your final journey in Charming's ferry.

Some people, of course get to go straight into the celestial elevator, which offers glass walls so you can observe the miserable left-behinds.

There's a trick to this. If you gloat, or feel relieved, or even mouth the words--'I told you so; I warned you'--you fall out.

If you feel even a twinge of sadness, however, at this wrenching sight, you are allowed to continue.

Few people know about this trick question because no one comes back to advise other test-takers about the difficulties of the immortal SAT exam.

And there aren't any cheat sheets available. No matter how much time you spend searching the net, you won't find any help.

Thus it was, everyone returned to find the roller-coaster car resting on its side on a spongy patch of ground, near a turbid stream in the Underworld.

"Well that was interesting!" said Neville as they got to their feet. "I wonder what's next."

"So this is the Underworld!"

"The rides in this place are terrifying," said Edwardian. "Look; isn't that Malicious, the nasty rebel priest from the Camels of the Negev?"

"I've seen him before on an ancient cuneiform Wanted poster in the Royal Ontario Museum," said Neville. "He was very naughty; he tried to assassinate Hank of Ur."

"I'm much nicer now," yelled Malicious. "I've had lots of negative reinforcement on these rides and I've seen the error of my ways."

"Well I'm glad of that," said Edwardian. "We Edwardian poets don't approve of assassination."

"I'd like some positive reinforcement now if you don't mind. The latest theories show that all punishment and no fun makes Jack a psychopath."

"But you already are a psychopath," said Neville.

"Shh, hsst!" said Edwardian. "We don't call them psychopaths any more; we call them victims."

"Victims?"

"Society made them do it."

Malicious' ride started up and he rode off into the sunset, screaming like a soccer dad with road rage.

It was the Crocodile Dunk ride, by the way. There was only enough room for one person in the car, so you had to push the other guys out. Whoever fell out was eaten by crocodiles.

"What are we supposed to do now?" said Edwardian.

Neville motioned to a map with a 'You Are Here' arrow.

Next to the map was a sign that said:

Under New Management.

Notice: Due to rising costs, all services that were formerly offered without charge are now available for a monthly fee. Please register online or your account will be cancelled and you will be deleted. Visa, MasterCard, or loonies accepted. We will no longer accept souls in payment.

"Hmmm," said Neville. "It appears there's a glut on the soul market."

"Too many executives and accountants," said Digger. "I knew this would happen."

Just then, a grin appeared in the air a little distance away. Then a beard. This was followed by a wizard's cap, a robe decorated with little quarter moons, like an outhouse, then a voluminous wizard.

It was Merlin.

"There's been a change of plans," he said. "We have been attacked by Doctor Amadeus Wacker. He's the one who switched you onto the Underworld track."

"Doctor Amadeus Wacker, the mad advertising executive?" said Neville. "I've heard of him. Isn't he the one who started the clinics to cure incorrect thinking?"

"Indeed," said Merlin. "The very man."

"A human?"

"What else!"

"But what's he doing this for?"

"My friends," said Merlin, "All of Tockworld faces a new and growing threat...."

Meanwhile, in Toronto, Vlod was growing desperate.

Exhausted from workouts and other activities, he crawled into his study.

Things were getting out of hand. Two armies were about to attack, and Gilda wanted to risk everything on some sort of game?

He had to snap out of this mysterious enchantment! He had to make himself stop loving Gilda before he wasted away.

But how?

Imagine her wrinkled and old, fumbling for her detachable teeth in the middle of the night?

He loved her even more.

Imagine her complaining because he forgot to put the toilet seat down again, or he'd squeezed the toothpaste tube from the wrong end?

He loved her still.

Surely there must be something he could do to kill this despicable love bug eating up his innards!

Absently he reached for a big, heart-shaped box of Mister Tasty Chocolate's chocolates. He had bought it on impulse, intending to give it to her on Mister Tasty Chocolate Day, even though he knew she'd take it right back to the store because chocolate was bad for you.

Then he picked up a stake--a good one, made out of granola particle board.

You might be wondering what a stake was doing in a vampire's study.

A stake to a vampire is little like a skull to a monk in his cloister; it's a means of contemplating your own extinction. An aid to reflection.

Anyway, Vlod picked up a hammer.

The hippopotamus of Fate had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 101:WHITE KNIGHT

Neville and his friends looked around nervously.

Mention of the dreaded name 'Doctor Wacker' was like an invocation of evil. It was even worse than summoning Nurse Jane.

"Is he here in the Underworld?" said Edwardian Jones.

"He'll be here soon," said Merlin. "In the meantime, be very careful about where you put your feet."

Everyone looked down quickly, ready to leap away from dangerous spiders or ants, but the ground was pest-free, featuring little more than discarded pizza boxes, hamburger boxes, air-sickness bags, chewing gum wrappers, souvenir brochures, dead lottery tickets, racing cards, coupons for useless products, and boring novels.

Neville leaned casually against a hitching post.

"And don't lean against walls or hitching posts!" shouted Merlin. "You never know where you'll find one of Wacker's tiny advertising parasites. They wait like ticks on branches to leap onto your scalp. They float in water like pond scum, waiting to leap onto your ankles."

"Ha, ha!" said Neville, leaping away from the hitching post. "That's a very clever way of saying advertising is like germ warfare, but we all know--"

"You know nothing," snapped Merlin. "Wacker has been working patiently for generations in his secret lab, breeding advertising parasites with artificial intelligence. They burrow through your nostrils into your brain, take over your mental faculties, such as they are, and fill up your waking mind with advertising jingles."

"The horror!" said Edwardian Jones, clutching his scalp in case any evil advertising

germs tried to burrow inside and replace his nascent rhymes with advertisements for Packard Trilobites.

"I wouldn't worry if I were you," said Neville. "Edwardian poets are immune to advertising; they notice nothing."

"No one is immune," said Merlin. "Not even poets who never look at the world around them."

"What are the symptoms?" said Sweet Gas. "I've been feeling rather strange lately."

"The main symptom is a devilish jingle that invades your mind and repeats itself endlessly," said Merlin. "It cannot be deleted."

Neville was silent for a moment, examining his mind for suspect jingles.

"I have lots of campfire jingles in my head," said Digger. "They're clean and wholesome union songs about trapping capitalists, smashing their monocles, and rubbing mine tailings into their striped trousers."

"Those don't count," said Merlin. "Anyway, Doctor Wacker isn't satisfied with mere advertising jingles. He wants the Power of Durable Evil."

"The cad!" said Neville. "What's his business plan?"

"His plan is to make everyone consume only the products he advertises," said Merlin. "This, as you know is the ultimate power. We are what we shop for."

"The fiend!" gasped Edwardian.

"This is what comes of unbridled shopping," said Digger.

"He'll begin by doing a hostile takeover of the Underworld," said Merlin. "This will give him a power base. The Underworld is especially vulnerable now because Van Von's depredations have left it heavily indebted. The shareholders are angry. Doctor Wacker could buy up a controlling interest for a pittance and oust Van Von."

"I'll do my bit," said Edwardian. "I can afford to buy three shares, I think. My old auntie Crabgrass gave me some guineas for my birthday."

"Inherited wealth," muttered Digger. "That's what keeps parasitical aristocrats in power."

"We have to counter Doctor Wacker's offer," said Merlin. "We need a white knight to take over the Underworld and defend it until Disser comes back."

"Where do we get a white knight?" said Neville. "I haven't seen any larking about in the parks lately."

"I'll have to put in a special order," said Merlin. "This is a bit complicated; it involves fiddling with the geography of time. Close your eyes for a moment, please, gentlemen, and think very intensely about fertility rites."

"I'll do no such thing!" said Chester. "I'm pure--"

"Fine!" said Merlin. "Think about lady parrots in bloomers."

"I will not," sputtered Chester. "I'm...hmmmm...parrots in bloomers? How very odd!"

There was a shocked silence.

Doctor Wacker, meanwhile, was spying on the little band of heroes from his lab in the frozen wastes of North to Alaska.

His monitor was a bit streaky, but what can you expect when you eviscerate a patient on top of it.

That's the thing about mad werewolf scientists; they haven't learned how to postpone gratification.

He held out the remote, focusing on an image of Neville closing his eyes.

"Who is that?" he demanded.

Carrion Snipe, his acolyte, put on his spectacles and peered at the image.

"Neville the Academic," he said.

"He irritates me. Have him destroyed."

"Yes sir."

"And his friends."

"Yes sir. One of his friends is Merlin, sir."

"Merlin? Hmmm. Summon Nurse Jane. It's time that old fool fell in love. What's Morgana up to these days?"

Just then there was a hammering at the door.

Carrion Snipe checked the security camera.

"It's your broker," sir."

Doctor Wacker grinned. He'd lost quite a lot of money in the recent stock market wars and he wanted a word with him.

"Show him in," he said. "And call up my banker too; we have much to discuss."

The door creaked open, and a nervous figure crept into the hall.

Afterwards, Doctor Wacker felt only mildly buoyant. Revenge is sweet, but control of the world is sweeter still.

Five minutes later, Mary Jane Columns, his banker, hammered at the door.

Carrion Snipe put down his mop and bucket and let her in while Doctor Wacker struggled into a suit.

It was a good Scottish suit made of cast-iron wool, but even so, it bulged at the shoulders and bits of fur stuck out at the cuffs and the collar.

Fortunately, Mary Jane had the same problem. Her sober business suit bulged here and there, and bits of fur showed at her ankles and on the backs of her hands.

Technically it wasn't time for a full moon--it wasn't even dark outside--but there was always a full moon in Wacker's lab.

"Enough small talk," snapped Mary Jane, before anyone had spoken. "Why did you call this meeting?"

Wacker liked her immediately.

"I'm planning a hostile takeover of the Underworld, using advertising parasites," he said. "Van Von will put up a fight. I need a lot of money."

They circled each other around the Bunsen burner on the coffee table, growling like rutabagas.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" said Mary Jane. "I looked at the figures. The long term potential is limited. Too many people leave their assets behind when they die."

"We can change that," said Doctor Wacker. "We can set up a bank for the life-challenged. We can employ psychics to determine when our clients want to make withdrawals."

"But they have no earning power. There's mandatory retirement for the deceased."

"Nobody pays any attention to that silly rule. The dead are employed in every Fortune Five Hundred company, in the civil service, and, of course, in the House of Commons. Many rise to high office."

They were still circling each other, and the growling had risen to quite a pitch when Carrion Snipe showed up with a tray of iced tea and little sandwiches cut into fancy geometric shapes.

The two fiends devoured the sandwiches as if they were fresh road kill.

When they had eaten everything, even the plate, Mary Jane snapped playfully at Wacker's neck.

"I find you strangely attractive," she said.

"I find you irresistible," said Doctor Wacker.

"Love's a thing that can't be denied."

"Oh sweetums; I could rip out your throat."

"And I could tear you to pieces and scatter your entrails to the four winds."

"Oh I love it when you talk dirty."

"Shall we?"

They leaped on each other and smooched for a long time on the couch. It was a horrible scene.

When it was over, they lay quietly purring together.

Carrion Snipe brought in a tray of petite fours and two cappuccinos.

"Was it good for you, too?" said Doctor Wacker.

"I needed that," said Mary Jane. "My husbands don't understand me."

"It's nice in the afternoon. Business and pleasure go together."

"I still think you should forget about the Underworld," said Mary Jane. "Buy something useful, like parliament."

"I've made up my mind."

Van Von, meanwhile, was getting a headache.

"I should never have bought the Underworld," he said. "It doesn't work like a normal business. When people start talking about good and evil you know the profit potential has been blown out the window. Who's responsible for this high-flown talk?"

"Um...Neville the Academic, I think," said his son and heir apparent, Futures Index.

"Have him killed."

"Merlin is on his side."

"Merlin? Kill him too. And kill his friend Digger Jones. He's trying to organize a strike vote among the demons. If they walk, I'll have to find scabs."

"You could staff it with humans, dad."

"Humans are ruthless and unpredictable. Give them a button to push, tell them it hurts someone, and they'll jab it so hard it snaps off the wall."

"You could offer it as an attraction and make them pay."

"I'm saving that one for my game show. I don't want to drain audience share away from a profitable unit."

"Then I advise you to sell the Underworld right away," said Money Transfer.

"And let Doctor Wacker take over? I think not!"

Meanwhile, in another part of the shopping mall, Merlin led his chums through a patch of mist to the site of a medieval battle.

It was actually a soccer riot, but it was in olden tymes, so it was called a battle.

Several knights were trying to get at each other with can openers, but so far, no one was having much success.

"More fighting," said Edwardian Jones. "This is what we get for having an enlightenment."

"Huh?" said Merlin.

"It made people stop being religious. As soon as they found out Newton made everything with clockworks, they stopped being charitable and devout and took up war and lasciviousness."

"This is new?" said Neville.

"Before the enlightenment it was limited to the depraved," said Edwardian piously. "Now everyone does it."

"What's in that water you're drinking," said Neville. "Have you been into the scotch?"

Just then, a knight in black armor with an armadillo rampant on his shield approached Merlin.

"Hey, it's Uther Pendragon!" said Edwardian Jones. "Isn't he the one who ---"

"Shhh, shhh!" said Neville. "Merlin's up to something. Don't spoil it!"

Neville watched nervously. This was interfering with the past. There had been quite enough interfering with the past already. People were getting confused.

Gorlois had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 102:A QUEEN FOR ALL SEASONS

Uther Pendragon raised his helm and examined Merlin closely.

"Is it really you, Merlin?" he said.

"Who did you think it was? Your dentist?"

You look different, somehow."

Merlin ignored this. "We have much to discuss," he said.

"You did something to yourself, Merlin. I can't put my finger on it, but you've changed."

"It matters little," said Merlin irritably. "We have a myth to invent--"

Uther clapped a gauntleted hand to his forehead, nearly killing himself. "Your hair!" he exclaimed. "You dyed your hair! It's black! It used to be as gray as my nanny's wig."

"I did no such thing," said Merlin, pulling the brim of his pointy hat tightly down over his thatched pate.

"Yes you did."

"It was an accident. I fell into a vat of shoe polish."

"How come you aren't all black, then?"

"About the myth! Your destiny awaits you. I've come to grant you that which you most desire."

"Really? I was hoping you would. I've made a list of things."

Uther rummaged in a pocket of his suit of armor until he found a rolled-up length of parchment.

"I didn't know you could write," said Merlin.

"Those who can, do; those who can't, write. I dictated this to my secretary."

Merlin read the list, shaking his head as he worked through it.

"What is this--you want me to send your cook to Gaul to learn something about food? You want a hot tub, five new siege engines, an architect who can do elementary arithmetic, a self-cleaning privy...."

"The privy master keeps fainting."

"And you want me to change your outward appearance to that of the Duke Gorlois so you can fool his wife into smooching with you."

"Yes...well I know that last one is a biggie, but I thought you might give it to me as a sort of birthday present."

"Your birthday isn't for another six months."

"An advance present. I wouldn't ask for anything else. Besides," he said, "I am seke for anger and for love of fayre Igrayne, that I many not be hool."

"Yes, Uther; we've all heard Uther's lament to Ulfius in Malory's version of the Arthurian tales. Some of us have even read it. Supposing I grant you your wish; what's in it for me?"

"Umm, I'll invade Constantinople, pack up all of the books in the library there and send them to a destination of your choice."

"Hmmm," said Merlin. "I can see you've been giving this some thought."

"And that's not all. I'll round up all the virgins in the kingdom, and you can have as many as you like."

"There aren't any virgins in your kingdom. You took care of that."

"Technically there are; they didn't inhale."

"What I want," said Merlin, "is a baby."

"Really?" said Uther, taking a quick step away from Merlin. "You can manage that sort of thing, can you? I never knew. I thought you needed special equipment."

Merlin became incandescent with rage.

"That is not what I meant!"

"Oh, good! I hate surprises--"

"I want YOUR baby."

Uther took another step backwards.

"That's going a bit too far, I think," he said. "I like you, Merlin, but there are limits--"

"Fool!" said Merlin through gritted teeth. "I want you to give me the baby that you will have with Igrayne, after you smooch with her under false pretences."

"Oh, THAT baby!" said Uther.

Then his face fell. "You mean I'm going to have one? Don't I take precautions?"

Merlin was silent for a moment, frowning at him.

"The first nyght that ye shal lye by Igrayne ye shal gete a child on her!" he boomed.

"Malory again," said Uther. "No, I suppose I don't take precautions. This could reflect badly on my image, you know. It would make me seem callous. I should at least ask you a few questions before I hand over the little tyke, just to make sure everything's on the up and up."

"You didn't ask in Malory!"

"No? Didn't I even hint at a possible concern on my part for the well-being of the child?"

"Not a whit. You said, 'I wylle wel as thow wilt have it.'"

"Good grief! I'm sure Malory got it wrong."

"Well it IS taken from the Oxford English Texts edition, which is a revision of Caxton's LE MORTE D'ARTHUR, as you know; so there may very well be some variations. However, you did not, on the whole, express much of an interest in the young fellow."

"I shall do so now; I shall ask, look you, many important questions."

"Ask away," said Merlin.

"Umm...hang on a moment. I can't think while you're watching me. Let me see; what should I ask? Hmmm.... I've got it! Ahem! You WILL look after the little urchin, will you?"

"Certainly."

"You won't turn it into a newt?"

"Do you have any idea what a newt is?"

"Of course I do. Small creature, heavily armored, lives in dry, sandy climates, eats ants...."

"Enough small talk. I hate armadillos! Are you in or out?"

Uther bethought himself of the lovely Igrayne.

"In," he said promptly.

"What a surprise!" said Merlin.

"Well that's settled then," said Uther, relieved. "You get the first-born. I wonder why you want it? Is it to be a sort of keepsake? A souvenir?"

"I have my reasons."

"You aren't planning on experimenting on the little chap, are you?"

"You will have what you want; I in turn will have what is needed for the myth."

"Hmmm."

"Having doubts are we?" said Merlin.

"I do have my image to think of. I'm not a villain, you know. I never hurt people unless they irritate me."

Merlin, sensing Uther's flagging libido, showed him a copy of the January PLAYKNIGHT, the one with Igrayne as centerfold.

"My word; what amazing fashion accessories she has!" said Uther.

Merlin shook his head. "Millions of years of evolution, and all they can think about is THAT!"

"Okay," said Uther hurriedly. "Done! It's a deal. What do we do now?"

"I should think that was obvious," said Merlin. "Get on your horse and ride into Gorlois's castle. Or do you want me to send away for an instructional book on females and their--"

"Enough small talk," said Uther, Then he summoned a crane and had himself hoisted onto his warhorse.

"Always the showoff," muttered Merlin. "We all know the armor is heavy, Uther. You don't have to pretend."

"We kings have to put on a display," said Uther, examining the castle.

"That's Castle Terrabyl," said Merlin. "You want Tyntagil; the one featuring Igrayne."

Uther looked in the other direction.

"Umm, Gorlois is at home, fighting off my army," he said. "It might be a little confusing if the two of us show up in Igrayne's bed at the same time."

Merlin was stumped for a moment. Then he consulted his copy of Malory.

"Drat!" he said. "There aren't any stage directions in this version. Nothing about how you got to the castle--just: 'So after the deth of the duke, kyng Uther lay with Igrayne....' I ask

you! What am I supposed to do with that? I'll have to invent some special effects."

"No flying on broomsticks!" said Uther. "I hate flying."

Merlin ignored this and began to chant:

Higgelty piggelty within the house,

Higgelty piggelty without the house....

"I don't think...." Uther started to say, but Merlin motioned him to silence.

A dragon stirred fretfully, deep down in the bowels of the earth, and blew a great quantity of fog into the air.

Presently, no one could see a thing.

"Merlin!" yelled Uther. "I don't want the House of Commons! I want Igrayne."

"And you shall have her," said Merlin. "Ride straight ahead through the fog until you come to the Castle Tyntagil."

There was a clatter of horse's hooves.

"I can't see a thing!" yelled Uther.

Then there was a crash and a scream.

"Watch where you're going, my good man! This is a Royal Ontario Museum dig. And not, I might add, the Royal Ontario Museum from the planet Earth, which was destroyed eons ago, yesterday, by humans."

"Sorry," came Uther's voice, so far away now it was barely audible.

"Magic fogs are dangerous things," said Merlin. "You never know what's going to show up in them. Time stalls and twists about itself, and all sorts of anachronisms get caught in the net."

"This is new?" said Neville. "How long have you been living in Tockworld?"

"I live in lots of different places," Merlin said petulantly. "I can't keep track of all the rules and customs."

"Shhh," said Digger Jones. "The real Gorlois is leaving the castle."

Merlin drew a magic porthole through which everyone could observe the ceremonies.

There was a great clattering of hooves as Gorlois rode out with his army.

"Where's he off to, then?" said Digger Jones.

"He thinks Uther is riding off to sleep with his mistress, the Hound of the Bosky Villas," said Merlin. "He's getting ready to dismember Uther and scatter his entrails to the four winds."

"The Hound of the Bosky Villas?" said Neville, mystified.

"She's a brachet, actually. Gorlois is very keen on hounds. He finds humans unnecessarily complicated and whiny."

"This gives new meaning to the term 'running with the hounds'," said Neville.

Merlin shifted the porthole and now they could see Uther waiting behind a picturesque ruin.

"Can he see anything?"

"Not much. But he'll know it's safe when he hears the bung popping out of a beer keg. The guards keep a keg in the gatehouse to while away the time while their boss is out with the hounds."

They all heard the pop of the bung, a chorus of cheers, and a rattling of tin cups as the guards huddled around their keg.

Uther waited a little longer; then he rode up to the drawbridge and blew a cracked note on his pocket trumpet. A drunken guard came out and peered into the fog.

"Whassup? No peddlers or religions here; we gave at the office."

"Lower the drawbridge; it is I, Gorlois, your master."

The drawbridge fell with a bang and Uther trotted across, into the courtyard, up the front porch of the keep, and into the main entrance.

"I'm home dear!" he yelled. "It is I, Gorlois!"

This was met by utter silence.

Merlin shifted the porthole so everyone could see Igrayne's boudoir.

There was much jostling for position.

"This is wrong," said Edwardian Jones. "How would you like it if a lot of foreigners trooped in from the distant future and ogled you during an intimate moment?"

"I notice you angled for the best spot," said Digger. "Just like a capitalist! Always an eye for the main chance; never thinking of your brothers."

"I'm not looking at the pictures; I'm reading the myth," said Edwardian indignantly. "We Edwardian poets are very interested in myth."

"Stop squabbling," said Neville. "It's not every day you get a chance to see history in the making."

Mist formed over the porthole. Merlin rubbed impatiently at it with his elbow until they could see Igrayne shooing a large, muscular chap out of her bed.

"Down the back stairs, Brucie!" she said. "Go as quickly as you can! And don't bother calling me; I'll call you. Intimate moments aren't speedways, you know!"

Uther, meanwhile, was growing impatient.

"I'm home, dear!" he yelled in a much louder voice. "I'm coming to bed now."

Moments later, he showed up in Merlin's magic porthole as he entered Igrayne's boudoir.

"Here I am, dear!" he bellowed. "It is I, Gorlois, your husband."

"That's fine, dear. I think you should get off your horse now, unless you want a threesome."

Uther got off his horse, congratulating himself on his disguise.

Igrayne pushed herself up and eyed him speculatively. There was something different about the old fool, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it.

"Hmmm," she said. "What big eyes you have, sweetie!"

"The better to admire you with, my dear."

"And what big feet."

"The better to...um...bear me straight to your side, my dear."

There was a clanking noise, then the sound of something very expensive being ripped to shreds.

"You tore my sheet, you clumsy platypus!" said Igrayne. "Take off your armor!"

"Sorry."

"My, what big hands you have, Gorlois!"

"The better to hold you with my dear. I can't get this stupid armor off. Where's the zipper. Nnnngggh."

"Here, let me help you."

"Thank you, sweetums."

"My, what a wee little--"

"That will do," said Merlin, hastily drawing a magic curtain across the scene.

"Hey; it was just getting mythical!" protested Edwardian.

"I wonder if they have bowels," said Sweet Gas. "Some people have all the luck!"

Just then, a black-shawled figure confronted Merlin.

It was Queen Victoria, the goddess of Spoiling Everyone's Fun.

"You go too far, wizard," she intoned. "We are not amused."

"I can't help it, your majesty," said Merlin. "This is bigger than both of us. It's mythical."

"Only a male could invent myth and legend based on the rape of a queen, the murder of her husband, and the kidnapping of her baby. I suppose you think it has entertainment value."

"It's realism."

"You could at least show her in queenly costume. Do not humiliate her."

Merlin took the stout little goddess aside and drew a special flashback porthole.

"This is Igrayne in her drawing room five days ago," he said. "There's Arthur Symons, George Bernard Shaw, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Mae West."

"I'm fed up," Igrayne was saying. "I spend my days and nights sitting around in a drafty

castle. Gorlois has a headache every time he gets into bed. He knows the name of every dog and falcon in the place, but he can't remember mine. His mommy tells him what clothes to put on in the morning."

"Fear not," said Merlin. "Uther is hot for you."

Igrayne looked up, amused.

"Is that you, Merlin? Peeking again? Would you like to see me in bloomers again?"

"Uther is interested in smooching with you," said Merlin in a louder voice.

"He is? You mean that loud man with a spear AND a sword? Hmmm. He has a certain energy."

"There's a downside though."

"Which is?"

"I'm afraid your child will have to become King of England."

"I can deal with it," said Igrayne. "As long as I get to pick his palace guard."

"This means, of course, that your child will be spirited away moments after he is born. You won't see him again until he's a young man, and when he finally does get around to finding out who you are, you'll be in a nunnery, with Maid Marion."

"History got it wrong!" snorted Igrayne. "Do you think I'd trust a child of mine to an old fart like you? What do old bachelors know about raising children."

"If he stays with you, he'll be assassinated. Gorlois has many enemies, and they're not all cats."

"Hmm..." said Igrayne. "This is true? You're not just teasing me?"

"Of course it's true. I never lie about other people's misfortunes."

"I don't like it; a child of mine living in a cave like a Neanderthal. What's he going to eat? Undercooked giraffe meat? Men are useless when it comes to anything practical."

"Remember the alternative."

"If he goes with you, he becomes King of England?"

"That's a given."

"I guess it's okay. Send in Uther."

Queen Victoria drew a curtain over the porthole.

"Okay," she said. "We shall allow you to intervene, just this once. For the sake of the myth."

"For the sake of the myth."

"But if we catch you enjoying yourself...."

"Never. I never have fun."

Queen Victoria vanished into the Fabulous Mists of Antiquity.

Now that's interesting," said Neville, who'd been watching with the others. "I always thought Igrayne was opposed to the whole thing. In fact, Malory says, 'But she was a passing good woman and would not assent unto the kynge.'"

"Depends which parallel world you're talking about," said Merlin. "In this one, she just wants to find her inner Igrayne. It's the pernicious influence of the future infecting the past. Besides, Gorlois cheats on her with his mistress, the Hound of the Bosky Villas."

"Ah yes; the sporty one."

"That's why he spends so much time on his hands and knees, with an aching back and fur between his teeth."

"Let that be a lesson to all of us!" said Neville.

"Anyway," said Merlin. "People will forgive any sort of evil as long as it's mythical. Look at the way King Arthur and his knights ran around trampling people's barbecues, killing their pet dragons, and fighting with strangers. They were just a motorcycle gang with a round table."

Edwardian Jones was scandalized. "That's blasphemy!" he said. "The real King Arthur was a social democrat with a plan for subsidized housing, benefits for mothers, and peace in our time with the Vikings, Saxons, Goths and telemarketers."

"Shhh," said Neville. "Igrayne found the zipper."

Queen Victoria had a bad feeling about this...

CHAPTER 103:MYSTIC DIAPERS

Morgana, meanwhile, was getting through childhood pretty well in various drafty castles and fogbound schoolrooms.

It wasn't as bad as people made it out to be, actually. She was upset about losing her dad, of course, but it wasn't as if she'd been close to him.

It's hard to get close to a man who mistakes you for a puppy whenever he happens to see you, and tries to give you chewy biscuits or a bowl of scraps.

She didn't mind the rubber bones and the chew toys, but she hated it when he took her out for walks and threw sticks for her to fetch.

You couldn't really blame Morgana for turning him into a church pew, and anyway, it was only a temporary spell. Besides, it was worth every bit of scolding she got--the look on the Duchess of Tewksbury's face when her pew suddenly barked at her and told her to pick up her big bottom and set it down somewhere else was priceless!

At first everyone thought it was the archbishop finally cracking up after twenty years of dull incomprehension emanating from the congregation--then they saw Gorlois squatting on the floor, chewing on a rude mechanic.

The archbishop was furious, but you can't really fulminate against the man who built your cathedral--even if it is a very small cathedral, with a meager stained-glass window depicting St. Magnus Minibus running away from a dragon the size of a poodle.

The dragon's name was Booboo, by the way. He was a disappointment to his dad, who wanted him to learn algebra from the Moors.

Anyway, once Gorlois had been deleted, Uther took over Morgana's upbringing. He hired a governess, a Viking au pair girl by the name of Oona.

Uther never mistook Morgana for a puppy, by the way; he thought she was one of his soldiers.

He designed a special curriculum for her that was heavy on sieges, fortifications, swords, pikes, maces and horses. There were quizzes every week, with exams every term, and a three-hour final.

"You can't go wrong with facts and exams," he used to say. "You know exactly where you stand when you have a mark expressed as a percentage of something. Teach her how to crush enemies, see them driven before her, and hear the lamentation of the women, and she'll never go wrong."

In her spare time, Oona was expected to help out in any wars and skirmishes that might come up.

Even enlightened monarchs like Uther were not above exploiting their household staff.

On the whole, Morgana was pleased with the way things had turned out; she enjoyed studying military campaigns because it gave her a chance to learn about generals and how they could be manipulated.

She soon came to understand the importance of pensions, housing, and the latest high-tech catapults and swords when bargaining, plotting and conspiring with military types.

And her governess didn't present any problems; Oona might inspire fear in the heart of her enemies, but she was goose grease in Morgana's hands. Morgana only had to turn her into a newt once to make her point.

Now she had a cat the size of a jaguar, a complete library of necromancy and forbidden things, and the latest Gilbert alchemical set for her experiments.

She only blew up her room twice.

On the whole, it was an acceptable existence. Igrayne was so busy with a parade of tutors and palace guards, she never bothered Morgana.

And Uther left her alone because he was writing a book about siege warfare, which

involved quite a lot of hands-on research in various parts of the land, so he was away on business a lot.

The Saxons were a dark cloud on the horizon, but Uther kept them in check by slaughtering them.

And when Uther was away on business, Igrayne conducted diplomatic sessions with various chieftains. Relations were cordial.

Igrayne, however, found that she was haunted by memories of another quite different Igrayne who chided her constantly with boring moral outrage: "Is this how you conduct yourself? Think of the myth! Think of our noble character!"

She attributed this to one of her daughter's tricks. It certainly couldn't be a case of conscience! Even Reggie, the archbishop, didn't pester her with conscience, as long as the weekly tithes were in order.

"We all have our peccadilloes," he used to say. "Mine happens to be gourmet cooking, but I'm much better now that I've taken up meditation--I only eat radishes."

And so the castle was well run and Morgana had time to conduct her experiments.

There were suitors, of course.

Normally young women don't object to having a bit of prime beef attending on their every word and gesture, fighting duels on their behalf, jousting, carousing, and showing what merry gentlemen they are.

Morgana cared little for such as these. She was more interested in working out the kinks in her business plan.

Some day she would have an army of her own to enforce her will.

But first there were things to learn.

And there was Merlin....

Before much of this happened, of course, there was the tedious business of smooching under false pretenses, and of baby production.

Igrayne managed the latter in due course, and there was much rejoicing in certain quarters.

"Well, that was easy enough," said Merlin. "Now for the hard part."

A hand reached out of the void, grabbed him by the front of his robe, and shook him.

"Easy?" said an angry voice. "You think producing a baby is easy?"

It was Queen Victoria, of course.

"You again!" said Merlin.

"I could send in Morgana to immure you in a cave, you know! Watch yourself, little man!"

Queen Victoria vanished in a cloud of duty and self-sacrifice.

Merlin shook himself.

"I blame Tennyson for this," he muttered. "An entire Arthurian epic scrubbed and scoured until there's not a hint of the dark, lascivious, evil ways of preliterate savages bonking and pillaging each other! It's all noble and pure knights, and glorious quests and--"

"Umm, Merlin...." said Neville. "The baby's crying."

"Drat! Now I have to spirit it away, and as usual, there's nothing in Malory about means and techniques. Down a cliff to the sea and hi, ho Silver--awaaaay! How am I supposed to accomplish that!"

And so Merlin set off, disguised as an irritable nanny, and purloined Arthur, waddling out of the castle with him and down the slippery stone steps to a convenient leather boat.

The moment he returned, Digger accosted him.

"What about Igrayne?" said the meddlesome miner. "Imagine how that poor woman will feel now!"

"It can't be helped," said Merlin. "It's all in the myth."

"What a dastardly way to build a myth! Why couldn't you bring the poor woman with you! At least she'd get to keep her baby."

"Have you ever really examined our heritage of myths and legends?" said Neville.

"Would you prefer to see her chained to a rock and served up to the creature from the Black Lagoon? Or chained to another rock for eagles and vultures? Or would you rather a witch popped her into an oven and cooked her for supper?"

"Right on!" said Merlin. "Besides, Igrayne already knows how it will end. I told her about Arthur becoming king."

"Did you tell her the part about his unfaithful queen, and about him dying on the field of battle?" said Digger.

"Well he gets to go to the Isle of the Blessed."

"Oh that's a good one! That's true opium for the masses, that is! And what's on the Isle? A bunch of women in night dresses humming while they work? Can you imagine an eternity of THAT?"

"Well I didn't like the part about the poodle dragon," said Chester. "We dragons have our pride you know."

"I thought you were a parrot," said Neville.

"Parrots, dragons! What's the difference! We're all brothers under the skin!"

"There's too much mass delusion here," said Digger. "All of this has already happened. What are we reprising it for? Why can't we just get on with it and roust the freebooters out of the corridors of power?"

"You can't count on the past staying put," said Merlin. "Nothing is ever over. Things have to keep on happening or they never happened at all."

"That is an absolutely terrible philosophy," said Edwardian. "If I have to sit through another year of math homework I shall expire."

"That's a capitalist wizard for you," grumbled Digger. "You're not satisfied with rubbing people's noses in poverty and despair; you have to keep them at it over and over again. What about people who had a rotten life? What about people who died in misery in prisons?"

Merlin grew hot. "Do you think I enjoy this?" he snapped.

Just then, Arthur started to cry.

"What's that smell?" said Sweet Gas. "Is somebody operating a bowel here?"

Merlin examined Arthur, and nearly fainted. "He's made a mess," he said. "We have to change his nappies."

"My word!" said Edwardian. "The Augean stables have nothing on our dear king!"

"Holy cats, it stinks!" said Digger. "If we were in the mines, I'd order everyone out for fear of an explosion."

"What do we do with it?" said Neville.

"How should I know?" said Merlin. "Give it to the Lady of the Lake."

"Aren't there any flush toilets here?" said Neville.

"There's a privy," said Merlin. "But I don't want it clogged. Besides, it's a magic privy. You never know what you'll get."

"It is?" said Neville, interested.

"See those dents and splinters? That's from the Highland Games, where I found it. That broken board is from a flying haggis."

"Enough about haggis!" said Digger Jones. "Do something about Arthur! I can't breathe."

"Anyone got any fresh diapers?" said Merlin.

"Oh I carry them around all the time, along with cans of mashed baby food and Dr. Spock's book on raising Vulcans," said Neville.

"A lot of good you people are!" said Merlin. "I suppose we'll have to try the Lady of the Lake."

Thus it was, the little band of heroes trekked over to the Lady of the Lake's pad, putting up as best they could with Arthur's lamentations.

When they arrived, however, they found a certain absence of presence.

"What do we do now?" said Neville.

"Shhh; she's reading," said Merlin. "I can see her shadowy form beneath the waves."
"Oh?" said Neville, his professional curiosity piqued. "What is she reading? Is it one of my treatises?"

There was a snort of laughter from Digger Jones.

"It's a book on military strategy," said Merlin. "Women are from Venus and...."

"Umm, hello, oh lady of the lake," said Edwardian. "Nice weather we're having, if it doesn't rain."

"Waaaaahhhh!" screamed King Arthur.

"Good grief; he did it again!" said Merlin.

Just then, a hand arose slowly from the waters, holding a package of diapers.

"Look, look, see, see!" yelled Edwardian. "Behold the diapers of infinity! Seize them before she changes her mind."

"But she's out in the middle of the lake!" said Merlin. "I'll get my shoes wet!"

There was a rumbling sigh from beneath the waves. Then a tiny boat drifted towards the reluctant wizard.

Merlin climbed in and floated out towards the upraised arm.

He could not, however, bring himself to reach for the diapers.

"Go on, go on!" said the voice. "What's keeping you?"

"This is not a suitable task for a wizard," said Merlin. "The other wizards will laugh."

"No they won't, you big sissy. No one can see you."

"Are you sure? I don't trust you."

"How would you like to spend the rest of your life with gills and a tail?"

Merlin rolled his eyes. "Okay, okay! Since you put it that way...."

Gingerly he grabbed the diapers.

There was silence, then the unmistakable sound of hysterical laughter emanating from the Wizards' Club.

Merlin paddled back to shore in a fury.

"Somebody is going to pay for this!" he said.

King Arthur had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 104: TO THE MOON, EDWARDIAN!

Merlin's bad mood intensified as he led the others back to the No Space.

"Anyone else feel like laughing?" he said.

There was a silence as they all contemplated Arthur in his toxic diaper.

"So now we have diapers," said Digger Jones. "What next?"

"We put them on," said Merlin.

"We do?" said Edwardian Jones, eyeing the merchandise. "They aren't very big."

"We put them on the baby, you fool! Not on us!"

"Oh. All at once?"

"One at a time."

"That seems like a lot of work. It would be easier if we put them on all at once; then we could just peel them off, one by one, as the occasion demanded."

"Not when the expired diaper is on the inside!" said Merlin.

"Hmmm. I see what you mean. Who gets the job?"

"Can't he do it himself?" said Digger. "He IS King Arthur isn't he? It's time the Royals learned how to wrap their own presents, like decent unionized workers."

"He isn't king yet," said Neville. "He needs to be a bit older."

"Enough small talk," yelled Merlin. "Stop larking about and put a new diaper on him before he adds to his collection."

"You're the wizard," said Digger. "You do it. I don't have the proper tools for changing diapers."

"You don't need a monkey wrench to change a diaper, you fool! Anyway, wizards don't change diapers. We aren't allowed manual labor."

"Do it by magic," said Digger.

"You need practice for that kind of magic. I might turn him into a mummy by mistake."

"He could use a mummy right now," said Edwardian.

"Or a nanny," said Neville. "Someone who knows about diapers and carries their own gas mask."

Edwardian grew disgusted with this bickering and cowardice. "I'll do it," he said. "How hard can it be? First you take off the old one...."

He disengaged Arthur from the offending item and handed it to Merlin, who grasped it carefully with a pair of tongs from a salad bowl and deposited it in a compost heap.

Arthur gurgled happily.

"What happens next?" said Neville, growing curious. Perhaps there was a monograph in this--something short and pithy that would fill a column in the TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT.

"That was the hard part," said Edwardian. "The rest should be easy. We just tie him up inside the new diaper."

"How does that work?" said Digger. "Sort of wrap him up, do we?"

"I think the best thing would be to put him down on top of it and roll it around."

Edwardian opened up a diaper and examined it for a time.

"Looking for something?" said Merlin.

"I don't see any instructions. I wonder if these are defective."

"Get on with it! Wrap him up before something else happens!"

Edwardian sighed and got to work. He fussed for a time, lifting Arthur and shifting the diaper about. Then he stepped back.

"That doesn't look right," said Neville.

"Oh, so! The academic speaks from within his ivory tower. Those who CAN, do, those who CAN'T teach."

"I'll have you know--"

"It's cylindrical," said Digger Jones.

"What do you expect? It's wrapped around him isn't it! When you wrap a diaper around an infant, it acquires a cylindrical aspect."

"Shouldn't it go between his legs at some point? I mean, there's nothing underneath."

"That's so things can drop out. You don't want the diaper getting messy do you?"

"It must be quite drafty for the little chap. Are you sure this is good for his development? He might catch cold."

"What if he widdles on the carpet?" said Digger.

"Hmmm...." Said Edwardian.

"Look it up in the Martha Stewart book," said Merlin.

"I don't think she does babies," said Neville. "She's more in the housewares line."

"We should use the triangle effect."

"Okay, okay! Has anybody got a calculator?" said Edwardian. "I need to calculate the hypotenuse."

"Of what?"

"The diaper. It's supposed to be a triangle, isn't it?"

Edwardian Jones unwrapped the diaper and a jet of tangy water hit him in the face.

"Hey!"

"My word!" said Chester. "He widdled right in Edwardian's face! Did you see that? I never knew changing diapers was such a hazardous rite."

"Kings don't widdle," said Neville. "They deliberate."

"Don't stand near me!" said Merlin. "You're dripping with it."

"Somebody is going to pay for this!" yelled Edwardian "I have to wash my clothes now. Where's the nearest Laundromat and shower?"

"We're a bit short on those things," said Merlin. "We're in a No Space, waiting for time to catch up with us."

"I want a Laundromat!"

"Oh of course," said Merlin. "I carry Laundromats around in my pocket all the time in case I want to wash something."

"Well, make one with magic!"

"I can't do that; it would be an anachronism here. I can make you a nice rock that you can use for pounding the clothes in a river somewhere, and a wooden bucket for dumping water on yourself."

"Go and wash yourself in the Lady of the Lake's Lake," said Digger Jones.

"Do you think she'll mind?"

"Depends on what she thinks of naked Edwardian poets."

Thus it was, Edwardian trekked over to the Lady of the Lake's lake. Then he disrobed behind a bush and tiptoed gingerly down to the shore, carrying his clothes draped over his arm.

"Ouch, ouch, thistles," he moaned.

"Bad omen," said Merlin.

Edwardian stuck one toe in the water and promptly removed it again.

"Argh; it's cold!" he yelled, shivering.

"Nonsense," said Merlin. "It's normal lake temperature. You don't want to parboil yourself do you?"

"Sssh," said Neville. "You'll wake the Lady of the Lake."

"This lake is glacier fed," said Edwardian. "I can see sunlight glinting off the icecaps."

"That's a billboard, you idiot!" said Merlin.

"A billboard? Right beside the Lady of the Lake's Lake? Will evil advertising executives stop at nothing!"

"It says, Try McVlod's Haggis in a Jar; you'll like it!"

"What kind of advertising slogan is that? Shouldn't there be a nice graphic of a celebrity chomping on haggis?"

"There's a nice canopic jar. What else do you want?"

Edwardian ignored this bickering, plunged into the lake, and began pounding his clothes with a rock.

At that moment, a party of Scottish elementary school teachers showed up on a field trip with their students.

"And this, children," said Gracie MacHomework, "Is where the Lady of the Lake lives--my word!"

Edwardian Jones held his clothes in front of him like a magic talisman.

"Go away! I'm not decent."

"I should say not," muttered Gracie.

Fortunately she managed to distract the others in time by yelling, "Look, look, see, see, children! Off in the distance. It's a guidance counselor. Let's go and talk to her."

All of the children ran off to talk to the lovely guidance counselor, without ever having noticed the naked Edwardian poet in the Lady of the Lake's private quarters.

And anyway, it wouldn't have mattered if they HAD seen Edwardian, because they were ADULT elementary school children, busily catching up on their court-ordered morality lessons after many years of running major corporations.

Gracie, of course, peeked before disappearing o'er the lea, but she wasn't impressed.

"We Scots invented peripherals," she muttered. "He should enquire about replacement parts."

Edwardian recommenced his ablutions.

"I don't have any soap," he complained.

"You want soap bubbles in the Lady's lake?"

"Eeps! Something grabbed me!"

"Really?" said Merlin, interested. "Where?"

"My foot!"

"Oh well. Is it pulling you down?"

"It's an arm clothed in white samite. It's holding up a clothes line, some kindling wood, and a box of matches."

"Better take them in the boat."

"I can't. I don't have any clothes on. She'll see me naked."

"Don't be such a ninny. This is the age of soft porn. Everybody takes their clothes off."

"YOU don't."

"I'm a wizard. We wizards know that illusion is more important than mere flesh any day!"

Edwardian found a clump of water lilies and covered himself.

"Nice outfit," said a voice from the lake. "You're taking a bit of a risk, aren't you?"

"Why?"

"Lots of snapping turtles in the water lilies."

There was a tense silence, then a scream.

The arm tossed the clothesline and kindling wood into the boat and then withdrew.

The turtle swam away, traumatized.

Edwardian waded back to shore, arranged the kindling wood and some old, creosote-soaked railway ties, and rigged the clothes line over it.

"Umm, is that a good idea?" said Digger.

"Shhh," said Neville. "This proves what I've always said about Edwardian poets; they have no concept of the real world."

"Look who's talking!" snorted Digger Jones. "Mister Ivory Tower himself."

Edwardian touched a flaming match to the kindling wood and a bonfire started up immediately. His clothes burned brightly.

There was a weary sigh, then the Lady of the Lake tossed him a replacement bundle.

Edwardian dressed hurriedly, in case another party of Scottish elementary school teachers showed up. Unfortunately, he realized too late that his new togs included a plaid shirt, coveralls, and a straw hat. The only things missing were a rocking chair and a pot-belly stove.

"How about some homespun wisdom?" said Neville, smirking.

"From an Edwardian poet?" said Merlin. "Can we get to work now?"

"We still haven't got the diaper on."

They all looked at Arthur who was gurgling happily.

Then his expression changed.

"Oh, oh; what now!" said Merlin.

"Look out!" Yelled Digger. "He's getting ready to scream. Look at his face. It's all red. What's the matter with him?"

"Is he operating his bowel again?" said Sweet Gas.

Merlin leaned over and put his ear to him.

Just then, Arthur let out a terrific yell.

Merlin leaped backwards, screaming like a jet on a taxiway.

"I'm deaf! Deaf!" he yelled.

"At least he didn't widdle this time," said Neville.

"I think he wants food," said Digger. "Now he's learning what the word 'oppressed' means."

"Good grief!" said Merlin. "What do babies eat?"

"How should I know?" said Neville. "Same things as we do, probably. Roast beef, Yorkshire pudding, haggis, bottle of port, coffee, cigars and a glass of scotch to help it all go down."

"My word!" said Merlin. "And you actually manage to write treatises after all that?"

"Have you ever read anything of his?" said Digger.

"Milk!" yelled Edwardian. "We need milk."

Merlin looked blank. "Are you sure about this? Do you fellows know where milk actually comes from?"

"Supermarkets." said Edwardian. "It's in the refrigerated section, next to the tinned herring."

"I've never seen tinned herring in the refrigerated section," said Digger. "Do much grocery shopping, do you?"

"My mummsy does it, so I'll have more time for my poetry."

"There aren't any supermarkets here," said Merlin. "The zoning laws forbid it."

"We need a cow," said Edwardian.

"Where are we supposed to find a cow?" said Merlin. "Do you see any farms around here?"

"Maybe the Lady of the Lake will give us one," said Neville.

"It's worth a try," said Merlin.

And so the little band of heroes trekked back to the lake, where they found an arm clothed in white samite holding up a cow.

"It doesn't look very happy," Edwardian said doubtfully.

"Are you sure that's a cow?" said Digger. "It looks quite savage."

"It's just a cow!" said Merlin. "A dumb cow."

"It's got fangs," said Edwardian.

"That's just grass sticking out of its mouth," said Neville. "Cows are always eating grass. It's what they do."

"Look at the size of that cow pie!" said Sweet Gas. "Now that's what I call operating a bowel!"

"Enough small talk!" said Merlin. "Now we have a cow."

"Yes."

"Excellent."

"Outstanding."

"Umm, what do we do with it?" said Digger.

"Milk it, I should think," said Merlin.

"Which end?" said Chester.

"Back end, I think."

"Where's the tap?" said Digger.

"Maybe that's what the tail is for," said Neville. "Like the string on a balloon."

"You mean you pull on its tail and the cow floats up into the air?"

"That's because of the gas," said Neville. "Cows are famous for it; they spend their days farting in the fields."

"What's so special about that?" said Sweet Gas. "You'd think farting was a skill."

"It is for some people," said Merlin.

"Just because I don't have a bowel doesn't mean I can't stink up the place," said Sweet Gas.

"Anyway, I think the milking part has something to do with those sausage-like things that hang underneath her," said Edwardian.

"You're kidding!" said Digger. "It's enough to put me off my breakfast."

"What are you supposed to do with them?" said Chester.

"You twist them, I think."

"Like a tap?"

"I should think so."

Edwardian pushed everyone aside.

"Leave it to me," he said.

"Glutton for punishment, that one!" said Merlin.

"It shouldn't be too hard," said Edwardian, crawling under the cow. "Just grab one and twist, like this...."

There was a loud 'MOOOO'; then a THWOCK!

"Amazing," said Neville.

"I didn't know a cow could kick anyone that far," said Digger.

"Punted him right into the privy."

That isn't a cow; it's Conan the Ruminant.

Merlin was furious. "He made a hole in my antique privy! It's been designated a historical site."

"Look out; something's flying out of it!" yelled Neville. "Good grief; it's a haggis! There was a haggis trapped in there!"

"No wonder it's green!" said Digger.

Everyone watched the haggis shoot straight up into the misty boundaries of the No Space.

"Well it's gone now," said Neville.

"Did you hear a 747 flying overhead?" said Digger.

"They don't fly anywhere near here," said Merlin. "Camelot isn't on their flight path."

"I wonder why the haggis was flying so fast."

"Look it up in Martha Stewart," said Merlin. "For every action there's an equal and opposite reaction."

"Surely that's Newton, not Martha Stewart?" said Neville.

"Anyway, aren't the two things involved supposed to be in contact with each other?" said Digger.

"Not when one of them is a haggis," said Merlin.

"I supposed it must have got stuck in there during the Highland Games."

"I wonder if it was the one that killed Lenore McBeauty?" said Neville. "It might have been hiding from the police."

"A killer haggis?" said Digger. "They're the worst kind. Once they've tasted flesh--"

"Nonsense!" said Merlin. "It was only trying to escape. I'm sure it's quite harmless."

"No haggis is harmless," said Digger.

"Anyway, there's a rumor it didn't really kill her; it just killed her dress," said Neville.

"Enough small talk," said Merlin. "How do we get Edwardian Jones out?"

"Do we really want to?" said Digger. "I mean, he's going to smell quite a bit."

"Worse than his poetry?" said Neville.

"I think a fishing rod should do it," said Merlin. "Fiberglass, with a one-hundred-pound test line."

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

CHAPTER 105:DANGEROUS BABIES

Merlin contemplated the darkness within the privy for moment, then produced a tackle box with an assortment of hooks and lines.

"Do you think Edwardian will go for this?" he said. "It's a Royal Coachman. It's a small fly, really, but you never know."

"I think he'll go for ANYTHING right now," said Digger. "As long as it doesn't scream at one end and poop at the other."

"What are you people doing up there?" yelled Edwardian. "I'm suffocating down here. I can't be expected to write lilting lyrical poetry in these conditions."

Everyone thought about this for a moment.

"Maybe we should leave him down there," said Neville.

"No you don't!" yelled Edwardian. "A life without art and beauty is a mere simulacrum, a bare bodkin."

"I thought a bodkin was the pointy thing that ended the mere simulacrum," said Neville.

"Simulacrams can be bodkins too, you know."

"I need that privy," said Merlin. "It's an antique."

"You could always go and do it in the bushes, like everyone else," said Digger.

"Speak for yourself. There are nettles in the bushes."

"Why don't you send it back to the Highland Games?" said Chester. "Edwardian might enjoy haranguing the Scots."

"The Highlanders would certainly take care of any lingering poetry infections," said Sweet Gas.

Everyone stood back as Merlin executed a perfect cast and snagged his line in the trees behind him.

This seemed to vex him, for some reason. He promptly turned the trees into scratching posts for cats, and dropped a single line, without a hook, into the privy.

"Ouch," said a petulant voice.

"Is he coming out?" said Chester.

"I think I can smell him," said Digger, pinching his nose.

Everyone cautiously backed away from the privy. Then Edwardian climbed out and shook himself off.

"He looks okay," said Digger.

"He doesn't SMELL okay," said Neville. "He smells like the faculty lounge after a heavy lunch."

Merlin magically transported Edwardian to the Lady of the Lake's Lake, and dropped him into the mystic waters.

There was some grumbling about toxic waste, overpopulation, and bad poetry, then Edwardian was tossed out again.

This time he was festooned in a pith helmet, a canary yellow scarf, a loose, black shirt, baggy trousers, and hiking boots. There were various tools and scientific instruments affixed to his belt like scalps.

"Oh, an Edwardian explorer!" said Digger Jones. "While the peons toil in the mines for a pittance, the exploiters dash off into the woods to collect fossils!"

"Were you traumatized down there?" Neville asked.

"It's not that bad," said Edwardian. "It's crawling with archaeologists from the Royal Ontario Museum. They set up a tent with refreshments."

"That's not a midden!" snorted Merlin. "What do they think they're doing?"

"You'd be surprised," said Edwardian. "I spotted all sorts of things down there."

"Coprolite," said Sweet Gas. "That's the polite term for it these days."

"Some people will toss anything into a privy," said Edwardian. "Anyway, they wanted to take me back to the ROM and do carbon dating on me to find out if I'm an artifact."

"I could have told them the answer to that!" said Digger. "They don't come any riper than you!"

"I'm quite youthful, actually," said Edwardian. "Only the young can write lyrical poetry."

"Thank the gods for small mercies," muttered Merlin.

"Philistine!" sniffed Edwardian. "You're just like those archaeologists. I began reciting some of my poetry to show them I was alive and they threatened to section me for electron microscopy."

"Quite sensible, those ROM people," said Neville.

"Anyway," said Edwardian, "They're very busy deciding what happened in the past."

"I could tell them that," said Merlin. "I was there."

"That's just hearsay," said Edwardian. "They need hard evidence. Pottery shards and--"

"Coprolite," said Merlin.

Just then Arthur began to scream again.

"What's the matter with him now?" said Neville. "Emergency evacuation of dispensable materials, or the appearance of a sudden vacuum in the middle parts?"

"Or colic!" said Sweet Gas. "Don't forget colic!"

The screaming grew louder.

"Aren't there any nannies around here?" said Edwardian. "What about the Lady of the

Lake?"

"Ummm, I don't think that was a good suggestion," said Merlin, crouching behind a bush.

There was a low growl, then a boomerang whizzed out of the lake, clipped Edwardian on the side of the head and flip-flopped back into the misty waters.

Edwardian sat down in the grass, holding his head with both hands.

"The critics keep telling me to get some real-life experience," he said. "But this isn't experience; it's purgatory."

"Welcome to the real world," said Digger. "It's you against the power-mad gods and capitalists, and they don't like you very much. Your only defense is solidarity. I have some blank union cards if you'd like to join."

Then the arm held up a case of milk and an assortment of bottles.

"Behold, the Lady of the Lake took pity on us," said Neville. "This time we get a pre-milked cow."

Digger Jones rowed out in the boat and collected the milk. Then he asked for butter and eggs as well, and left two Euros in return.

"You should always pay the milk woman promptly," he said.

"Okay, so now we have milk," said Neville. "What do we do with it?"

"We have to warm it up first, I think," said Merlin.

Digger began frying eggs in a saucepan over his miner's candle.

"Do we pour it into the bottle first, or warm it separately?" asked Chester. "We parrots don't have much experience with milk."

"Warm it separately, I should think," said Neville. "In case something goes wrong."

"I shall write a poem about this," said Edwardian. "Something about the beauty of milk bottles in Tewksbury, in the rain. Tum-te-tum."

He looked up to see a tight little circle of menacing faces closing in around him.

"Right then," he said, brandishing the bottle. "Now we warm it up."

"Great Scott!" said Neville. "Isn't that stuff dangerous?"

"In the wrong hands, I suppose," said Edwardian.

"How do we warm it?"

"Usually with something hot," said Merlin. "A fire might do."

A miner's candle?"

"Mine's taken," said Digger Jones. "Unless you want cold eggs for breakfast."

"I'll start a fire," said Neville.

He gathered up some kindling, brushwood, a few railway ties, and in no time at all, had a magnificent bonfire going.

Edwardian jammed the bottle into the crotch of a forked stick and thrust it into the roaring inferno.

"Warming up nicely now," he said.

The ensuing explosion took them all by surprise.

"Now what?" said Neville, who had been crouching behind a rock and had received only a few bits of scalding milk.

Merlin bandaged Edwardian, humming the theme song from Mary Poppins.

"We need a lab manual," he said. "There should be warning labels on milk bottles."

"The milk has to be at skin temperature, I think," said Digger, handing out two fried eggs to each of his comrades.

Sweet Gas, of course, didn't actually eat his eggs; he only admired them. Rock trolls get their dinners through sedimentary action, or through helpful contributions from careless hikers.

The Lady of the Lake tossed them a brochure for new mothers, and Neville scrutinized it.

"Hmmm," he said. "It seems we should warm up the milk in a pan."

"I knew it!" said Edwardian. "How hot do we make it?"

"Surface temperature of the sun, I should think," said Neville, consulting the brochure.
"No, by gad! Skin temperature."

"You mean skin temperature in the heat of a summer day, or in the cool of a winter day," said Digger Jones.

"We're mammals, you fool!" said Neville. "Our skin temperature doesn't vary that much."

"Mine does," said Edwardian. "I really hate winter."

"The heat of a summer day?" said Merlin. "In Wales?"

"The Welsh enjoy hot summer days as much as anyone else," said Digger.

"Yes, but the question is, do they in fact, have them?" said Neville.

The atmosphere grew tense.

Fortunately Arthur chose that moment to increase his decibel count.

"Okay, okay!" said Edwardian. "Din-din is coming, you little air raid siren!"

"Din-din?" said Digger, smirking.

"Haven't you read Rudyard Kipling?" said Edwardian. "Din-din is an affectionate term for an elephant."

"I thought a din-din was a kind of gazebo," said Chester.

"The elephant is coming?" said Neville. "How big is Arthur's appetite? Should we withdraw to a safe distance?"

Edwardian ignored this and warmed up some milk in a pan.

"Look at the little savage, just lying in wait there, screaming!" said Neville.

"He's only a baby," said Edwardian.

"YOU feed him then!"

Edwardian poured the warm milk into one of the baby's bottles. Then he gingerly picked up Arthur and held him in the crook of his arm.

Arthur immediately stopped howling and looked up expectantly.

"Does that rather well, doesn't he!" said Digger.

"He has plenty of experience," said Neville. "It comes from putting so many audiences to sleep with soporific poetry."

"He has audiences?" said Digger.

Suddenly Arthur grabbed the bottle with both hands and drained it in one go.

"My word!" said Neville.

"Did that really happen?" said Digger, stupefied.

"Do you suppose he wants another one?" said Edwardian.

Oh, oh!" yelled Neville, backing away. "His face is turning red again. He's going to scream."

"What's wrong this time!" said Digger.

"Quick, another bottle!" yelled Edwardian.

There was a frantic interval of bustling about, fumbling with the pan and the milk. When the bottle was aimed at his screaming end, however, Arthur thrust it angrily away and ratcheted up the sound..

"Don't they come with volume controls?" yelled Neville.

"Just like royalty," muttered Digger. "After the workers have slaved and toiled, he pushes away the fruit of their labor because it isn't a diamond-studded bauble; it's merely a rough-hewn tribute to the arts and crafts of the oppressed."

"You mean Soviet-era television sets?" said Neville.

There was a deafening scream.

"Great hopping Hornby hopper cars!" yelled Digger. "My ears have been destroyed."

"What's that you say?" shouted Neville. "I think the Big Bang just started up again."

"I didn't know you capitalized that," said Edwardian. "It's not on the same level as a religious experience, you know. The big bang was just an event."

"What do we do now?" yelled Digger.

"The Big Bang was considerably more important than tea with the archbishop," said

Neville.

"Quick; we must seek out the Lady of the Lake!" said Merlin. "Maybe she's got some earplugs."

"Or a manual."

"Valium would do nicely," said Neville.

Just then, an arm rose up out of the waters.

"What's she holding this time?" said Neville.

"A video camera," said Digger Jones. "Put a smile on your face, Edwardian; I think she's filming you for posterity."

"For blackmail, you mean," said Edwardian.

The camera vanished, followed by the sound of hysterical glee. Then the arm tossed a thick book the size of a telephone book.

"The Open Source Baby Manual," said Neville. "Hmmm. Also available in PDF."

"My word," said Merlin. "This means absolutely anyone can have a baby! There are no restrictions on using the code."

"Well, technically," said Neville. "I think you're expected to pay a licensing fee if you envision production on a commercial scale."

"Look in the index," said Digger.

Neville examined the index with professional curiosity. "Let's see... kernel panic...recompiling after...recovery from...here we go... Screaming...."

"Quick!" yelled Edwardian. "What does it say? This is torture."

"Screaming accompanied by a complete system lock-up. This may be caused by many things: fatal injuries, starvation, dehydration, cunning manipulation, colic...."

"That's it!" yelled Edwardian, snapping his fingers. "Colic! Of course!"

"Hmmm," said Neville. "Colic. Caused by trapped gas. Remedies: burp the infant."

"Does that involve nuclear weapons?" said Digger.

"I don't think I want a bowel anymore," said Sweet Gas. "It seems to be more trouble than its worth. I've never had colic in my life. When I get gas, I just let it seep out through a crack."

"How original!" said Chester.

"On the other hand, it might be nice to stand around farting in the fields like a cow. They always look so contented."

"Especially after they've just kicked someone into a privy," said Edwardian bitterly.

"Cows are overrated in my opinion. They're all Visigoths in disguise."

"I find a glass of scotch invariably cures these little difficulties," said Neville, still consulting the manual. "It says here you have to hold him over your shoulder, pat him gently on the back, and sing in a soothing voice."

"How long does this go on?" said Edwardian suspiciously.

"About four hours, possibly longer."

There was a silence, broken only by Arthur's unbearable wailing, while everyone thought about how long four hours REALLY was.

"Quick, sing something!" said Neville.

They all sang a ragged chorus of 'How Much is That Doggie in the Window?', but it didn't seem to produce much of an effect on Arthur.

It did, however, affect the lake; the waters of which seethed and roiled. Then an arm clothed in white samite held up a boom box, which played the Welsh National Anthem.

"This won't do," said Digger Jones. "We need a family to help bring him up."

"I could blackmail a graduate student," said Neville.

"We really need a nanny."

"Where do we get one of those?"

Suddenly there was an enormous belch, and a flood of warm, sour milk tumbled down Edwardian's back.

"Well done!" said Neville.

"Oh noooo!" moaned Edwardian. "Now it's coming out the other end too!"

"It's hard work being a surrogate mum," said Merlin. "You deserve a medal for this."

Thus it was Edwardian returned to the lovely waters of the mystic lake to bathe and refresh himself, and garner a new outfit.

Just then Gracie MacHomework popped out of the bushes.

"I knew you'd be at it again the moment you thought you were alone," she said. "I'm here to act as a witness."

Edwardian hurriedly snatched up some cover. He'd learned the hard way about water lilies and what could be lurking in them, so he hid himself behind a large, strategically placed leaf.

"Odd looking leaf," said Neville.

"Fresh-water sting ray," said Merlin. "Very rare."

Meanwhile, Arthur had begun screaming again, and did not cease until Edwardian returned, sporting a Roy Rogers outfit, complete with cap guns.

Arthur gurgled happily as Edwardian picked him up.

"What now?" said Edwardian.

"If you could just stand like that for the next sixteen years, we should be fine," said Merlin.

Edwardian had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 106:ARTHUR'S FIRST MOUSE

"So we have to look after Arthur for sixteen years!" said Neville. "What about US? What about OUR lives? I have colleagues to sacrifice, you know! I'm a busy academic."

"You won't lose much," said Merlin. "We're all stuck in a time eddy, going around and around. Arthur will age, but we won't."

"Really?" said Edwardian. "We'll be as good as new when you send us back?"

"In your case, I can't make any guarantees. The poetry bug is a difficult thing to eradicate. You will, however, get back. I make very few errors."

"Errors?" said Neville. "What sort of errors are we referring to here? Grammatical errors?"

"Well, there is some truth behind that old Vincent Price version of 'The Fly', you know," said Merlin. "It's not entirely fantasy."

"The Fly'? You mean we should avoid flies?" said Edwardian.

"Or Vincent Price," said Merlin. "It's not a perfect world; sometimes we have to choose between one thing and another."

"Sixteen years!" groaned Digger. "I didn't bring anything to read; I left my campaign literature at home."

"You'll find plenty to read in the monasteries and on the rune stones," said Merlin. "The runes are mostly romance novels, but some of them are quite good. I'm fond of historical romances myself; they come packaged with torn bodices that fall out when you open the cover."

Everyone looked at Merlin for a time. A shadow deepened beneath the brim of his hat, and a pair of eyes glowed ominously.

"Do we really have to do this?" said Edwardian.

"Tockworld depends on us," said Merlin. "When Arthur is old enough, he'll don dazzling white armor, take over the Underworld from Van Von, and fend off hostiles until Disser comes back to save England from the investment bankers."

"That's the legend?" said Edwardian. "I thought there was something about Tennyson and the Saxons."

Before Merlin could answer, there was a gurgling sound, then a little voice said: "Mi...Mic...Mick...."

Everyone turned in amazement.

"Hey--all of a sudden he's a toddler!" said Digger. "How did that happen?"

"We're in the Fabulous Mists of Antiquity now," said Merlin. "Time moves by fits and starts, according to the needs of the legend."

"Who cares about legends!" yelled Edwardian. "He talked! Arthur Talked! Didn't you hear it? His first word was Mick..."

Edwardian's voice faded away as the significance of this word dawned on him. "Oh no!" he moaned.

"The Mouse?" said Digger. "How does Arthur know about the Mouse? The little beast hasn't even been invented yet."

"Retroactive marketing," said Merlin. "It's the most powerful force on Tockworld. I nearly got caught in it myself. They tried to make me into a charming plush toy with big eyes and a perpetual smile, and they wanted me to speak in simple sentences so everyone would understand me, as though I were a nightly news bunny."

Everyone thought about a smiling, charming Merlin with big eyes. It was a ghastly thought. They all went pale.

"So what did you do?" said Digger.

"We worked out a deal."

"Aha! That's where you got the Jag and the home theatre, and the studio?"

"Give the duck a cookie!" said Merlin, smirking.

"You sold out to the Mouse?" said Edwardian, horrified.

"I did not sell out!" roared Merlin. "I agreed to allow digital artists to create a pleasing image for children."

"A smiley and cute wizard?" said Chester.

"It's camouflage. It distracts Morgana."

"Did she sell out too?" said Edwardian.

"Of course she did! They made her famous, didn't they? Besides, all Morgana wants is money, clothes, jewelry, limos, fancy hotels, real estate, palace guards, and the adulation of the plebes."

"There's a place on the scaffold for creatures like that," said Digger Jones darkly.

Edwardian stared at him in shock. "Surely you, of all people, don't believe in capital punishment!" he said.

"Well...not as such, but--"

"Perhaps you were thinking of pressing her to death with weights," said Sweet Gas. "I'm afraid I won't be able to help you; my daddy became an Anglican church in the eighteenth century, and I wouldn't want to upset him. He's got troubles enough, what with the precarious state of church finances."

"Who cares about Morgana!" said Chester. "The important thing is Arthur just uttered his first word. We should get it on tape for posterity."

"Arthur won't sell out to the Mouse, will he?" said Edwardian. "He was never charming and cuddly; he was a Roman cavalry officer."

"Some people think he was a ROM curator trying to protect Roman mosaics from Saxons with big feet."

"This is getting complicated," said Digger. "Are you sure we have to raise Arthur? Can't we just skip forward in time."

"And leave his upbringing to someone else?" said Merlin. "What if he falls into the clutches of a flower child, or an advertising agency? We have to bring him up properly, using a suitable curriculum."

"So what should we put in the curriculum?" said Chester. "What do we teach a king?"

"Couldn't he just play video games?" said Edward.

"We'll teach him to give lots of money to wizards," said Merlin.

"To abolish the class system and end all privileges of rank," said Digger.

"To give academics important posts in the cabinet," said Neville.

"How do we know when to stop bashing him with the curriculum?" said Chester. "This could go on for a long time."

"We stop when he pulls the sword of merchandising out of the stone," said Merlin.

"Oh ho; the old sword in the stone trick!" said Sweet Gas indignantly. "And what happens to the injured stone? Does anyone care? This is supposed to be the age of environmentalism."

"Enough small talk!" said Merlin. Morgana is already setting up a business. She'll make a mint and take over the world before Arthur learns how to change his own diapers."

"More capitalism," said Digger. "What kind of business?"

"Scottish travelogues, I think," said Merlin. "There's usually a bagpipe and a sheep in them."

"That's enough about soft porn!" yelled Chester.

"Look, look, see, see!" said Sweet Gas. "Arthur's taking his first step. Can you believe it!"

They all clustered around Arthur, waving madly and going through all sorts of odd motions to encourage him.

"Isn't he cute!" said Digger.

"What an amazing little chap!" said Edwardian. "He reminds me of Thomas Hardy."

"That's it, little fellow!" shouted Neville. "You'll be a full professor in no time."

"Hey, he stumbled!" said Chester.

"He did not stumble!" said Digger. "There was an earthquake. You'd lose your balance too if the ground started hopping around."

"I didn't notice any earthquakes," said Sweet Gas.

"It was a small one; the epicenter was right under Arthur."

"Look out; there's a cute fawn standing in his way!" said Chester. "Quick, Merlin; do something!"

"The fawn won't move; it's just standing there smiling at him," said Sweet Gas.

"KILL THAT ONE!" roared Edwardian.

"Wait," said Chester. "Arthur is holding onto the fawn's neck. The fawn is helping him."

"It's a Mouse Moment," said Merlin. "I told you the Mouse was in on this."

"Who cares?" said Neville. "He's happy. He's walking. Our baby is a genius. He'll rise straight to the top of the class when he gets into Harvard. Have you got him enrolled yet, Merlin?"

"I was thinking of the University of Strange Thoughts; it has more cachet."

"They'll have to offer him a scholarship," said Edwardian. "I certainly can't afford the tuition there."

"We get a discount because I'm on the faculty," said Neville.

"He'll have to start learning about unions and workers right away," said Digger. "I'll dig a mine for him."

"And I'll write some Edwardian poems for him," said Edwardian.

There was a bonking sound, and Edwardian lapsed into silence.

"He'll make a wonderful dragon," said Chester.

"I'll fall on his enemies like a pile of rocks," said Sweet Gas.

All at once, Arthur's face crumpled up and turned bright red. Then he started screaming and wailing.

"What's he crying for now?" said Neville. "We've got the milk thing down, and the diaper thing, and the colic thing too."

"Don't remind me," said Edwardian.

"He's bored," said Digger. "You'd be bored too, lying around all day in your diaper. Anyone can see he wants to go out on strike."

"He needs some toys," said Edwardian.

"Toys?" said Digger. "Where are we supposed to get toys? Do you see any toys around here?"

"The Lady of the Lake?" said Chester.

They all turned to the lake and saw the familiar arm, clothed in white samite, aiming a video camera at them.

Nasty laughter penetrated the surrounding woods.

"She's got that video camera going again," said Edwardian.

"I'm not asking HER for anything," said Merlin. "We can find toys in a department store. We'll take Arthur shopping and see what he likes."

"We need a stroller if we're going to take him shopping," said Edwardian.

"I'll make one," said Merlin. Then he waved his arm and muttered a spell that seemed to have something to do with pickles and ice cream.

There was a flash and a bang, and a big green cloud materialized.

When the cloud dissipated, everyone saw a bright red golf cart glittering in the sun.

"Ummm...." said Chester.

"I'm not an expert in strollers," Merlin said testily. He tried again, muttered a spell involving pigs and wings, and there was another flash and a bang.

This time, a John Deere tractor appeared, complete with combine and manual.

"That's not--" Edwardian said, but he broke off abruptly when he spotted a pterodactyl eyeing him hungrily from a nearby perch.

"How should I know what a stroller looks like!" said Merlin. "When I was a kid we didn't get pushed around in strollers; we had to walk five miles through snow and ice to get to the toy store."

"Show him the 'Open Source Baby Manual' again," said Neville. "Maybe there's a picture of a stroller."

Edwardian handed over the manual and Merlin flipped irritably through it to the 'Strollers and other Weapons' section.

"A stroller is a weapon?" said Edwardian.

"Been in any grocery stores recently?" said Digger.

"Look, a whole page of strollers," said Sweet Gas, peering over Merlin's shoulder.

"Look at this one--it's French. It looks like a penguin trapped in a waffle iron."

"Go for it!" said Edwardian. "It's the most expensive stroller in the manual; it must be the best."

Merlin waved his arm and the French delicacy appeared, complete with a little tricolor flag and bilingual labels, in French and Japanese.

The little band of heroes examined it curiously, scratching their heads as they marveled over its complexity.

"How does it work?" said Edwardian.

"I think you put the baby in here," said Digger, motioning to the beak-like front end.

"I don't know; there's dozens of compartments and things. Maybe you're supposed to put a fake baby in the beak as a kind of decoy in case you meet muggers. The real baby goes into one of the compartments."

"I wonder if there's any scotch in this bottle," said Neville.

"That's a baby's bottle, you fool!"

"Valium would be a nice treat," said Edwardian.

"What's this thing with the dials?" said Chester, examining a thing with lots of dials.

"That's the satellite uplink and GPS rig," said Merlin. "It's the same system I have in my Jag. If you get lost, you can download a computer game while you're waiting for the search-and-rescue chopper."

"It comes with a game preinstalled," said Sweet Gas. "It's a video from the Mouse to help you learn your ABC's."

"The Mouse again," muttered Digger.

"You're not supposed to capitalize his epithet," said Edwardian. "He's not the Supreme Being."

"Enough small talk," said Merlin, and he began pushing the stroller.

"Hey!" yelled Edwardian. "Who said you get to push Arthur. I should be the one pushing him; I had to change his diaper and soak up all of his ejective matter."

"I'm better at pushing than you are," said Digger. "I've been doing manual labor all my life."

"Get away!" roared Sweet Gas. "I'm the one who should push Arthur; I don't have a bowel."

"What's that got to do with anything?" said Digger.

"It gives Arthur a role model," said Sweet Gas. "He can see for himself how pleasant it is when you don't spend so much of your time filling your diaper."

"I thought you WANTED a bowel," said Merlin.

"I've changed my mind."

"We'll draw straws," said Merlin. "Short straw gets to push the stroller."

There was a great deal of muttering and grumbling because everyone thought Merlin would cheat and use his magic to get the short straw.

He did, in fact, cheat, but he got it wrong, and Edwardian wound up with the short straw.

Edwardian smirked unbearably as he took over the stroller. Everyone else sulked.

"You get two hours," said Merlin. "I'm timing you."

"Wait a minute!" said Digger. "What if something happens to Arthur while we're away and we can't find a cure in the manual. Shouldn't we bring the Lady of the Lake with us?"

There was a snort of laughter from the lake. Then a whirring noise.

"She's still running that horrible video camera," said Edwardian.

"She won't come with us," said Merlin. "It doesn't matter. What could go wrong? We're all mature adults."

There was a superstitious silence.

Never, never say 'What Could Go Wrong?' when you're setting out on an expedition.

Edwardian had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 107:ABC'S FOR THE MEDIEVAL

The heroes were not in good spirits when they set out on their quest for a department store with a good toy department.

Edwardian, though inwardly gloating because HE was the one pushing the stroller, was also uneasy, because he had little experience of happy outcomes.

The others were merely sulking as they trekked along behind Edwardian, each one waiting impatiently for his turn at the helm.

A wicked chortling followed them through the mist as the Lady of the Lake made her feelings known.

"Listen to that woman!" said Digger Jones. "A true aristocrat; laugh at the little people and never lift a finger to help."

"She did actually help," said Edwardian. "She gave me several new outfits, and the milk--"

"And the cow that kicked you into the privy," said Digger. "You of all people, singing her praises! It's what I've always said; hold people down long enough and they fall in love with their oppressors."

"You can be as crabby as you want to; it won't affect my mood," said Edwardian. "I'm having lots of fun pushing the stroller."

"Just make sure you don't try any poetry on us," said Chester. "That's a hanging offense."

"Are were there yet?" said Sweet Gas. "We've been walking for a long time."

"Four minutes and nine seconds," said Neville.

"I don't trust YOUR watch," said Sweet Gas. "It slows down when you're in the faculty lounge and speeds up when you're lecturing."

"Do you like it? I got it from a duck who like to travel on two trains at the same time, one moving away from the observer and the other moving towards the observer. It had something to do with the afterlife."

"Enough small talk," said Merlin. "It's time to go shopping."

Then he mumbled his way through a spell that involved the words 'cadeaux', 'credit card', and 'Halloween'.

There was an awkward silence, a phlegmatic chuffing noise; then a bilious green cloud appeared.

When the cloud had dissipated and everyone had stopped coughing, the crabby heroes found themselves standing directly in front of a door.

It was a revolving door.

"The person who invented those things was trying to make a blender," said Edwardian, who had once been trapped with an elephantine lady wrestler in a revolving door.

"Go on!" said Digger. "You wanted to push the stroller."

After twenty minutes or so, Edwardian made it inside and the others followed.

An array of booths and kiosks greeted them. Perfumes and cosmetics were stacked on every counter, and there were lots of gifts on offer, free with every purchase of things none of the heroes had ever heard of before.

Every counter featured a skinny woman in a little black dress.

Neville gazed in awe.

"So this is a department store!" he said. "Look at that woman trying out lipstick on her beak. She can't be a graduate student; where's her biography of Jean-Paul Sartre? My word; she's rather attractive--"

"We have work to do, Neville," said Merlin. "This isn't a beauty contest; it's the Hudson's Bay Company."

"It is? I thought that was a geographical feature. A big hole in Canada left over from an asteroid impact, or perhaps it was the prototype of a form of underwater crop circle."

"The Bay used to be a lot of trading posts in the wilderness," said Merlin. "But that was before Sitting Bull flew all of the native people to the Planet of Refuge in his flying saucer."

"Does that mean we're supposed to barter furs for toys?" said Digger Jones. "We don't get many furs down in the mines, you know."

"It's quite modern now," said Merlin. "They accept loonies. I shop here all the time for kitchenware. I found a robe embroidered with pictures of Kermit the frog in the men's wear department. I snapped it up as soon as I saw it."

Everyone looked at Merlin for awhile.

"The toy department is upstairs!" he said, gruffly.

"Look at this!" said Edwardian. "An inflatable codpiece! What will they think of next?"

"That's a blood pressure cuff, you fool!" said Merlin. "It's the latest thing for joggers. If you don't find a pulse, you whip out your portable defibrillator and have a go at the victim's heart. If all else fails, you give the body parts to Igor, in the cafeteria."

They found the elevators and after much jostling, managed to squeeze into a car. A man with a briefcase ran to catch it as the doors began to close.

Merlin pushed a button to hold the doors open for him.

"Toys and body parts!" he called.

The man nodded. Then he got a better look at what was inside and his feet carried him away in a new direction while his mouth gaped and his eyes popped open like oysters.

"There are some very odd people in this department store," said Edwardian. "I hope Arthur will be okay."

"This is part of learning how to be a king," said Merlin. "You have to select the right sort of toy."

The elevator disgorged them into an array of ladies' undergarments.

Edwardian blushed like a chameleon on a chili pepper and gazed straight ahead as he pushed the stroller.

The others looked around with more interest.

"Goodness gracious me!" said Neville. "So that's what a thong is! I wondered what all the fuss was about. I should think it would be rather uncomfortable, don't you?"

"It's not very practical," said Digger, with a hint of lewd interest mixed into his disapproval.

"Well I wouldn't wear one of those things," said Sweet Gas.

"Not to worry," said Merlin. "I don't think they come in size eighty-four. Besides, you don't have a bowel."

"What's that got to do with it," said Sweet Gas indignantly. "I have as much right to wear a thong as anyone else; I have lots of crevices."

"I'm not hearing this!" yelled Chester.

Fortunately, they were soon past this hazardous zone and had reached the toy section at the back.

The clerks were busy arranging a display for Llama's Eve. It was still two months away, but people were already getting into the festive spirit. It took their minds off bankruptcy, war and plague.

The heroes gazed in wild surmise. Everywhere they looked, shelves and shelves of toys glittered and twinkled, just waiting for eager little hands.

"Gosh!" said Edwardian. "I never knew! This must be paradise."

"Awww, look at the cute plush toy parrots," said Chester. "Aren't they sweet!"

"I think we should make our choice as quickly as possible, before our colleagues suffer further brain damage," said Merlin. "What exactly do we need?"

"Something educational," said Neville, but he was talking to the wind, because Merlin had just spotted the alchemical sets.

So many beakers, retorts, reagents and instruments, and all in handy boxes with colorful pictures! True, they depicted smiling children doing simple things like melting salt and fawning over pretty colors in test tubes, but Merlin knew better than to pay attention to this bit of deception.

In the right hands, these amazing kits would shake up the very foundations of civilization.

"My word!" said Edwardian. "The things children learn these days! Here's a plastic fighter jet with three different kinds of missiles, from the Crush Enemies toy company."

The others ignored him, lost in their own worlds. Digger had opened up an entire fleet of construction vehicles and was showing some toddlers how to build a rock crusher and sink a mine shaft.

"The tungsten carbide drill will make short work of this floor," he said. "We'll sink a shaft down to the third floor and run lateral shafts through the China department."

Then he moved a dump truck to the drill site.

"Vroom, vroom," he said.

Arthur sat in a plastic dump truck, giggling happily as Digger looked for a suitable drill.

Chester, meanwhile, had arranged dozens of plush toy parrots in an enormous toy theatre, and he was standing behind a lectern with moist eyes.

"They like me!" he yelled. "They really like me!"

Sweet Gas had found a mineral collection and was grokking his new little friends.

Neville had discovered the Sesame Street section and was lecturing Big Bird.

Merlin opened three of the alchemical sets and went to work.

"The things they give children these days!" he said. "If anyone is listening, I'd certainly like a few of these alchemical sets in my Llama's Eve stocking."

Soon, a number of retorts were smoking merrily away.

Meanwhile, Edwardian loaded a video game into the game console bolted to Arthur's new stroller.

The screen brightened. A peaceful village appeared, complete with happy villagers, who were boiling their laundry, catching and cooking haggises, and pounding smoking iron

into various useless ornamental devices.

A choice of catastrophes appeared in a little options box on the right side of the screen.

An evil grin formed on Edwardian's beak.

"It's the 'God Game'," he said to no one in particular. "You get to play god. Hee, hee, hee."

He selected a tornado, cranked it up to Category Five, and set it loose on the village, completely destroying it in a whirl of flying matter.

A lone survivor, a puny villager shook his fist at the storm.

"KILL THAT ONE!" roared Edwardian.

The others looked at him in surprise.

"My word," said Sweet Gas. "I never knew Edwardian poets could be so violent."

"They pretend to be prissier than thou, but it's all fakery," said Digger. "Really, they're just swamp creatures like the rest of us."

Neville began experimenting with Mister Potato Head while Sweet Gas opened up a boxed model railroad and arranged the track, running it over his fissured and corrugated surface.

Then an irritable voice said "Ahem!" and everyone looked up guiltily.

It was the manager, surveying the carnage.

"Umm...." Said Chester.

"DISEMBOWEL HIM RIGHT NOW!" roared Edwardian, frowning at the lone villager who kept thumbing his nose at the storm.

"Give it to me after you take it out," said Sweet Gas. "I might be able to use it."

Merlin got up from his new lab to have a little chat with the manager. There were several new scorch marks on his robe, and his beard had been singed here and there.

"I'm a wizard, mind you," he said.

"Oh, I see," said the manager. "That would explain the pointy hat."

"I suppose you want payment for all of this."

"Only for the things you intend to buy."

Merlin waved his hand, producing another of his bilious green clouds. There was an ominous creaking noise in the overhead sprinkler system, but he stopped it with a special spell he'd written expressly to prevent sprinkler systems from ruining his green clouds.

When the smoke had cleared and everyone had stopped coughing, the manager noticed an open chest.

Inside the chest were a lot of gold doubloons. He stared at them for a long moment, his brain trying to tell him that they were fake, but something much more primitive in him, something rooted in basic survival tricks learned in the savannahs, told him these were real.

As was the pirate with the wooden leg, the big sword, and the dazed look that was already giving way to a look of murderous rage.

"Will that be enough, do you think?" said Merlin.

The manager blinked.

"There's a problem?"

"The...umm...gold is acceptable. But we don't take pirates."

"Oh, him! Merlin sent the pirate back with a wave of his arm."

The manager, an easy going, friendly sort who actually liked watching children inspect his selection of toys, was trying desperately to stuff his sanity back into its jar before it got away from him.

"What is it you wish to purchase, sir?" he said.

"Everything," said Merlin.

"Everything?"

Merlin nodded encouragingly.

"Isn't that a bit excessive, Merlin," said Neville. "If you spoil Arthur rotten, he won't want to study hard and go to university. He'll miss all the beer drinking and soft porn."

"I wasn't thinking of Arthur; I was thinking of US."

"Merlin's right," said Chester. "We don't really know what Arthur wants, do we? We'll have to try everything out ourselves to make sure the toys are safe."

The manager, who had begun to have doubts about himself, decided the best course was immediate and firm action.

He led Merlin to a cash register, and waved a hand in front of a dazed cashier until she recovered from her shock.

"Erm...Jenny will help you," he said desperately. "They want to buy everything, Jenny. We won't bother scanning; I think there's a total somewhere in the data base; I'll just look it up and give it to you, shall I? And you can enter it."

"I'll need codes sir."

"For everything?"

"No you won't," said Merlin, and the manager and cashier believed him, because Merlin had that sort of power, occasionally.

"Do you have Air Miles, sir?" Jenny asked.

Merlin nodded and produced his card.

Jenny looked at the manager, who was smiling and nodding because if he tried to do anything else he might faint.

"What's the exchange rate on doubloons, sir?" Jenny asked.

"A lot," said the manager in a cracked voice.

Merlin looked it up on his Palm Pilot and Jenny worked out the amounts on a calculator.

The transaction went through eventually. Merlin nodded at the fixed smiles attached to Jenny and the manager; then he waved his arms and the heroes, along with Arthur and all of the toys in the Bay toy department, materialized near the Lady of the Lake's lake.

"We sure got a lot of stuff," said Digger. "I hope we don't ruin Arthur."

"Arthur will be okay," said Merlin. "I'm not so sure about Edwardian; he has a glazed look in his eyes."

"WAR!" roared Edwardian. "CRUSH ENEMIES!"

Then Arthur grinned at him and Edwardian picked him up.

"Edwardian seems to have become a surrogate mother," said Merlin.

"No he hasn't!" said Digger. "Arthur likes me just as much as he likes Edwardian. He feels sorry for Edwardian."

"Hey, Arthur's reading a book now," said Neville. "Who taught him to read? Was it you, Merlin?"

"And he's bigger, too," said Chester. "Does that mean a lot of time has passed and we're older now?"

"You haven't aged at all," said Merlin. "Quit complaining."

"Yes we have!" said Chester. "Look at Edwardian. He's got a wrinkle."

"That?" said Edwardian, hurriedly scanning himself in a pocket mirror. "That's not a wrinkle; it's a PLEAT."

"So what does that make you?" said Digger. "A curtain? Where's your drawstring?"

"I didn't hear that!" yelled Chester.

"What's Arthur reading?" said Digger.

"Wittgenstein," said Neville.

"No it isn't," said Edwardian. "It's Chivalry for Dum Dums. He's learning how to be a noble king."

"Good," said Merlin. "He managed to get the reading thing down. Now he needs lessons."

"In what?" said Edwardian, holding Arthur protectively. "I won't have him learning about the birds and the bees."

"Lessons in chivalry, you fool!" roared Merlin.

"What's to learn?" said Digger. "Chivalry is simple: it's all about sticking sharp swords in people, piercing them with arrows, stabbing them with knives, knocking their brains out

with metal balls, punching through their chests with spears, smashing their skulls, hacking them to pieces with axes, kicking them to death with horses, beheading them, drowning them in moats, pulling them apart with ropes, disjuncting them on racks, boiling them in oil and crushing them with rocks."

"And after that, there's dancing, poetry, and playing the lute," said Edwardian. "I can teach him poetry."

There was a bonking sound and he fell silent.

"So who do we get for a tutor?" said Digger.

"He needs more than a tutor," said Merlin. "He needs a companion to play with."

"Another baby?" said Edwardian. "Don't look at me! I'm not having one."

"Why not?" said Digger. "It would give you something to write about."

"We need someone to lend us a toddler," said Merlin.

"We could invite someone who has a toddler to come and play with us," said Digger. "I mean, with Arthur."

"Who would we invite?" said Neville. "We can't ask just anybody? We'd want someone who likes Jean-Paul Sartre."

"Look in the phone book," said Chester.

Merlin produced a phone book and Digger began flipping through it. After a moment, he said: "This isn't helping; it doesn't give the age of the people listed. How do you find people with babies? Besides, it's the directory for Lighter Than Air, California."

"If you want to find people with small children, you look in psychiatrist's offices, at the valium counter in drugstores, and in daycare centers," said Merlin.

"Hey, why don't we start a daycare center!" said Edwardian. "That way, we'll get lots of companions for Arthur and he can start practicing to be a real king, ordering people around and that sort of thing."

"I don't know...." said Merlin. "That could be difficult."

"What's so hard about looking after a bunch of infants?" said Edwardian.

There was a murmur of agreement. They were all big chaps, after all. Why should they be nervous about looking after a few infants?

"That's it then," said Merlin. "Everybody is agreed? We start a daycare center?"

A chorus of voices yelled: "Agreed."

Merlin waved his arm and chanted a new spell in which the words 'shrink' and 'retainer' figured prominently, and after the customary green cloud had disported itself, a daycare center appeared.

The Hippopotamus of Fate had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 108:CLAUSEWITZ ON DAYCARE

Merlin stepped back from his creation, smirking with pride.

"Nothing to it," he said. "Daycare centers are easy."

"That's not a daycare center," said Digger. "It's a fortification. Where did you get the plans? Clausewitz? Sieges'R'Us?"

Merlin was indignant. "I got the plans from one of Arthur's video games--OKAY? It's what little kids like these days. Besides, it's been modernized. There's a dungeon with fully operational accessories so they can torture their classmates as much as they like."

Everyone peered at the curtain walls, at the gun slits, the barbed wire, the trenches and the moat.

"You WANT the children to be safe from advertising executives and telemarketers, don't you?" said Merlin irritably. "This is as safe as it gets."

"What about the parents?" said Edwardian. "What if they decide to visit their offspring?"

"They'll be issued identity cards. If they don't have proper ID, they'll be dragged off and

interrogated."

Edwardian eyed the large, torpedo-like shapes hurtling through the waters of the moat.

"Those are awfully big goldfish," he said suspiciously.

"They're lawyers," said Merlin. "We need them in case anyone tries to sneak up on us with a lawsuit."

"Where are the children supposed to play?" said Chester. "In the trenches?"

"This castle is fully child-friendly," said Merlin. "There's a playground on the other side of the blast shield."

"This reminds me of the new theology building at the University of Strange Thoughts," said Neville.

"Theologians have a lot to worry about, do they?" said Digger.

"Interfaith dialogs," said Neville. "Dangerous things."

"I don't feel good about this place," said Edwardian, shivering. "It's not cozy and inviting, like a country garden."

"Country gardens are vulnerable to airborne assault," said Merlin. "Besides, children can trip over roots and fall out of trees. This is a hazard-free zone where children can assault each other in perfect safety."

"It's too grim and martial," said Edwardian. "The little tykes won't like it."

"What are you whining about!" said Merlin. "The parents will approve. The children will love it. We'll teach them how to shoot telemarketers through the arrow slits, and how to prepare boiling oil and pour it onto spam artists."

Edwardian was horrified. "Merlin!" he gasped. "The violence! The horror! You'll traumatize them!"

"What's the matter, Edwardian? Suffering from withdrawal pangs because you had to stop playing Arthur's video games and concentrate on more important things?"

"We're supposed to be teaching Arthur how to be a legendary king, brimming with wisdom, fair play, social justice and sportsmanship."

"We tried that once," Merlin snorted. "Arthur lost."

Edwardian shook his head. "At least try to make it a little more cheery."

"We could put some potted plants in the dungeon," said Merlin.

"Pictures of famous academics would be nice," said Neville.

"I'll lend you my print of the storming of the Bastille," said Digger. "It's never too early to start learning about parasitical aristocrats and what to do with them."

"The more I look at this thing the more I think we're making a mistake," said Chester.

"We don't know the first thing about daycare centers."

"This is a pretty good start," said Merlin.

"Yes, but what do we do now? Where are the children? Doesn't it come with infants?"

"We have to go out and collect them ourselves," said Merlin.

"And how do we do that?"

"It's quite simple; we put an ad in the paper. Exclusive daycare center, approved by Duns Scotus, Cardinal Richelieu, and Jean-Paul Sartre. Twenty places available."

"Twenty places!" said Neville. "Isn't that a little ambitious?"

"Okay, okay! So we make it ten! We put an ad in the business section of the Globe. That way, we can announce our IPO at the same time."

"This is not for profit!" said Digger, scandalized. "It's a cooperative, for everyone's benefit."

"Cooperatives don't pay the bills," said Chester. "We have big expenses."

"For what?" said Digger. "If we need something, Merlin will make it."

"I should think a playground would be apt," said Neville. "Preferably one with child-safe devices that the little tykes can ascend and descend."

"The playground is the sawdust-covered area in the middle of the courtyard," said Merlin. "I arranged it so the guards in the towers could see everyone. The children can play with the crossbows and the ballista. With luck, they'll launch something nasty into the Lady of

the Lake's lake."

"The parents will demand toys that are a little more age-specific," said Neville. "We could give them some academic gowns and caps, and they could pretend to be professors trapped in a graduation ceremony."

"We should find toys that will interest little children Arthur's age," said Edwardian. "There must be some suitable things among the objects we purchased at the Bay."

"You can't have my dump trucks!" said Digger quickly.

"That's a good point," said Neville. "We should do some field work and make notes on which toys Arthur destroys first. Where is he, by the way?"

The heroes glanced nervously around. When they didn't see their little bundle of joy, their nervousness gave way to terror.

Digger jabbed a finger at Neville. "I thought YOU were watching him."

"I was watching Merlin," said Neville. "I thought YOU were watching Arthur."

"Oh my gosh!" wailed Edwardian. "Wasn't anyone watching him? Suppose he was run over by a herd of elephants and squashed. Oh my little king--"

"Relax," said Merlin. "He's right here, behind a mound of broken model freight cars, playing quietly."

"What's he playing with?" said Neville. "What did he pick out?"

"Oh this is so exciting," said Edwardian. "Arthur's first possession!"

"Another victory for capitalism!" muttered Digger. "This is how it begins."

"Oh, so!" said Edwardian. "I notice someone was pretty quick to hoard the dump trucks when he thought he might have to share."

"I was guarding them for the workers of the world."

"Is it the Lego castle with knights, dragons and stuff?" said Chester.

"Is it a plastic bowel?" said Sweet Gas. "Is he playing doctor?"

"He's a bit young for that, isn't he?" said Neville. "Besides, you need someone of the opposite--"

"I'm not hearing this!" yelled Chester, clapping his hands over his ears.

"I think you're a bit behind the times, Neville," said Merlin. "They don't necessarily pair off anymore when they're playing doctor. They form teams and leave surgical clamps inside each other."

"Look!" yelled Digger. "He's playing with a hammer. Isn't that cute! He's pretending to be a mine engineer."

"A craftsman, you mean," said Edwardian. "I love all trades, their tackle and gear--"

"No he isn't," said Neville. "He's pretending to be a committee chairman; he's bopping Chester on the beak. Quick; pull him away!"

The heroes converged on Arthur, and by dint of great courage in the face of mortal danger, they managed to pull him away from Chester's beak.

Everyone massaged their bruises and waited for their ears to stop ringing.

"It's okay," said Chester, rubbing his beak. "It's only a temporary beak, as you know. I'll be forced to keep it until Mister Wizard here decides to give me my operation and turn me into a real parrot. Besides, Arthur was just playing; he didn't hit me as hard as he could."

"Are you kidding," said Neville, rubbing a bruise on his shoulder. "That child has the strength of an ox."

"Of course he does," said Merlin. "He needs it. It's a dog-eat-dog world. He has to learn how to bash his enemies or he'll never get to Harvard."

"The University of Strange Thoughts, you mean," said Neville. "Harvard is much too conventional for a boy as gifted as our Arthur is."

"Is there anything in Malory about Arthur being a psychopath?" said Edwardian.

"A psychopath in those days was a peasant who fought back," said Digger.

"It does say in Malory that Arthur treated Sir Pellinor rather shabbily," said Neville. "Sir Pellinor, you remember, knocked Arthur down, beat him to a pulp fairly and squarely, and even offered to rip off his head. Arthur resorted to a shifty, sneaky wizard to weasel out of his

just desserts."

"What do you expect him to do?" said Merlin crabily. "He had a job to do; he couldn't lie around all day with his head torn off. Besides, fair play is for pansies. Arthur had Saxons to fight. You can't fight Saxons with a copy of the Queensbury rules in your fist. And you don't want a pansy defending the Underworld against hostile bidders."

"I suppose he was a violent person because he had an unhappy childhood," said Chester.

"He's still having it!" said Neville. "Look, he's smashing Digger's mine assembly with a tractor."

"Cor, I didn't know you could do so much damage with a toy tractor," said Chester.

"Of course he had an unhappy childhood!" said Edwardian. "Torn from his mommy's breast at the tender age of nothing, raised by a lot of bachelors who think milk is a byproduct of the local brewery, exposed to the fruits of modern manufacturing...."

"This is exactly why we need a daycare center," said Chester. "If Arthur is ever to recover from his separation anxiety, he'll need the company of children his own age. We'd better start up the daycare machinery right away."

"So we're agreed?" said Merlin. "We'll call it Merlin's Daycare Center, shall we?"

"Hey, it should be Edwardian's Daycare Center," said Edwardian. "I'm the one who's been doing all of the work, getting kicked into privies, blowing up the milk, and serving as a puking post for the little tyke."

"We'll compromise, shall we?" said Merlin. Then he waved an arm and a sign appeared in front of the castle:

Merlin's Edwardian Daycare.

Edwardian fretted and grumbled, but there was nothing he could do about it.

"I still say it's missing something," said Neville.

"What?" said Merlin. "We have blockhouses, guard towers, barbed wire, security posts, metal detectors...."

"Neville has a point," said Chester. "We should hire a consultant to check it out before we advertise."

"Got anyone in mind?"

"The Lady of the Lake?" said Chester.

"That harridan!" snorted Merlin. "Forget it! Besides, she's still at the lake."

"No she isn't," said Neville. "She's right here, filming us. I can hear her video camera."

"Drat that woman!"

Merlin waved his arm and Gracie MacHomework appeared.

"Do you mind!" she said. "I was marking examination papers."

"You're always marking examination papers," said Merlin.

"I don't have any choice; the parents demand it."

Then Gracie spotted Edwardian, who was trying to hide behind Digger.

"You look familiar," she said. "Aren't you the exhibitionist from the lake?"

"I'm an Edwardian poet!" said Edwardian, trying to make himself smaller.

"Ha! That's what they all say!"

"They do? I mean, I really am an Edwardian poet! I won a prize in the Tewksbury Festival. It was a poem about galoshes in the rain."

"You don't look like an Edwardian poet."

"What does an Edwardian poet look like?" said Neville, interested.

"Tweedy and ineffectual, like a chaperone at a prom," said Gracie.

Then she inspected the premises, smirking and chortling to herself.

"Call this a daycare center? It's a theme park for lawyers. They'll have a field day with you! They'll sue you for having toys, for letting the sawdust pile up in dangerous mounds, for not having proper bathrooms. You're vulnerable on a dozen fronts--no sinks, no first aid station, no kitchen...."

Merlin followed her around, conjuring up things as she recommended them.

At length, she discovered Arthur playing with a mace.

"This won't do," she said. "He might hurt himself."

When she tried to remove it, however, Arthur turned bright red with rage and screamed.

"You'll have trouble with this one, you mark my words," said Gracie. "He needs to learn some manners."

"That's precisely why we started this daycare center," said Edwardian.

"Hmmp! Who gave him all of these toys?"

"You can't have my dump trucks," said Digger.

"There's only one table here, and it's the wrong kind," said Gracie.

"It's my best card table," protested Merlin. "I spent hours gluing that baize on it--"

"The children will cut it to pieces in five minutes. You shouldn't make them sit at one big table; they'll squabble over who gets to sit next to whom, and who's most important. They'll have food fights and they'll spill juice on each other. You should at least make it round, so no one can claim precedence."

Everyone thought about this for a moment.

"Brilliant!" said Edwardian.

"It is rather a clever idea," said Neville. "I wonder if it would work in the faculty lounge."

Merlin grumbled and muttered to himself, then he waved his arm and the table changed its shape.

And that, of course, was how the round table came into being.

Sad to say, Merlin never gave proper credit to Gracie MacHomework for her extraordinary idea, preferring instead to attribute it to Arthur.

Such is the lot of elementary school teachers, the unsung heroes of civilization, plodding on through the minefields of the education wars, staving off barbarians, savages, and product tie-ins, giving selflessly of themselves, etc....

Arthur, of course, would remember the table in later life, and order a new one from IKEA.

Gracie, meanwhile, had had enough.

"I'm not meddling in this, she said. "It's a disaster waiting to happen. Besides, I like the past just the way it is. I've gone to a lot of trouble to learn about it, and I'm not going to waste time learning it all over again just because you fools want to change it."

"WE don't decide what happened in the past," said Merlin. "The archaeologists from the Royal Ontario Museum do. It's their job."

"And look at the mess they've made of things! Every time one of them digs up some new object, we have to cross out an entry in our history textbook and write in a new interpretation. I ask you!"

Gracie waved goodbye.

"Have fun, boys!" she said. "You'll need psychiatric help after this. I think you should make a preemptive call to Dr. Philip Napoleon. Not that he can help you!"

"That sounded ominous," said Edwardian.

"Don't pay any attention to Gracie," said Merlin. "She's been around children too long. She thinks everyone is a savage now."

Merlin faxed an ad for their new center showing a lot of happy, smiling children and a smiling wizard doing magic tricks for them.

"Isn't that false advertising?" said Edwardian.

"Do you think anyone will be mad enough to send us their babies?" said Neville.

"Maybe we should dress up in costumes to make the parents feel at ease," said Edwardian.

"Dress up as what?" said Merlin.

"Elves, I should think. People always think of elves as cheerful."

"Are you kidding!" said Merlin. "Do you know what the elves did to the Jolly Fat Llama when he asked them to make toys for kids around the world?"

"I don't think I want to know," said Edwardian.

"Fat boy had to call in an air strike. He barely escaped with his life."

"So? It was a misunderstanding. The elves work for him now."

"They don't actually work; they just pretend to. They're actors, and they get union scale. When Vlod Ironbeak found out what would happen to his tax base if elves started competing with local factories, he took charge of the whole thing."

"I wonder if anyone will show up," said Edwardian.

"Getting antsy, are we!" said Merlin.

"What's that racket outside?" said Neville. "It sounds like a lot of peasants storming the House of Commons."

Digger glanced through the gate.

"Oh my gosh!" he yelped. "It's parents! Hundreds of them. And they're all dragging screaming, kicking infants with them!"

"Shortage of daycare spots in the world," said Merlin. "Terrible thing."

"We're doomed!" said Edwardian. "Doomed."

Digger had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 109:ALLURA'S BAD HAIR DAY

Edwardian gazed in horror at the mob of parents besieging the new daycare center.

"Aren't they supposed to form a single line?" he said.

"I suppose they're a bit anxious," said Neville. "Eager to secure that first rung on the ladder of opportunity reaching to the pinnacle of academic excellence."

"They're storming the gate!" said Edwardian. "They'll tear us to pieces!"

"Nonsense," said Neville. "They're quite sensible, actually. They obviously looked over the available facilities and decided we were the best."

"You call that sensible do you?" muttered Digger.

They eyed the parents as the line slowly extended past the moat and along the path around the lake.

"What are you afraid of?" said Merlin. "They're just people, like us."

"No they aren't; they're PARENTS."

Edwardian was growing frantic....

At the same time, but in a different era, a telephone rang in a Gothic condo.

It was an awkward moment.

Allura, the femme fatale who had captivated Macklin, was in the middle of a transformation.

"Drat!" she grumbled, tearing the phone away from the wall and smashing it to pieces.

Allura had a savage temper, especially during full moons, when she transformed into a werewolf.

There was a tense silence, then another phone rang.

With a growl and a sigh, Allura went into the kitchen to answer it. She knew it would be Vlod; who else would dare call her on the night of a full moon?

Who else would dare to call her at all?

He would ask her about Macklin, of course, and she would have no answers.

Allura was a troubled duck. It isn't easy being a werewolf. Not when you're a duck; most people choose one or the other.

She was beginning to have Doubts.

She was beginning to think she'd been wrong to lure Macklin away from Gladys KindHeart, even if it had only been for an evening.

At the same time, she was fascinated by Macklin. He filled her with a strange mixture of pity, contempt, and shame.

What would it be like to marry a model railroader and live an ordinary life, she wondered.

She tried to imagine getting together with other model railroaders and their spouses, running trains in their backyards in the summer, going out on picnics to take pictures of the big container yard north of the city, relaxing in the evenings with videos of the Union Pacific terminal in Lighter Than Air, California.

It might be fun.

The telephone shrilled again, triggering all of her rage buttons.

As she picked up the hated machine, she caught sight of her reflection in the polished metal backing of a blood gutter.

She looked a fright! Her transformation was still incomplete. She had the face and choppers of a wolf, topped by the feathers of a mallard. Her chest was a fierce carnivore's, but her legs and webbed feet were a duck's.

She picked up the phone and yelled, "Quack!"

"Dear me," said Vlod. "That time of month again?"

"You know it is."

"The moon is irregular, but you, my dear, are utterly reliable."

"I'm a busy duck--I mean wolf--I mean, where is this leading, Vlod?"

"Our little business deals have always gone off like clockwork in the past," Vlod said silkily.

When Vlod used that tone of voice, Allura automatically checked for assassins.

"You have complaints?" she said.

"Just thinking out loud. I was looking over the Macklin account this morning. I expected to see a list of items under expenses. Track, switches, building materials--that sort of thing. I see nothing. Perhaps this is only a draft, and I've misplaced the final version."

"Macklin hasn't been working, as you know. He took some time off because he fell into a coma."

"And you haven't nudged him a little? You haven't pushed him along with your feminine wiles."

"My feminine wiles are not a tractor!" snorted Allura. "I don't push people with them."

"I see."

"I enslave people with them."

"Of course, my dear. Forgive me. I was only thinking of our mutual interest in seeing Macklin complete the model railroad I commissioned him to build."

"The affair is complicated. His sweetheart is watching over him."

"This is a problem?"

"It has to be handled properly."

"If memory serves, your customary tactic in these situations is simply to tear the offending mistress to pieces and devour the scraps, I believe."

"Only when they deserve it," said Allura indignantly. "I have scruples."

"And Gladys doesn't?"

"Are you asking me to assassinate her?"

"Did someone mention assassination? I don't think I did. We were discussing a polite agreement between business associates regarding a comatose slacker, I believe."

"Of course."

"I've been patient, Allura. I'm not a slave driver. If one of my business partners becomes ill, I'm perfectly willing to allow a bit of sick leave."

"You've been patient because you aren't sure how to deal with the aliens who want to persuade Macklin to renege on his deal with you and sign up with them."

"I have no objection to aliens, as long as they pay taxes. These aliens, however, are blocking traffic on Mount Pleasant with their incessant spying on Macklin. This makes it difficult for people to get to work and increase productivity. I think it's time they were sent home."

Allura uttered an unpleasant laugh. "Before they get to Macklin, you mean."

"You might consider pushing your feminine wiles at the chief alien. A chap named

Bessemer Converter, I believe."

"He won't be an easy target; he disguised himself as a quacking elephant so he'd blend in."

"I'm sure you'll be able to find him without too much difficulty."

"I don't do elephants."

"As a favor to me...."

"That's calling in a lot of favors, Vlod."

"I HAVE been patient."

"I suppose I could let him buy me a drink. I wonder if he'll fit into a bar."

"He's only DISGUISED as an elephant, remember. In fact, he's not much bigger than we are. And he does have five rectums and three heads, which is a bit excessive, and tends to slow him down."

"Not when he's in disguise. The extra attachments have been retracted."

"But he has the MEMORY of his various implements, and he's probably feeling uncomfortable and vulnerable. You could ask him about the green fields of home; make him feel nostalgic for his friends and relations, should he have any. He might cry in his beer."

"Aliens have thirty-nine different genders, one of which is an interrupt request. What am I supposed to do with him? Select an option?"

"I'm sure you'll manage, my dear. You have super powers, after all."

Allura growled, but Vlod, anticipating her reaction, had already hung up. He knew he had her, and not because she owed him.

It was the challenge.

She had never turned an alien.

Could she bend a quacking elephant to her will, without actually tearing it to pieces and eating the scraps?

She looked at herself in the shiny blood gutter again. She still looked a fright, but the transformation was progressing. The duck feathers were gone. The webbed feet were developing fur.

A little lipstick on the ravaging jaws, perhaps. Some blush on the fur. A bit of liner to emphasize her gorgeous red eyes. Some perfume.

What would an alien like? Eau de napalm?

No! It was humans who liked the smell of napalm.

Speaking of humans, by the way; there were quite a few of them in Tockworld--refugees from the series of catastrophes that had destroyed their planet.

One of these humans was about to embark on an interesting adventure.

No one felt sorry for the humans, of course. People who blow up their own planet, shroud it in toxic waste and gas it with biochemical agents are not to be pitied.

Everyone in the Universe of Adjustable Manners knew about these fools, and when the space ships had started arriving, asking for sanctuary at various ports, they were usually refused admission.

In fact, in the early days of the exodus, things looked bleak for the shattered remnants of humanity.

Until, one fateful morning, a particularly desperate captain found himself orbiting a planet that looked exactly like home.

It was Tockworld, of course--a planet so much like Earth it used many of the same names for its cities, institutions, and famous people.

None of these cities, institutions, or famous people had the slightest thing to do with their counterparts on Earth, of course. They were mostly ducks, camels, caymans, llamas, turtles, armadillos and others.

Vlod Ironbeak, the mayor of Toronto, for instance, had nothing in common with the mayor of the OTHER Toronto, a human with many sterling qualities and a love of his people that surpassed understanding.

Anyway, when the first lot of humans approached the rulers of Tockworld for asylum,

they were refused.

Rightly so, in my opinion.

Captain Rogers was about to give up when, in a last throw of the dice, he approached Vlod Ironbeak.

Vlod knew about the humans; he'd been watching signals from Earth's TV networks for a long time. He knew they were dangerous, but there was something intriguing about them.

They understood the concept of paying taxes.

In short order, Vlod signed an agreement allowing all surviving humans provisional citizenship in Toronto.

The provision was that they pay taxes.

Tockworld, as the humans soon found out, was an anarchic place. There were national governments, but they counted for nothing, being little more than a lot of monkeys on a stick.

It was the cities that counted on Tockworld; and Toronto was the most powerful, largely as a result of Vlod's efforts to find new things to tax.

Humans poured in, and eventually began to spread out to other cities. They took to business like ducks to water, and soon controlled most of the financial institutions in Tockworld.

There was a war.

Fortunately it was limited to stock markets and other financial institutions, which were quickly reduced to picturesque Gothic ruins.

The various mayors caught up in this tragic affair deployed academics and wizards from the University of Strange Thoughts, and these heroes soon put a stop to the war. They did it by transforming all financial executives into werewolves, eagles, ravens, and other predators.

Eventually, everyone found happiness once again.

Cities around the world boasted of their picturesque and sinister Gothic financial centers, featuring ruined stock markets and banks, and pleasant Gothic forests.

Many humans deplored the war, of course, and were allowed to preserve their corporeal forms intact, unless they were interested in trying something new.

And humans kept coming, though the flood had slowed to a steady drip...drip...drip....

News of creatures like Vlod gets around quickly.

Among the new arrivals was a young man who had been a bit of a failure on Earth, before it was destroyed by his colleagues.

His name was Sandy MacTavish.

He was a Torontonian.

He was also a mediocrity.

He had been about to flunk out of the University of Toronto when war broke out, and all records of his incompetence were destroyed.

Sandy's parents had died young, leaving him in the care of an aunt, who despised him.

He loved his aunt, of course, and tried everything to please her, though it was a doomed pursuit.

On the day war broke out, a basset hound followed him home.

Basset hounds, as everyone knows, are dogs of ill omen.

"Shoo!" said Sandy. "Aunt Hammerfist hates all living creatures, especially dogs. She'll eviscerate you."

But the dog, whose name was Wiggytip, slipped inside when Sandy opened the door and pattered down into the basement.

"No!" yelled Sandy, plunging after him.

"Fee...fie...fo...fum!" roared his aunt, from somewhere upstairs. "I smell a DOG!"

Sandy raced into the gloomy laundry room, where the dog had paused to wait for him.

It seemed Wiggytip wanted Sandy to follow him.

But where was the poor chap leading him? And how had he learned so much about Aunt Hammerfist's basement?

It turned back outside Aunt Hammerfist's workshop, its eyes glowing a soft, hypnotic green, urging Sandy on.

He was growing panicky now. The basement would come to an end soon. There was only his aunt's workout room, and her collection of axes, then the concrete wall.

Her heard the heavy clump of his aunt's work boots on the stairs, then the door opening.

He was for it now! She'd toss him out into the street and he'd have to go and live in a rooming house, with winos and English professors.

Failure! He thought. Mediocrity!

From somewhere upstairs, a radio announcer said, "This is it folks! The Kaiser has launched his missiles. In ninety seconds, the world as we know it will disappear forever. The President is speaking now from his bunker, advising everyone not to panic...."

"Where are you, dear?" growled Aunt Hammerfist. "There's no use in hiding. I'll find you, wherever you are. I've been waiting for you."

Sandy thought he could see the shadow of her meat cleaver raised high above the shadow of her head.

This way! Wiggytip seemed to urge. Past the bug collection. To the wall!

Sandy went stiffly towards his new friend. Despair had taken hold and he was winding down like a child's toy. Soon his heart would stop clattering and the breath would go out of his body, and what did it matter! One more mediocrity hacked to pieces by life's butcher shop!

There was a door in the wall.

He put his hand on the knob and a thrill of excitement went through him.

I wonder where this leads, he thought.

Fateful words indeed!

"I'm coming, dear," said an ominous voice.

Sandy could hear the whicker-whacker of the meat cleaver swooshing noisily through the air.

He opened the door and went through.

And came out in front of a large bed and breakfast in a Gothic forest.

'Madame Butterflies' 'Bed and Breakfast, said the big sign in front. 'Not a Flying Saucer'.

Wiggytip, had a bad feeling about this.....

CHAPTER 110:CHOOSING TIME

Sometimes success can be too much of a good thing. There were so many parents besieging the new daycare center, it looked like the battle of Maldon.

Edwardian was close to hysteria.

"Look, look, see, see!" he yelled. "That soccer mom kicked that truck driver right in the peripherals."

"Calm down," said Merlin. "He probably offended her because he wouldn't stand aside to let her have his place in line."

"Now the truck driver's little girl is bopping the soccer mom with her complete Shamash and Nonni doll set, with optional sacrificial altar."

"Somebody should tell her those things are fragile," said Neville. "One of my graduate students broke his set whilst quaffing mead at a frat party."

"Now they're all going at it!" yelled Edwardian. "Oh my goodness gracious me! We'll never be able to handle those wretched little beasts! We'll need the marines!"

"Take it easy," said Merlin. "A little blood-letting is a good thing; it shows enthusiasm."

"Desperation, you mean," said Neville.

"That's the capitalist system for you!" said Digger. "Encourage the workers to kill each other off so they won't notice they're being exploited."

"Who's exploiting them?" said Merlin. "We haven't even opened for business yet. Besides, they aren't workers; they're upper middle class."

"They may THINK they're safely ensconced in the upper middle class, but in point of fact, they could be downsized in the wink of an eye."

"I don't like this at all," said Edwardian, trembling like a blob of jelly in a cement mixer. "They never behaved like this in Tewksbury, in the rain, in the trams."

Merlin waved his arm and a heap of medieval suits of armor appeared at their feet.

"Put these on," he said. "You'll be quite safe."

"I see no reason why--" Neville started to say, but a terrifying scream interrupted him.

A woman adorned with sapphires and a mink coat had tried to cut in front of everyone else, and some of the parents were instructing her in the proper etiquette.

"Oh my gosh! What are they doing to her NOW!" yelled Chester.

"Rather warm for a mink coat, don't you think?" said Neville.

"It's never too warm for ostentatious display," muttered Digger, eyeing the woman with a kind of fierce joy. At last! A true symbol of wealth and oppression he could be indignant at!

"Good heavens!" said Neville. "It looks as though the other parents are building a scaffold."

"She can't have my dump trucks," said Digger.

Neville watched in amazement as a group of fathers retrieved lumber and carpentry tools from their SUV's. This was worse than Friday evenings in the faculty lounge!

"They're going to execute her, right in front of the kiddies," said Edwardian. "Those poor, innocent children; they'll be traumatized for the rest of their lives! They'll lose all of their self esteem and grow up to be telemarketers."

"The children are setting up the noose," said Neville. "They're doing a good job of it, too."

Merlin waved his arm and the woman vanished before the mob could drag her off to the scaffold.

"I sent her back to the Jurassic era," he said. "She won't be cold anymore. I suggest you put on your armor, right NOW."

The heroes selected bits and pieces of medieval armor and helped each other dress.

"This one's got a dent in it," said Digger.

"It's probably from the department of experimental theology at the University of Strange Thoughts," said Neville. "Priests can be quite belligerent when it comes to a point of doctrine."

Edwardian donned the armor reluctantly.

"I have a bad feeling about this," he said.

"Try a little therapy," said Merlin, handing him Philip Napoleon's business card. "It doesn't work, but it makes you feel better because it's expensive and cures constipation."

Everyone else had dressed up in their metal tuxes by now. Fully encased in dented and tarnished suits, the little band surveyed the volatile parents.

"We'd better do something before they start lighting up flaming torches and smashing in the door," said Edwardian nervously.

Edwardian's anxiety was beginning to infect everyone else.

"I'll handle this," said Neville. "I'm used to it, you know. Every year, thousands of students besiege the Experimental Philosophy department in hopes of a place."

"They do?" said Chester. "Whatever for?"

Neville gave him a dark look. "Philosophers are celestial beings, in case you don't know," he said. "Anyway, the important thing is to create an illusion of order. We can do that by setting up a desk and chair on the mossy verge and asking the parents to register for an interview."

Edwardian gazed nervously at the mob, a tremor going through him. "I'm not sitting out there, all alone," he said.

"I'll go," said Sweet Gas. "I'm not afraid of a lot of screaming mammals. Their bowels

make them vulnerable."

"I thought you WANTED a bowel," said Merlin.

"You don't need bowels to be vulnerable and charming," said Sweet Gas indignantly.

"Some of us have lichen, you know."

"Some of those people have little dogs," said Merlin. "They might pee on you."

"Good heavens! Isn't there a rule about leashes here?"

"I'll do it, shall I?" said Neville. "I'll tell them it's the preliminary round, in which we simply collect data. The rest of you take up defensive positions in case I need help."

"Good of you," said Chester.

Digger eyed him suspiciously. Neville wasn't the type to volunteer for anything unless there was something in it for HIM.

But what advantage could he possibly see in controlling a lot of worried parents' access to a daycare center?

Neville clanked out in his armor and set up a desk and a chair.

Edwardian watched nervously. "That was very brave of him," he said. "I shall write a nice poem for his tombstone. Something about his mournful ghost sitting in a tram in Tewksbury, in the rain."

"He's up to something," muttered Digger. "You mark my words."

The first parents fought their way to the desk. Two mothers arrived at the same time.

"Little Caradoc is so looking forward to attending your daycare center," said one of the mothers.

"Not as much as little Boas," yelled the other mother. "See; he even brought an apple for the registrar!"

She held out a fistful of dollars, waving them in front of Neville's beak.

"You call that an apple, you peasant!" said the first mother. "THIS is an apple."

The first mother held out a few dollars more, waving them in front of Neville's beak.

"Ladies, ladies," said Neville mildly.

"I knew it," muttered Digger. "He's going to enrich himself with bribes."

But Neville surprised them.

"Money won't buy you a place here," he said. "We're only interested in the children. Bring us your huddled masses--the good, the bad, and the ugly. We'll educate them and prepare them for a life of service as undergraduates in the department of experimental philosophy, at the University of Strange Thoughts."

"What tosh!" said Digger, and he clanked indignantly out to the grassy verge.

"Don't listen to this chap; he's just a lawn ornament. A kind of academic platypus. We are in fact interested in training young men and women in the care and feeding of a social conscience."

"But you won't let them have your dump trucks," said Chester in a stage whisper.

Digger turned angrily on him.

"I'm saving them for the workers of the world," he said frostily.

"Time out!" yelled Merlin, waving his arm.

Everyone fell silent.

"This isn't working," he grumbled. "We'll be here all day while they try to outbid each other."

"So what do we do?"

"We have to interview each family, ONE AT A TIME, and make a selection."

"Selection! Said Digger. You mean take some little tykes and refuse others. That is disgusting."

"We don't have enough room for everyone," said Merlin. "We're not Revenue Canada."

"But look at the line-up!" said Chester. "There must be hundreds of them, and the line keeps growing longer. We'll be at this all month!"

The heroes gazed apprehensively at the sullen faces as parents pushed each other, and children brandished laser pointers and laptops.

Sweet Gas lumbered out and sat on a hockey dad who was trying to form a new line closer to the desk.

A group of children gathered excitedly around the squashed parent as Sweet Gas got up.

"Is he dead, Mister Pile of Boulders? Cool! Are those his intestines, mommy?"

"Quiet Jenny; your dad and I are arguing about money."

"I was careful not to break anything," said Sweet Gas. "He's just resting."

The afflicted parent got up, shook himself off, and made a call on his cell phone.

"Hello, Reality TV? I want to report a near-death experience...."

"You should rest," said Chester. "All of your bones are broken."

"Who needs bones? I'm going to be rich, rich! We can send the kid to Harvard."

Neville turned away in disgust.

"Harvard," he muttered. "Imagine naming a university after a World War II training aircraft! First interviewee, please!"

A husband and wife stepped forward, dragging a child who was turning an odd shape of purple as he threw a tantrum.

"This is Lance," said the mother. "He's shy. That's why he likes to smash things. I know he'll thrive here."

Neville made the sign to ward off evil. "And what sort of games does little Lance enjoy?" he said.

"Well, yesterday he organized a burial party and buried one of his friends in a rock tomb. It was quite authentic. We kept the tomb."

"And the buried child?"

"The lions ate him," she said vaguely.

"I see. And do you read to your child at night?"

"What?" Both parents looked confused for a moment, but recovered quickly. "Read?" said the father. "Umm. Yes; Lance enjoys the articles in PLAYDRAKE."

"But not the pictures?" said Neville.

"Of course not," said the father. "Those are for me--I mean, to, ummm...."

His voice faltered as his wife's glaring eyes reached the temperature of the surface of the sun.

"Right then," said Neville. "How do you normally handle tantrums?"

"We leave that to the nanny," said the mother. "If Lance throws a fit in company, we just take everyone outside and wait on the porch until he stops screaming."

"Very sensible. Does the child like sports?"

"Hockey, of course," said the father, and a beam of light shone from his forehead. "He's going to make the NHL for sure, eh? Yesterday he knocked an opposing player clear out of the rink and disemboweled a ref."

"Good show!" said Neville. "And what are your goals for him?"

"I want him to make sixty million dollars and start up a new corporate monopoly," said the mother. "There'll be an annuity for the school, of course, and the teachers won't be forgotten. Especially the registrar."

There was a flurry of activity behind Neville as Digger and the others beckoned him for a consultation.

Digger was beside himself.

"Did you hear that harridan?" he said. "She wants a monopoly! I knew it! I knew this was a bad idea. We should march them all into the mines right now."

"Digger may be right," said Edwardian. "If this is what these people are like now, I shudder to think of what they'll be like when it comes time to apply for elementary school."

"Do we even know what the criteria are for admission to our own institution?" said Chester.

"Relax," said Merlin. "It's easy. We find out which parents have done the least amount of damage, and which children are less inclined to commit mayhem."

"We'll need a plan of battle," said Digger. "Once the parents find out who gets in and who doesn't, there'll be a full-scale attack, with lawyers."

"Leave that to me," said Merlin. "I know how to handle lawyers. Anyone who makes trouble goes straight back to the Jurassic period. That's where I send all of my enemies."

"So that's why the dinosaurs died out!" said Digger.

Neville returned to his desk and faced an impatient, irritable mother, with a child who was pulling apart a mechanical toy.

"Aren't there any women around here?" the mother asked.

"Yes, in the lake," said Merlin, pointing. "She's um...having a nap. She likes to lie around on the bottom, dreaming about her job."

"This is Angus," said the mother. "He likes to hit other children on the head with a hammer; it doesn't mean anything--it's his way of being sociable. And I insist he be allowed to wear a dirk in class; it's Scottish, so it's a religious item."

Neville examined the malevolent Angus.

"Do you play the bagpipes?" he said.

"Yus. Kill bagpipes. Death. Yus."

"No you don't, dear," said the mother.

"Which is it, then?" said Neville.

The mother eyed Neville, trying to work out which side of the bagpipe equation he ate his bread on--love or hate.

"Um, we we're thinking about getting Angus lessons, perhaps," she said. "But then again, perhaps not, depending on how everyone feels."

"But he doesn't play now?" said Neville.

"Not as such."

"Good."

"You don't like the bagpipes?" said the mother.

"Oh I do enjoy them when they're played by competent pipers. There are three left in Tockworld, I believe. The others were killed."

"Really?"

"It's a cold, hostile world for bagpipe players. So no bagpipes, then?"

"Under the right circumstances, if he could be taught to play perfectly. But not, as an amateur. No."

"Right, then. Next question. Do you like haggis?"

"Um, funny you should mention that. My husband and I were just thinking about adopting a haggis. In fact, as soon as we finish here, we're going to rush off to the adoption agency."

"Really?"

"I hate haggis," said Angus, who was taking apart a nearby grandfather clock and bending the gears with a pair of pliers.

"You've never tried it, dear," said his mother.

"I hate it."

"You don't even know what it is."

"Hate it, hate it, hate it!"

"Isn't he sweet!" said his mother. "He's so creative."

"Accepted," said Neville, and watched with interest as another child put a doll into a model boat.

Then the little tyke set fire to the boat.

"What are you doing?" Neville asked.

"I'm giving her a Viking funeral," said the little girl.

"Oh, a warrior's funeral," said Merlin approvingly.

"She was naughty," said the child. "Her husband caught her in bed with her lover."

"Oh, I see."

"Just like mummy with the milkman. Only daddy doesn't know about him yet."

"Really."

There was a tense silence.

Neville withdrew for a discussion with the others.

"That child is okay, but the parents might be a bit of a problem. They won't work as a team, reading to her at nights etc."

"Accept her," said Merlin. "We can work things out."

Neville delivered the good news to the parents, then he returned, wondering how Arthur would accept this new arrival.

"What's he doing?" asked Chester.

"He bonked her with his sword," said Sweet Gas. "Oh my; she snatched the sword out of his hand and snapped it over her knee. And now--ooh, that smarts!"

"Shouldn't we break this up?" said Edwardian.

"We'd better let them work it out," said Merlin.

We could let them watch a video," said Chester. "Something about parrots, for instance."

"We have one on the food chain," said Merlin. "

"Oh good!" said Edwardian sarcastically. "A video about wild animals killing and eating one another. That's all the little beasts need!"

"I thought we agreed to postpone all lessons on economics," said Neville. "We'll have to warn them not to try it at home."

Merlin popped in the cassette and the children sat in rapt silence as a lioness slashed Bambi's throat with a single powerful blow.

"My word!" breathed Edwardian, horrified.

"Sweet aren't they!" said Merlin. "Innocence personified."

"There is no innocence," said Neville. "Bosola of Sicily tells us we are all born with smirches."

"Smirches?"

"You've heard of besmirched?" said Neville. "We got it from the Great Fall, when Jack and Jill dropped the pail of water."

Then he returned to deal with the next parents, a tall, lean pair armed with cell phones, pagers, slim briefcases and matching black suits.

They beeped and buzzed like mechanical scorpions.

"Gillian is allergic to food," said the mother. "You'll have to feed her with a portable drip. We have organic saline bags sent in from Tiffany's. Here is a list of children who must not be allowed to come into contact with her because she doesn't like them. She's very sensitive and will only respond if you treat her like a creative adult and bribe her."

The people next in line heard this, and in no time at all the orderly, courteous group of parents dissolved into a raging mob.

Sweet Gas quieted everyone with a sudden emanation of methane from his fissures.

"Hurry it up!" said Merlin. "Finish the selection process while they're stunned."

"No one light any matches, please," said Neville. "Next!"

The line was shorter now because a lot of parents had fallen in combat. In no time at all, Neville finished his chores.

"We have our ten children," he said. "Now what?"

"Now someone has to tell the other parents the places have been filled," said Merlin.

The heroes peered out a gun slit at the remaining parents.

"Who's feeling suicidal today?" said Edwardian.

"Relax," said Merlin. Then he yelled, "The NHL is recruiting at the next castle. Five places only."

In seconds, the mob had vanished.

"Quick, pull up the drawbridge!" yelled Chester. "Before they realize there IS no NHL in Camelot."

"Yes, but we have Saxons and Vikings," said Merlin. "It's the same thing, really."

"Now what?" said Edwardian. "I wonder what the children are doing. It's very quiet on

the playground."

"I suppose we should check on them," said Chester reluctantly.

"Do you think it's safe?" said Edwardian.

"They're only a bunch of little kids. What can happen?"

"What's that sound?"

"It's the Lady of the Lake and Gracie MacHomework, laughing."

Edwardian had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 111:TEACHER BURN-OUT

The thing about starting a daycare center and enrolling children in it is you eventually have to teach the children something.

Merlin, who had survived a previous teaching experience on a parallel world, knew enough to hang back a little.

Let someone else have a crack at it, he reasoned. Why hog all the agony?

Edwardian eyed the little tykes nervously.

"So now we go in and do our bit for civilization," he said.

"Well put!" said Merlin, slapping him on the back. "Play up, play up, play the game! Why don't you have a go at it?"

"Isn't that what they said to Cardigan at Balaklava?" said Digger.

"Well, no one actually said THAT to him," observed Neville.

"Just think; you can be your own Tennyson!" said Merlin. "Ours not to reason why--"

"Tennyson never went pelting off after a lot of nasty cannons," said Digger. "He did his charging behind a pen."

"Oh for Pete's sake; they're just a bunch of little kids!" said Neville. "I'll go! I've had lots of experience in educational environments."

"What? The University of Strange Thoughts?" There was a chorus of laughter that lasted several minutes while Neville grew very red in the face.

"Oh thank you, Neville!" said Digger, recovering his breath. "I needed that. I love a good joke."

"I'll show you!" muttered Neville. "In no time at all I'll have those little creatures doing algebra like Moors."

"He's serious," said Digger, astonished. "He really means to go in there."

Everyone stared at him in amazement.

"Gosh!" said Edwardian. "You'd better take my lucky tram ticket. My great auntie Piddywack bought it the day Dreyfus was convicted and she never had the heart to use it. 'You mark my words!' she said to my great auntie Mintybottom; this will lead to civil war in France. The Kaiser will take the opportunity to sack Belgium, we'll have a terrible war, and then we'll have to put up with a completely different era, with beastly popular music."

Everyone stared at Edwardian for a moment.

"Here, take my lucky rabbit's foot," said Digger. "It's not actually from a rabbit; it's a big toe from a running dog capitalist industrialist mine owner werewolf. It'll bring you luck."

"Take my box of parrot seed," said Chester. "You'll need something to sustain you during the long hours on the proving grounds."

"You can pick a bit of my lichen if you like," said Sweet Gas. "It might ward off missiles."

"And I shall give you immunity from prosecution," said Merlin, touching him with a crooked forefinger. "You'll need it if you make the mistake of grading any of their work. Infants are very litigious these days."

They all ducked behind the blast shield as Neville started for the door. When they heard the telltale hiss of the airlock snapping into place, they gathered around the monitor to watch.

"I wonder how long he'll live," said Chester.

"I give him about an hour," said Merlin. "Unless he tries to draw on his experience as a professor at the University of Strange Thoughts. In that case, I'd give him about three minutes."

Neville hesitated, taking it all in.

It was a big room. There were a lot of toys scattered in clumps on the stone-flagged floor.

And there were ten little children, watching him.

One of the children had been strapped into a makeshift rack. Two little girls were turning a wheel, tightening the ropes.

"Good grief!" Neville exclaimed. "You'll break that rack! What do you think you're doing!"

A boy standing on an overturned box of caviar said: "We're starting a revolution. You have to crush the bourgeoisie right away, or they'll become focal points for malcontents and counter-revolutionaries."

"But this is Camelot!" said Neville. "You're supposed to establish order by setting a good example."

"That's in fairy stories; this is life. If you want to secure your position, use terror."

This was too much for Edwardian. Forgetting the danger he was exposing himself to, he strode into the room.

"This is blasphemy!" he said. "Arthur ruled with compassion and honor. He was a nice man, full of clean virtue, like Matthew Arnold."

Neville shook his head, waiting for this canard to fade away.

The children eyed the two old fools wolfishly. Here was fresh blood.

Neville kept a wary eye on the pocket orator declaiming from the caviar box.

"What is your name, child?" he said.

"Sir Vladimir Ilyich," the little chap said. "I'm learning how to use spies and secret police so I can be a popular leader when I grow up."

"King Arthur didn't have secret police."

"That's why he was liquidated. He never knew what was going on. No spies, no proper command structure. No central committee. It was easy for the running dog capitalists to subvert his reign."

"Toronto has those too, my boy. In fact, your mother and father are capitalists. How else could they afford this place?"

Sir Vladimir didn't like this very much.

"They aren't my real parents," he said. "When I was a baby, aliens abducted me from a sealed train at the Finland station and gave me to a bunch of bankers as collateral for a loan. The bankers picked straws to see who'd get stuck with me. My mom and dad lost."

"You poor child!" wailed Edwardian, his heart bursting with sentiment. "You have no self esteem."

"KILL THAT ONE!" roared Sir Vladimir.

The children moved closer, muttering and grumbling among themselves.

"Take them to the rubber duckie," said Sir Vladimir.

"Isn't that cute!" said Edwardian. "They want us to say hello to their little rubber duckie."

Neville, who was a realist, and therefore cynical by nature, was not so sure.

The children marched them towards a sandbox in the middle of the play area.

Ensclosed in the sandbox was a very large, mud-brick rubber duckie, with red eyes and an Egyptian headdress.

It also featured authentic looking striations, representing eons of erosion.

"Isn't that cute!" said Edwardian. "They made a rubber duckie sphinx."

"Looks like the Michelin Duck to me," grumbled Chester, who was peering over Merlin's shoulder at the monitor.

Neville said nothing; he was watching a child who seemed to have appointed himself

curator of the rubber duckie exhibit. He had dark eyes that burned with malevolence and cunning.

Merlin, watching on the monitor, felt his hair stand on end.

"That looks like the legendary matrix of evil," he said. "It was designed to collect and hold the Power of Durable Evil."

"A rubber duckie?" said Chester.

"It only APPEARS to be a rubber duckie," said Merlin. "It's a matrix. I wonder what it's doing here. It can't be the real one. It must be a votive object--an image of the real thing."

"Placed here to influence the children?" said Sweet Gas.

"Diabolical," said Merlin. "Doctor Wacker must have something to do with this."

"What is your name, child?" said Edwardian.

"Mordred."

"What a nice name! And where did you get this nice duckie?"

"A mad doctor gave it to me."

"What did I tell you!" muttered Merlin. "Wacker is on the march."

Edwardian touched the votive object.

"SQUEAK!" it bellowed, and he jumped back.

The children laughed.

Merlin strode into the room, his hair still standing on end.

"That thing is evil," he said. "We have to get rid of it."

"Nonsense," said Edwardian. "It's just a cute rubber duckie with oddly colored eyes. Look, the children are bowing down to it; isn't that sweet!"

Merlin was growing impatient.

"You fool! Don't you realize what happened when Queen Victoria died? Evil came into the world! And here is an image of the quintessence of evil, right in front of our eyes. It draws on the power of the real matrix, influencing whomsoever dares to look upon its awesome form."

"Good grief!" said Chester. "I'll never take a rubber duckie into the bath again."

"Tosh!" said Edwardian. "Look at this cute little temple in front of it. There's even a table where the children have tied down one of the little girls...ummm...should they be allowed to do that?"

"They certainly build realistic toys these days," said Digger. "That ceremonial dagger Mordred is raising over his head looks just like the real thing."

Merlin cast a spell. The dagger turned into an armadillo and scuttled away, looking for ants. The little girl sprang up and whopped Mordred with a Shamash doll until Mordred stamped his foot and threw a tantrum.

"How do you expect me to develop self esteem if you won't let me cut out people's hearts!" he bawled. "I'll grow up to be a psychopath."

Then he skulked off and kicked a Nonni doll.

The matrix, meanwhile, had vanished, utterly.

Merlin shook his head. "There is evil afoot," he said.

"I'm sure that's wrong," said Edwardian.

But he had begun to have doubts, and he went on a desperate search for signs of natural goodness and other delusions.

At length, he stopped beside a child playing with some empty sausage casings.

"And who gave you these, young fellow?" he said.

"Sir John D., sir. He's really nice; he gave me three whole sausage casings for all of my useless steam shovels and drilling machines. And he said I could live in this nice tin shed if I gave him the deed to the daycare center."

"Messy, isn't he!" said Chester. "Look at that nasty oil gushing out of his drilling equipment."

Edwardian moved on, trying not to despair.

"And who are you?" he asked, examining a boy in a lab coat who was checking a lot of

wires and flasks.

"Sir Frank, sir."

"My what an interesting apparatus. Why have you strapped that odd-looking child to the table, and what are these wires running up to the roof?"

"It's a new kind of anti-aging device, sir. Very stimulating. Gives you a whole new outlook on life. Besides, the subject isn't complete yet; we haven't finished building her."

"Isn't that wonderful!" said Edwardian. "Have you tried it out yet?"

There was an ominous silence, punctuated by the occasional giggle, which only served to emphasize the odd atmosphere.

Just then, a child with a hump and a cowl slouched forward, bearing a mysterious box.

"Here are some more body parts to add to the subject, master," he said to Sir Frank.

"Thank you, Sir Igor. You may begin assembling them."

"Where did you get those, child?" Edwardian asked.

"The Girl Guides were selling them door-to-door in cookie boxes," said Sir Igor, smirking.

Igor quickly stapled the parts together with a staple gun and attached them to the child on the table.

"Are we ready, Igor?" said Sir Frank.

"We need a storm, master."

Frank glared at Merlin, looking as if he were going to throw a fit.

"Oh, excuse me," said Merlin. He snapped his fingers and the day rapidly became dull, dark, and dreary, with low, scudding clouds and plenty of thunder and lightning.

There was a sudden, brilliant flash as lightning struck the wires, then a hissing, popping sound.

Seconds later, the figure strapped to the table groaned and sat up, breaking its bonds.

Then it spotted Edwardian and uttered a loud honking sound, like a goose.

Edwardian backed away.

"Goodness, gracious me," he said in a frightened voice.

The honking figure leaped from the table and began waddling towards Edwardian.

"Where did you get the brains for that one, Igor?" said Frank.

Igor shuffled his feet and giggled.

"I have a confession to make, master. I couldn't find the cemetery, so I borrowed a brain from a member of parliament. That's why it honks so much. "

"We'll have to start over again, Igor. Our body parts think Edwardian is their mummy."

"I'm already a surrogate daddy," squawked Edwardian. "I can't be a surrogate mommy too. It isn't natural."

The goose, which was actually a very tall duck in a baggy suit and tie, wrapped its arms around him.

"Mommy!"

"You look a little pale, Edwardian," said Neville.

"Mmmfff," said Edwardian.

"Where's Arthur?" said Digger. "I don't see him anywhere. I thought we were supposed to be training him to be a white knight."

"Yield, recreant piped a small voice," and Arthur came out from behind a ballista."

"Isn't that cute," said Chester. "He's pointing a little tiny stick-like thing at Edwardian."

Everyone ducked.

Edwardian, however, had just broken away from the body parts, and was completely unprepared for the blinding laser light, never having seen one before. Luckily, it missed his eyes and burned a hole in his beak.

"Ouch, ouch, ouch!" he yelled.

"Snack time," said Merlin quickly.

"What's for snacks?" the children yelled.

"Cheese and crackers."

"That's child abuse," roared a little girl. "I'm calling my lawyer."

"Umm, I was wrong," said Merlin. "It seems we have smoked salmon and brie on Ralph Lauren crackers."

The children gathered around the snack table and threw smoked salmon at each other. Merlin caught one of the little felons and snatched a wad of salmon out of his hand.

"Go and see the principal at once!" he hissed.

"You ARE the principal, Merlin," said Edwardian.

Merlin was silent for a moment while he pondered this bit of news. Then he said, "Are you quite sure?"

"It's YOUR daycare center," said Edwardian. "You conjured it up. You HAVE to be the principal."

"I must have been out of my mind," grumbled Merlin.

"Snack time is over," said Neville. "It's time to get down to serious matters, children. You all want the same thing--to be rich and famous and to lord it over everyone else. We're here to help you."

There was a silence while the infants digested this, then a sneering laugh.

"Tell us another one," said Sir Frank. "What do you clowns know about being rich and famous? Look at you!"

"Time out," said Merlin, and the teacher heroes retired to the staff room to collapse.

"Are you going to tell me that teachers actually manage to do anything with a group like this?" said Edwardian.

"My Auntie Stahlhelmet does," said Digger. "She just has to walk into a room and the children stop their rioting."

"What magic does she use?" said Merlin. "Ask her if she'll come here and help us out."

"Are you kidding? She works in a real school, with professional colleagues who know what they're doing."

"I'll handle these little beasts," said Sweet Gas. Then he rumbled into the play area and said, "I'm a troll, mind you."

"Cool," said several voices.

"Look, he's made out of rocks. Let's take him apart."

"Rip off his lichen."

"Crack him open with hammers and chisels!"

Seconds later, Sweet Gas rumbled out of the play area.

"I need to lie down," he said. "I have a headache."

"What have we done!" said Edwardian. "We've unleashed a plague."

"Send for Gracie MacHomework," said Chester.

"She'll make us eat humble pie," said Merlin.

"SEND FOR HER, RIGHT NOW!" said Sweet Gas.

Merlin muttered and grumbled to himself, then he waved his arm and Gracie showed up with a big smirk on her beak.

"Do you solemnly promise to increase the budget, raise salaries to the median level, and maintain decent class sizes," she said.

"Yes, yes, anything," said Merlin.

Gracie produced a contract.

"This is a special contract, designed for politicians, government officials, and people like you," she said. "Sign it in blood. If you renege on any of my conditions, I'll clone you and recycle the originals."

The little group of heroes gathered around the contract and eyed it warily.

Gracie produced a pin for puncturing sensitive digits.

Merlin had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 112: MERLIN'S CLOWNS

Gracie walked into the room. The others flinched as she entered, expecting the children to launch a missile attack, but there was dead silence.

Neville, who had considerable experience in the rigors of academic life, watched in awe. He recognized the atmosphere. It was dense with respect; you could feel it right through the blast shield.

Gracie stood near the blackboard for a moment, getting a good look at her charges, memorizing each face.

Then she spoke in a clear, untroubled voice: "Today we are going to draw pictures of clowns. I will give each of you a box of crayons and a sheet of paper. Does everyone know what a clown looks like?"

"Yes Ma'am," the children said, pointing excitedly at the door. "They left just before you came in."

"Very good," said Gracie. "You may begin."

"I resent that," said Edwardian hotly.

"I'm sure they didn't mean ME," said Neville. "Gracie's got them in the palm of her hand. How did she do it?"

"It's because she has a bowel," said Sweet Gas. "When you have a bowel you can do ANYTHING."

"She just walked into the class, like this," said Edwardian, and he strode across the observation pit in a vaguely Gracie-like manner."

"I don't think you've got it down properly," said Chester. "Maybe you should wear a kilt."

"Look, she's walking around the table," said Neville. "She knows all of their names already. How did she do that?"

"Sir Frank is actually talking nicely to her," said Digger. "He's the one who likes to steal body parts from graves and make new workers who don't belong to unions because they're technically dead."

"You don't need unions when you're made out of body parts stolen from corpses," said Neville. "You can do whatever you like."

"Shh, shh; the children are working," said Sweet Gas. "Have you ever seen anything so cute! Look, Arthur is cheating; he's copying Lance's picture!"

Gracie stood behind Arthur for a moment, until he became aware of a peculiar sensation, as though he were sitting in front of a refrigerator with an open door.

With a sudden start, he turned back to his own page and quickly drew a picture of Merlin in a clown suit, standing on his head with his beard flopping down around his face like a patch of old, dead weeds.

Merlin, watching in the observation pit, began to glow like an overheated piston.

Gracie looked up at the camera and smirked. Then she walked from table to table, watching the children work, never interfering, but frequently offering encouragement.

"How does she do it?" said Neville. "Imagine having that much power over a lot of graduate students! I could make them speak in class; I could make them hand in papers on time. I COULD MAKE THEM READ BOOKS."

"Maybe if you assigned books written by humans, they'd be more interested," said Merlin.

"ONE of the books you dislike so much was written by ME," said Neville. "It's a fascinating study of the origins of philosophy in the Big Bang."

"If I had a bowel, I could make big bangs too," said Sweet Gas. "When you don't have a bowel, it's difficult to get the proper methane density, unless you happen to be in a tunnel."

"Or in an observation pit," said Digger. "We don't need a demonstration, Sweet Gas."

"She does it with magic," said Merlin.

"Does what?" said Digger. "The Big Bang?"

"She must have a magic wand," said Merlin, ignoring this crudity. "She touches the children with it, stunning them into silence and obedience."

"I don't see any wands," said Neville.

"Of course you don't. It's a stealth wand, invisible to radar. She sneaks up on you and when you're least expecting it and she taps you on the brain box. POW! Instant nerd."

"Really?" said Neville. "I must look into this."

"What for? You teach the sort of children who do their rioting in the streets, not in the classroom."

"I don't want any rioting at all. It draws the wrong sort of attention to our department. The University might revoke our status and fold our lab into engineering."

"What's wrong with engineering?" said Digger, scandalized. "A little practical work would do you good."

"Oh of course!" said Neville. "We could build philosophical lighthouses, or machines that read Wittgenstein."

"It would be an improvement on what you do now," said Digger. "Philosophy is a parasitical activity, if you ask me. Teaching young people to cope with their horrible circumstances! What you should be doing is sending them out into the streets to fight for higher wages, social justice, and more chocolate bars in their lunches."

"Shh!" said Edwardian. "The children have finished their assignment."

Gracie went around the table, admiring their work. "Oh I like these!" she said. "I've never seen such silly looking clowns. Let's tape them up on the walls, shall we?"

The children ran excitedly to the walls and with only a little concealed jostling and maiming, began taping up their art.

"Hey!" said Neville. "Those are pretty good likenesses of Edwardian and Digger. I love the clown suits; they bring out the inner you."

"There's one of you next to the blackboard, Neville," said Chester.

Neville peered suspiciously at it.

"That's not me," he said.

"It isn't? I wonder why it has that distinctive, pear-shaped look. And why has the child written 'Neville' across the bottom of the page with an orange crayon."

Neville turned an interesting shade of rust.

There was a prolonged silence as the heroes gazed in dismay at their likenesses. Each of them was depicted in a ridiculous costume, with bulbous beaks and dizzy eyes.

Merlin had a nose like Pinocchio. Neville looked like a platypus in a striped academic gown with spots of mustard and tomato ketchup. Edwardian resembled a very large balloon surmounted by a smaller balloon with a floppy beak.

Sweet Gas, of course, looked like a sack of rocks in a loot bag.

Chester had been drawn by a child who really liked bowling pins.

"I wonder if that's how they really see us," said Edwardian in hurt tones.

"They're obviously perceptually challenged," said Merlin. "They need corrective glasses, or a detention."

"I've been betrayed by a revolutionary," said Digger. "Vladimir made me look like a psychopath in a caftan, waving my miner's pick as though it were a butcher knife. I knew this would happen; I warned Shaw not to let the Bolshies hijack the revolution."

"We all know about union leaders," said Merlin. "If the miner's hat fits, wear it."

"Oh, so! What about wizards who can't do magic?"

Soon the little band of heroes had become a mob of hurt and angry soccer fans, bashing each other with classroom supplies.

Many people harbor the misguided belief that they would make wonderful teachers, if they were only given the chance, and that all children would instinctively love them as soon as they walked into a classroom.

There is a cure for this, but it has dangerous side effects.

Neville, with his considerable experience of teaching--simulated teaching, actually--should have known better.

Alas, the delusion respects neither experience nor age. Ten minutes in a real classroom

would burn away the misty visions, but the cure, as mentioned previously, has dangerous side effects.

The heroes were yelling and screaming at each other; chalk, erasers, paperclips and spit wads were hurtling through the air, and Sweet Gas was conjuring up an enormous cloud of methane, when a voice cut through the nonsense:

"SILENCE!"

Everyone froze. It was Gracie, her arms folded across her chest, a terrifying look on her face.

"Shame on you, children! Look at this mess. Clean it up immediately."

Merlin looked as if he were about to explode, but he bent to the task.

"Yes Ma'am."

"And you, Digger."

"Yes Ma'am."

The heroes set to work while Gracie opened a window to clear the air.

When they had finished, they watched anxiously as she inspected their handiwork.

"Good," she said, and everyone breathed out a sigh of relief. Who knew what Gracie would do to you if she found you wanting!

Next, she led them into the play area and motioned to a lot of cushions on the floor.

"Now sit quietly," she said.

The other children were all reading picture books at the round table. Every so often one of them would look up and smirk.

"There are rules in my class," said Gracie.

"But we're not children--" Neville started, and then broke off under the intense pressure of her gaze.

"Please do not interrupt me when I'm speaking, Neville."

"Yes Ma'am."

"Put up your hands if you have questions."

"Yes Ma'am."

"You will sit quietly in my class until you are told you can get up. Is that clear?"

"Ma'am?" said Sweet Gas, waving his hand. "Please Ma'am, I have to go to the bathroom."

"You're a troll, Sweet Gas. 'You don't have a bowel.'"

"But I like to pretend--"

"Sit down."

Sweet Gas sat down abruptly. Moments later there was a nearly silent pfffffft, and Gracie had to open another window.

"Oh my gosh!" said Chester. "I'm going to faint!"

"I'm sorry," said Sweet Gas. "You scared me, Ma'am."

Gracie softened at once.

"Come, come. I'm not a monster; I only want you to learn the rules so we don't have any more trouble. Settle down, children, and I'll read you a story."

"What about the other children?" said Digger.

"They're working out a complicated problem in wave theory, however it was nice of you to think of them Digger."

Gracie looked through an assortment of picture books. "Now what shall we read?" she said. "A funny book? A fairy story? A scary story."

"A scary story please Ma'am," everyone shouted.

"Very well. Here's THE LITTLE CUNEIFORM BOOK OF HOW HUMANS DESTROYED EARTH, A bedtime book for children."

There was much delighted wriggling and squirming as everyone got comfortable.

Gracie began to read:

"Once upon a time, Earth was a happy place, in spite of wars, famines, plagues, species extinctions, pollution and nastiness. Humans had learned how to ignore the future

and in this way managed to get through the boring intervals between weekends of scotch and soccer.

Then one day, a little-known soccer team from Toronto won the World Cup and the French and Brazilians declared war on Canada...."

It was an exciting story. Everyone listened with rapt attention, even Neville, who had his own theories about the real reason humans destroyed themselves--it was an argument over Wittgenstein, he thought.

Merlin of course had seen it all happen in a parallel world, and he knew it began with a referee's bad call in a Stanley Cup match between Toronto and Montreal.

The battle descriptions were the best part, full of blood-curdling jets, tanks, chemicals and biological agents in the initial bout, then, in the next round, warriors on horseback with guns, and finally, in the last stage, warriors hurtling towards each other with wooden spears.

Then of course there was the last-minute rescue, imperfectly described in the epic GILGAMESH, during which aliens from all over the Universe of Adjustable Manners sent down robot-controlled space ships to extract most of the animals and some of the humans, leaving behind only spammers and telemarketers.

Gracie looked up and saw that her class was nodding off.

"Nap time, children," she said.

Everyone stretched out on cushions.

"Wait a minute," said Neville. "This isn't right." But he was too sleepy to go on.

They woke up to the sound of screaming.

Outside, a lot of shrieking, yelling parents in giant SUV's were bashing into each other, fighting for the best pickup spots.

"What is going on?" said a sleepy Digger. "Has the Labour party won a by-election?"

"Pickup time," said Gracie. "The parents are fighting to be first in line so they can rush home with their infants and take some valium. Now you know where the children learn their manners!"

It was a terrifying sight. A soccer mom cut in front of the line, then a soccer dad drove his enormous SUV up on top of all of the other SUV's, all the way to the front of the line, stopping only when he was resting on the soccer mom's roof.

When the dust had settled, he dropped a ladder for his daughter.

"Maybe you should make a round parking lot, Merlin," said Neville.

"Can't you tame the parents the way you tamed the children?" Digger asked.

"Too late for that, I'm afraid," said Gracie. "They'd sue me. I'd have to pretend to be a personal trainer or a yoga instructor."

"I blame this on sixties culture," said Merlin. "Let it all hang out! Whatever turns you on!"

"I blame it on the Jurassic era," said Neville. "We evolved too quickly; we needed more time to mature."

"Nonsense," said Gracie. "It's simple bad manners: greed, selfishness, ignorance, stupidity and narcissism, and the cure for it is a proper education along with a week or so in the stocks."

"Corporal punishment?" said Neville.

"Never for the children. But the adults need it."

Gracie closed the window so the children wouldn't be shocked by the carnage outside.

Then she gave each of the heroes a gold star.

"You started off awkwardly, but you're good boys at heart and you listened quietly and politely," she said.

Then she gave each of them a dram of scotch and a McBowel's laminated shortbread cookie, and ushered them out the back door.

The heroes trooped into the woods and sat down by the Lady of the Lake's Lake to enjoy their treats.

The Lady of the Lake was playing a rollicking tune on her harp--it was 'The March of the Clowns' from the famous opera, SOME PRINCES JUST WANT TO BE AMPHIBIANS.

"I don't like that woman," said Neville. "She has no respect."

"Shh," said Edwardian. "Can you believe how Gracie tamed those kids!"

"That's not what we want," said Merlin. "We want an aggressive white knight to take and hold the Underworld until Disser comes to his senses and gets it back. We have to train him in the sporting art of hostile takeovers, junk bonds, evaporating profits and mystical balance sheets."

"Gracie will never allow that," said Edwardian.

"I suggest this is the wrong place for it. We need to deal with him at a more advanced age, when we can reason with him."

"So we need a high school?" said Digger.

"You're not going to conjure up a high school, Merlin!" said Chester. "Enough is enough!"

"I don't have to make one," said Merlin. "We already have the Toronto Random School."

There was a shocked silence.

The legendary Toronto Random School is affiliated with the University of Strange Thoughts, and harbors many of the same odd personalities within its battle-scarred walls.

Neville had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 113:WICKED TORONTO

"The Toronto Random School?" said Digger. "What kind of a name is that? Why didn't they call it something interesting, like the Cripple Creek Mine School, or Dead Duck Secondary School? What kind of people live in Toronto anyway?"

"It's a cultural mosaic," said Merlin. "Aliens from all over the Universe of Adjustable Manners go to Toronto because no one harasses them there, or tries to convert them."

"Into what?"

"Dead aliens," said Chester.

"They do, however, frequently become road kill," said Neville. "The drivers are not very forgiving."

"Capitalism at work," muttered Digger.

"The drivers aren't thinking about capitalism when they run you down," said Neville. "They're letting it all hang out, in the spirit of the sixties. What usually hangs out is the emotional heritage of the Jurassic era."

"At least we won't need Gracie MacHomework anymore," said Merlin. "The Toronto Random School comes fully equipped with teachers."

There was a snort of laughter, and the Lady of the Lake began playing 'Three Blind Mice' on her harp.

"That woman needs help," said Chester. "She's too cynical."

"She knows something we don't," said Digger.

"She's a sore loser," said Merlin. "She likes to think she's indispensable."

"Maybe she is," said Sweet Gas. "How are we going to get our little toddlers out of daycare and into a secondary school? They're very happy where they are. We'll need powerful magic to get them into the future."

"Look at the little rascals laughing and whispering," said Chester. "They're up to something."

"I'm not going back in there," said Edwardian.

"We don't have to go back," said Merlin. "We'll use child psychology. I'll offer them something they can't resist."

"Like what?"

"A break in the routine. An exciting field trip."

He waved his arm and a yellow school bus appeared. A sign on the bus said 'Merlin's

Edwardian Field Trips. Educational Fun For All.'

Neville turned away to hide his cynical laughter.

"Get ready for an educational experience, children," yelled Merlin. "We're going on an exciting trip."

"I'm not going to any silly museum," said King Arthur.

"I'm not going in that stupid bus," said Sir Frank.

"Igor tried to rip off my arm for one of his experiments," said Sir Kenyon."

"Vladimir told me I have to go into the refrigerator because it's really part of Siberia, and that's where all rotten traitors go," said Lady Catherine.

Merlin waved his arm again and a green cloud appeared, nearly suffocating everyone. When it had faded away, the heroes and their charges observed a rickety old Edwardian truck parked on a grassy verge, next to a Burma Shave ad.

Gilt lettering on the sides spelled out the words: McBowel's Ambiguous Jams.

"Is that the best you can do, Merlin?" said Neville in disgust.

"I suppose you wanted a Packard Trilobite," said Merlin. "With sufficient room for your ample bottom."

"I have a sufficiency of bottom; neither more nor less," said Neville.

"That's where he keeps his lecture notes," whispered Digger.

"I like Packard Trilobites too," said Chester. "Steel you can trust. Edwardian trucks are no match for the behemoths on modern roads."

"We'd better change the sign," said Edwardian. "We don't want the principal to think we're associated with McBowel's."

"Why not?" said Merlin.

"He might have eaten one of their products; you don't want to prejudice Arthur's chances before we even get started."

"McBowel's is putting up some of the funding for this little project," said Merlin.

"There you have it!" grumbled Digger. "Evil capitalist llamas spreading their tentacles everywhere."

"Shouldn't that be evil capitalist octopuses?" said Neville.

"We don't see many octopuses down in the mines," said Digger. "We see the bones of fossilized academics, dismembered by their students after the first lecture."

"Anyway, I thought all of this time-travel and retroactive upbringing and education bit was done by magic," said Chester.

"Magic doesn't come cheap, you know," said Merlin. "I have to earn back my research and development costs."

"This is what your research and development came up with?" said Neville. "An Edwardian truck? Where did you do your research? An old Eaton's Catalog?"

"I wonder why McBowel's is funding this project," said Edwardian nervously. "Do they know something we don't know?"

"You mean about the side effects of education?" said Digger.

"Has anybody actually seen McBowel?" said Chester.

"Not as such," said Merlin.

"How do you know he exists, then?" said Edwardian.

"Because a cheque drawn on his name expunged the red ink from my balance sheet."

"Capitalist sea horses," muttered Digger.

This time, no one bothered to question his choice of metaphors.

"How do you know McBowel is male?" said Chester. "He might be an alien. He might be from some planet where they watch a lot of movies about people leaping into the air and kicking other people to death."

"They do that here, too," said Merlin.

There was a silence while everyone thought about Jackie Chan movies.

The children, meanwhile, had come up with a more favorable opinion of the truck.

"Cool," said Arthur. "Does it have cannons."

"That would be an anachronism, child," said Merlin. "There weren't any cannons in Camelot."

"Primitive, weren't they!" said Digger. "No cannons, no machine guns, no missiles, no battlefield computers."

Edwardian rolled his eyes. "They had no idea what they were missing."

"What good is an assault vehicle without weapons!" said Arthur.

"Look at this way," said Digger. "Modern weapons are like white bread; there's no fiber. With swords and spears, however, you get the real flavor of the thing, because YOU'RE the one shoving in the pointy bits; not some computer. It makes you think twice before you go charging off to fight for glory and gain, doesn't it!"

"That's why there were hardly any wars in the Fabulous Mists of Antiquity, and everyone lived in peace and harmony," said Edwardian.

"They had morale boosters to keep them going," said Merlin. "Mead, beer, wine, and the death penalty for desertion."

Edwardian was scandalized.

"That's not what Camelot was about!" he said. "Arthur was an enlightened leader, an inspiration to all Britons. Camelot was about harmony, peace, and reverence for beauty, truth, and honor."

"And trams in Tewksbury, in the rain," said Chester.

"Trams are beautiful, especially in Tewksbury, in the rain," said Edwardian defiantly.

Arthur made a gesture to ward off lunacy. "Are you sure he's all here?" he said, pointing at Edwardian.

"He's a bit simple, but he has entertainment value," said Merlin. "Will you get into the truck please, ladies and gentlemen."

The children climbed into the back of the truck and began wrecking things. Merlin motioned to his colleagues to get on board.

"We're not all going to fit in there," said Sweet Gas.

"Just do it!" said Merlin. "It's a magic truck. The cab is bigger on the inside than it is on the outside."

The heroes climbed into the cab, muttering and grumbling to themselves, but they did, in fact, fit.

There was even a sufficiency of room for Neville's bottom.

"That was easy enough," said Merlin. "I think we have everything we need--the children, a keg of McBowel's potable scotch, and a box of valium. Is there anything I've forgotten?"

Just then, Gracie MacHomework showed up with snacks in Tupperware containers, juice boxes, telephone numbers to call in case of emergency, and instructions on what the children should do if they got lost.

Then she stood back and watched Merlin trying to figure out the controls.

Arthur and his chums began hammering on the sides with various implements.

"Isn't that cute!" said Sweet Gas, "They're testing its structural strength."

"Do you think we should take out insurance?" said Edwardian. "The truck might fall to pieces in the middle of a time door."

"We'll make it," Merlin said grimly, and he started the engine.

The engine made an astonishing racket; it sounded like the recovery room in a Victorian field hospital. Then it stalled.

An hour later, and with the addition of some McBowel's Inflammable Porridge, they managed to crawl through a time door.

They popped out on a major Toronto freeway, in the middle of a traffic jam.

"My word, look at the carnage!" said Edwardian. "Wreckage everywhere! What happened here?"

"Rush hour," said Neville. "We're not in Camelot anymore, Dorothy."

"Someone is bleeping at us," said Chester. "Shall I fly out and give them a blast of dragon breath?"

"I thought you were a parrot."

"I'm in between. I haven't had the operation yet."

Merlin looked in the rear view mirror and saw nothing but grille.

"Is that one of the legendary SUV's I've heard so much about?" said Edwardian.

"It WAS," said Merlin, and he thrust an arm out the window, waving casually at the beast on their tail.

In a trice, The SUV turned into an ancient Vespa. A human wearing a business suit and a cell phone gaped in astonishment at his new transport.

Fortunately, traffic was moving at three kilometers an hour, so no harm was done.

"Well done, Merlin!" said Neville. "He was probably a former student of mine, trying to lord it over me because he went into the private sector and makes ten times as much as I do."

"Only that much!" said Digger.

"Where are we?" said Edwardian. "It's nothing but breeze block walls, apartment buildings and wrathful commuters! Where's the light, the air?"

"It was better in the mine," said Digger. "At least I didn't have to worry about gigantic vehicles trying to crush me under their wheels."

"It's called the 401," said Neville, squinting through the fumes at the rickety truck ahead of them. "It drains higher life forms out of the countryside and deposits them among the office towers in the sinister financial district."

"HIGHER life forms?" said Digger. "People who do THIS every day are called higher life forms?"

"Tram drivers in Tewksbury aren't like this," said Edwardian. ; they're always courteous and cheerful."

"They've never had to face berserk passengers with carving knives," said Neville. "Let them work for the Toronto Transit Commission for a month and see how cheerful they are at the end of it!"

Chester looked out the back. "We seem to be trailing clouds of glory," he said.

There was a pall of gas behind them.

"Sweet Gas, is that you?" said Merlin.

"Well I never!" said Sweet Gas indignantly. "Thank you very much! I suppose people with bowels don't emit toxic clouds?"

Chester twisted around and peeked into the back.

"It's a chemistry lab," he said. "The children are making something that involves a lot of colored smoke. Magic pixie dust, I should think. They don't look so young anymore, by the way."

"Of course not," said Merlin., "We jumped ahead to the high-school years."

"They're teen-agers now?" said Edwardian nervously. "Do you think that was a good idea, Merlin?"

"If the children have become teen-agers, the clouds they're manufacturing are unlikely to be pixie dust," said Digger. "Something more potent, I should think."

Merlin sniffed the air.

"Laughing gas," he said. Then he popped open the little window and yelled through it: "Stop making that gas, children! Do something constructive."

Digger shut the window on a crescendo of laughter and insults.

"I won't stand for this!" said Merlin. "I'm an important and powerful wizard, and CEO of a major corporation; I don't need a pack of teenagers treating me like a troublesome old fart."

There was silence and a certain amount of concealed smirking and suppressed laughter.

"Our clouds of glory seem to be working," said Chester. "People behind us are getting out of their cars and singing 'Oh What a Beautiful Morning!' The man on the Vespa is taking all of his clothes off."

"Really!" said Edwardian. "They allow that sort of thing here? I'm glad my poor old great

auntie isn't here to see it. She cried like a baby when Queen Victoria died, you know."

"Good grief, that enormous truck in front of us just discarded two of its wheels!" said Chester.

"Wasteful capitalists!" muttered Digger.

"Only two?" said Neville.

The truck wobbled precariously and slid into a ditch. The doors popped open and its cargo of top-secret hard drives fell into a pond.

"Are we there yet?" said Sweet Gas.

Merlin, growing weary of his troublesome charges, waved his arm again. A door appeared directly in front of them and they rolled through it, popping out in front of the Toronto Random School.

"Hooray!" yelled Edwardian, as he took in the bosky playgrounds and the rather odd-looking building.

The man on the Vespa, who had also popped through the doorway, did not cheer. He opened his briefcase, extracted a mystical balance sheet, and made it into a serviceable costume. Then he dressed hurriedly and staggered away, a fixed grin on his face.

"Well here we are," said Merlin.

"There's something odd about it," said Edwardian. "It doesn't look quite right."

"The students keep altering its outward appearance," said Merlin. "This is a school for the gifted."

"How do we get our own unruly charges accepted into this place?" said Edwardian.

"We have to convince the interviewer of their merit," said Merlin.

"Their marks are good enough," said Edwardian.

"What marks?" said Chester. "Daycare centers don't give marks."

"Leave the interviewer to me," said Merlin. "The first step is to convince him that we do, in fact, live in this time and place."

"Where DO we live, now that we're not where we were when we lived somewhere?" said Edwardian. "We aren't bag ladies are we?"

"Speak for yourself," said Neville. "I do, in fact live here, usually in the faculty lounge. I have a bungalow, but I rarely inhabit it, because my housekeeper makes my life miserable. I call her the scorpion queen."

"I live in a mine," said Digger. "I wouldn't know about bungalows. I have a housekeeper, but she's a pit pony."

"I'm not all here, so I live in a tram in Tewksbury," said Edwardian.

"In the rain," several voices said.

"When it rains," said Edwardian.

"I live on a crooked crag above a wrinkled sea," said Sweet Gas. "But I've been driven out by rock climbers and people filming car commercials, so my real home is where my lichen is."

"I used to live in a volcano," said Chester. "But it exploded, so my wife left me. That's when I decided to become a parrot."

"This won't do," said Neville. "We need an address before we can even think of applying. I'm certainly not going to let you make use of my bungalow; my housekeeper would flay me alive."

"We'll need a house," said Merlin. "A big house."

"All the land here is being used," said Neville. "And someone might complain if a big house materialized in their back yard."

"We'll have to buy a domicile through a real estate agent," said Merlin.

"We'd better do it quickly," said Edwardian. "The children are making a rock video in the back of your truck, Merlin. It's a good thing Queen Victoria isn't here to see this."

Merlin waved his arm and a green real estate agent appeared. She concocted her own cloud of smoke, but it was blue, not green.

Merlin waved his arm again and the real estate lady regained her normal attributes,

including a Mercedes, a voice like a drill sergeant's, and the competence of a battering ram.

She was a little confused at first, but very quick witted.

"My name is Lara," she said. "What price-range were you thinking of?"

Merlin introduced everyone and told her what they wanted.

After she got over the shock, she examined him closely to see if anything was loose or broken.

"We want a house," insisted Merlin. "A big one, close to the Toronto Random School."

"How big?"

"Twenty bedrooms."

"This is Toronto," said Lara, speaking very slowly and loudly, the way people do when they're talking to simple-minded foreigners. "You want a castle near the school? How big is your gross domestic product?"

"I don't think that was a very nice thing to say about Sweet Gas," said Edwardian.

"We'll pay cash," said Merlin. "There'll be a bonus for alacrity."

Lara opened up her laptop and looked up alacrity in a multilingual dictionary. Then she checked listings.

"Twenty bedrooms," she muttered. "How about an apartment building?"

"Apartment buildings aren't very cozy," said Edwardian.

Lara stared at him for a long time.

"Don't worry about Edwardian," said Merlin. "He's a poet, but we keep him on medication."

"I have a big warehouse available. It's a bit of a fixer-upper. You could make lofts."

"I don't like warehouses," said Merlin.

Lara stared at him.

The warehouse, as it turned out, was only a few blocks away, on a street that bordered the Canadian Pacific tracks.

It was a long, two-storey building across the street from a hydro electric building. There were lots of power lines, humming transformers, and mutant sparrows.

"I wouldn't worry about the tracks," said Lara. "Trains are being replaced by big trucks. It's only a matter of time before the tracks are converted into hiking paths."

"Why is it available?" said Merlin.

"People get nervous about it for some reason," said Lara. "They can't believe they found such a wonderful bargain; it makes them crazy, so they have to sell."

Merlin signed on the dotted computer screen.

At the last minute, the owner showed up. He was a pale, thin, bundle of nerves in a frayed jacket and dungarees. He seemed very anxious to complete the sale and get away. He kept eyeing the warehouse, as though afraid it might reach out and tear him to pieces.

After the formalities, he offered up a prayer of thanks and set fire to a lump of McBowel's Inflammable Porridge in the backyard.

"Sacrificial offering," said Lara. "Everyone in Toronto does it when they sell a property. It brings luck."

"Very strange duck that," said Neville.

Edwardian had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 114: THAT OLD, SWEET SONG

Chester eyed the sacrificial porridge burning on its disposable altar.

The owner grinned maniacally at him and fled into the afternoon mists, shrieking like a banshee.

"I don't think this was such a good idea," said Chester. "Did you see the way the owner kept looking back at the warehouse, as though he thought it was going to bite him?"

"He was nostalgic," said Lara. "People feel lucky when they own this place."

"But he doesn't own it anymore."

"That's why he was shrieking. We were discussing terms, I believe."

"Here they are," said Merlin, and he waved his arm.

The requisite green cloud materialized and then dissipated, leaving a briefcase full of emeralds, diamonds, rubies, and a few Alberta potatoes.

Lara endured a brief moment of intense, though not unpleasurable, shock.

"Ha, ha!" she said. "Aha. Yes."

Then she fainted.

Merlin signed her computer screen again while she was out cold. The moment she revived, she countersigned and phoned Brinks.

Once the loot had been safely removed, she rummaged in her purse for a new expression and a slightly altered tone of voice.

"If you ever need a life partner, or a nurturing, caring woman who makes no demands and would be very happy with ONLY A FEW OF THE THINGS I saw in that briefcase....."

Merlin gave her the Eye of Dibs as a tip. This, of course, is the big emerald that in olden times was affixed to the statue of Dibs, the ancient god of economics, who presides over the mezzanine of the ruined stock exchange in the heart of Toronto's sinister financial district.

Merlin had replaced the original ages ago with the Star of Etobicoke, recovered from the secret cache of an unscrupulous trader in stolen body parts.

The people of Etobicoke gave up paganism when they became philosophers.

"Well that went rather well," said Merlin.

"Are you kidding!" said Chester, surveying their prize. "This is a dump. It looks like it was occupied by an invading army."

"Good grief!" said Merlin. "What does it take to satisfy you people! I suppose you want indoor plumbing!"

Then he waved in the general direction of the warehouse, conjuring up a choking green cloud. Moments later it dissipated, revealing a huge, rambling old monstrosity of a house that might have been built by an Edwardian manufacturer trying to look established and Victorian.

The young people gave cheers and war whoops, and immediately rushed inside and began wrecking things.

Merlin led everyone else on a tour.

It was quite an expedition, up narrow stairs and down creaky stairs, through extensions and additions, along secret passageways, up into towers and gables, and down into cobwebby cellars.

"Gosh!" said Edwardian. "My old aunties would love this place."

"The tax assessor will have something to say about this plutocrat's palace!" muttered Digger. "How many workers broke their backs carrying bricks to make this stately pile, I wonder."

"I'll discuss it with Vlod," said Merlin airily. "I think you'll come to be grateful for the vast scale of the interior. The children's rooms are distant and have been soundproofed."

When everyone had assembled in the parlor, he handed out maps and instructions.

"The rules are, no killing or maiming," he said to the young people. "You must eat proper food, and drink wholesome beverages entirely lacking in alcoholic matter."

This was met by hearty laughter.

Merlin turned as red as a double-decker bus.

"I AM THE AUTHORITY HERE!" he roared. "You will listen to me. You will be civil and polite at all times, unless there is a war and we need you in the army."

The laughter intensified. Merlin lapsed into a frustrated silence.

When the children had finished mocking him, Merlin heard sounds of merriment emanating from outside.

"It's the Lady of the Lake!" he muttered. "What's she doing here? Did she bring her lake?"

"She's in the goldfish pond, in the garden," said Neville.

"We have a goldfish pond?"

"It's never a good idea to show off with your magic, Merlin," said Edwardian. "We didn't need a pond; A garden ornament would have done nicely."

Merlin was getting ready to turn Edwardian into a plaster poet, with a stocking cap and shoes with curled-up toes, when a great roaring and rumbling made the entire house shake like a leaf.

"Good grief, what was that?" said Neville. "Are the children playing with their chemistry set again?"

The noise was coming from somewhere behind the house. They all ran to the windows and peered down at the Canadian Pacific tracks.

Four enormous diesel locomotives thundered by like a convoy on the North Atlantic. Behind them, an endless procession of freight cars loaded with sulfuric acid, SUV parts, and petroleum products made the earth tremble.

"Good grief!" said Edwardian. "Is Toronto part of the Underworld now? Tewksbury was never like this!"

"Tewksbury doesn't have drive-in funeral parlors," said Merlin. "Try to look on the bright side. This may be a good thing; it will cover up any noise the children make. If they have another one of their accidents, the neighbors will think it's a freight train."

"Where ARE the children, by the way?" said Digger.

At these words, the heroes panicked, assailed by visions of innocent teenagers lost in huge shopping malls, threatened by gangs, drug pushers, and other unsavory types.

"Relax," said Neville, turning away so that no one would see his pallor. "They're perfectly safe; they're watching rock videos here in the parlor--MY WORD! DOES THAT SINGER HAVE ANY CLOTHES ON AT ALL! WHAT IS SHE DOING? HOW DID THIS GET PAST THE CENSORS?"

"Those rock singers are almost COMPLETELY naked," said Chester. "They're wearing tiny bits of designer rags."

"I knew it!" muttered Digger. "That's what rich people do; they buy fabulously expensive clothes that would feed an entire family for a month, and they rip them to pieces to show they don't need them."

"Feed an entire family?" said Neville. "What kind of families do you have where you come from?"

Merlin beckoned the others and they withdrew into the hall, where they could make themselves heard by yelling very loudly.

"This is no good," he shouted. "We can't handle teenagers; we'll need help."

Suddenly they noticed a woman dancing with the children.

"Who's that?" said Edwardian. "She looks vaguely familiar."

"She does, doesn't she!" said Neville, drawn in spite of himself into the parlor. "She looks rather like a Maenad with that long, dark hair whipping about, and those shining dark eyes, and...and...."

The others examined Neville with interest. He seemed oblivious to them now.

"Calm down Neville," said Edwardian.

"I'm NOT uncalm," Neville snapped.

"Uncalm?" said Edwardian, shocked. "Something has gone seriously wrong with our Neville. The old Neville would never have attacked the English language so shamelessly."

Neville, meanwhile, only had eyes for the maenad. He edged closer to the fatal dance floor.

"Look at him!" breathed Edwardian. "He's going out there!"

"Stop him!" said Chester. "We don't know who she is. She might be a vampire."

"Relax," said Merlin. "It's Gracie MacHomework."

"What?" said Digger. "Surely you can't mean the Scottish Elementary Schoolteacher! The one who inspires awe just by walking into a classroom in her sensible shoes and her kilt?"

"Has she been into the scotch?" said Sweet Gas.

"The haggis maybe," said Edwardian. "We have to do something! Neville's turning purple. He's going to have a seizure."

"Has he had much experience with the fair sex?" said Chester.

"I think it avoids him as much as possible," said Edwardian.

"Quite sensible," said Digger. "Female students are vanguards of the revolution. They don't want to associate with paternalistic university professors."

"And what gender are you, oh mighty union leader?" said Chester.

"Union leaders can be any sex they like; it's the job that counts."

"Really?" said Chester, stepping away from Digger.

"I, of course, am a MALE union leader," said Digger.

"Shhh!" said Edwardian. "Gracie's watching us."

The heroes lapsed into a painful silence under Gracie's imperious gaze. She had resumed the true aura of a Scottish Elementary Schoolteacher and dreadnaught.

Neville gave a little sigh and leaned against a wall."

"How romantic," whispered Edwardian. "It's love."

Digger shook his head. "It's scholarship. He's reading a book."

Gracie walked over to Neville and put a hand on his book.

Neville looked up, pretending surprise. "Oh, hi, Gracie!"

"Hi yourself, you big pear. What are you doing?"

"I'm looking you up in Ovid. He's the authority on metamorphoses, don't you know."

"You should try dancing, Neville."

"Me?" said Neville in a terrified voice. "Ha, ha, ha. You beautiful and seductive women are all kidders."

Gracie blinked at him. Then she seized him by the arm and dragged him out to the middle of the parlor.

It was quite a large parlor, by the way, with a dance floor only slightly smaller than the dance floor in the ballroom.

"Ummm...." said Neville.

"Hey Neville; show us what you can do!" yelled Chester. "Cut a rug."

"Cut a rug?" said the young people, laughing.

"If any of my students saw this...." said Neville.

"Horrors!" said Gracie. "They might think you're mortal. We can't have that, can we!"

"Come on, Neville," said Merlin. "Shake it up, baby!"

"Don't smirk, Merlin," said Gracie. "It'll be YOUR turn next, and no sneaking off into ancient Thebes to get out of it. Not if you want me to help you keep order here."

"That's blackmail!" sputtered Merlin, turning back in mid-transparency. There was a hint of the Fabulous Mists of Antiquity shimmering around him. You could see freshly carved stone statues of Egyptian egomaniacs, and crisp hieroglyphics explaining who really built the pyramids and what they're for.

Then it all faded away as Merlin settled into the present again.

The music declined from a crescendo of outrageous sounds to a crescendo of outrageous sounds from an earlier period.

"What's that horrible noise!" the children shouted.

"It's called Codger Rock," said Gracie. "Many of the early rock stars are still alive, tottering around on stages with wigs and hearing aids, gumming the microphones."

There was a snicker of laughter.

"No need to laugh, children. We all get old sooner or later. Time is an ever-burning fuse; this is one of the things you have to learn--it makes you appreciate your family and friends." Edwardian started weeping.

"That is so sad. We're all going to rot and crumble into dust."

"Not in front of the children, please," said Sweet Gas. "Go and do it somewhere else."

"YOU don't have to worry," sniffed Edwardian. "You don't have a bowel."

"Oh, so! People who don't have bowels aren't allowed to rot and crumble into dust like everyone else? See this little bit here? See? Brush it. Go ahead, it won't bite you. What's that, then?"

"Dust," said Edwardian reluctantly.

"Dust, is it! There you have it. I'm eroding. Soon I'll be nothing more than littoral."

"Define 'soon'," said Edwardian.

"Well, I might last through the Cenozoic era, but after that...."

"Look, look, see, see!" yelled Chester. "Neville's going to dance!"

Edwardian and Sweet Gas stopped their bickering and turned to look, arm in arm. This was better than a freak show at the Carnival of Lies.

Neville had been hoping the others wouldn't notice him. He felt like a business professor extracted from his cozy seat in the faculty lounge and dumped into the middle of a student protest.

Then Gracie metamorphosed back into a Scottish Elementary Schoolteacher Maenad.

Her dark hair flew, her black eyes shone, her lovely form turned this way and that right inside Neville's brain.

"Come on," she said. "You can do it."

Tentatively, like a Spanish galleon venturing out to run a gauntlet of British cannon, Neville started dancing.

There was a disconcerting anarchy about his midsection.

He tried to suck in his stomach, but you can't squeeze a tractor tire into a smaller space, no matter how much effort you put into it. Whenever he moved, his stomach moved too, but in a different direction, and to a different rhythm.

Then there was the business of his arms. What were you supposed to do with them? He risked a glance at some of the children--the ones who weren't watching him with incredulity and amusement. Their arms seemed to fly around in more directions than a Balinese dancer's.

He tried a jerky move and sent Chester, who had inched too close to him in his quest for scientific truth, flying backwards.

"Hey, watch the beak!" squawked Chester. "We parrots are sensitive, you know."

Neville paused for breath while Gracie kept up a wild, Scottish siren's dancing.

Scottish sirens, by the way, are much more difficult to ignore than any poor excuse for a temptress Ulysses may have encountered in merry old Greece.

Anyway, Neville had decided that the only thing blocking his way to success as a dancer was rhythm. But where was the rhythm? He had heard it discussed, of course, as an academic subject, and he knew Pythagoras's theories.

But what was it?

He listened closely for it, but all he could hear was a lot of bashing and crashing in no particular order. And one of the band members seemed to be moaning about something.

Perhaps it was a song.

"Do you want to rip my T-shirt?" moaned the singer.

"Do you want to rip my T-shirt?"

"DO you want to rip my T-shirt?"

This dancing business was very puzzling. If you listened to the words, you lost the bashing and the crashing--in fact, your mind simply vanished, taking sanctuary in madness.

A poke in the ribs startled Neville out of his reverie.

"Come on!" said Gracie. "Keep going. You're doing fine."

"Do you WANT to rip my T-shirt?" groaned the singer.

Neville tried again, and this time he managed to get his arms moving in different directions without actually clubbing anyone.

"Hey, cool!" said Chester. "Neville looks like a semaphore!"

"Maybe he's sending a message," said Edwardian. "Does anybody know the code?"

"I used to," said Digger, peering skeptically at Neville. "Let's see: 'Help, I'm a prisoner in a Scottish jig!' That can't be right!"

"Ignore them," said Gracie.

"I am," said Neville.

He no longer cared; his mind was fully engaged. This was a serious problem in experimental philosophy. Now that he'd worked out what he was supposed to do with his arms, there was the business of what to do with his feet.

He shuffled about for a moment, then he observed the other dancers.

Their feet shifted about like waffles on a griddle. How did they manage it?

He examined Arthur, who was making quite a racket dancing with Guinevere in his armor--especially when he stamped his feet.

Up, up, kick to the side, then to the other side; down, down; one foot up; now the other foot up --no; that can't be right!

Neville landed on his bottom with his feet up in the air.

"Hey, Neville's got the hang of it!" yelled the children, and they all started laughing.

Their laughter alone was bad enough, but it was infinitely worse when they started imitating him. Neville just wanted to crawl away into a library carrel and read Duns Scotus.

Haecceus. Surely embarrassment qualified as a mode of being!

Then Neville realized the children weren't laughing AT him; they were laughing with him.

Not that he was actually laughing, of course, but still....

"Hey, it's a new dance," said Arthur. "We'll call it 'The Neville'."

"How can it be a new dance when the music is the same?" said Edwardian, who was jealous.

All of the children were now doing The Neville.

Neville, however, was blowing like a whale.

"Once is enough," he said, catching his breath. His bottom was well padded against such eventualities but there were limits.

Gracie twisted her head this way and that and her hair flew out, mesmerizing him.

He forgot everything he had ever read in the great classics --all of the warnings, all of the explicit descriptions of what happened to people who got CARRIED AWAY.

"Keep going, Neville!" yelled Arthur. "You're good at this."

"Huh?"

He began moving his feet again, this time making sure to keep at least one foot on the floor at all times.

His chums, unable to resist the fun, had begun dancing and shouting along with the music.

"Do you want to RIP my T-shirt?"

Sweet Gas and Chester danced to their own rhythm; it looked as though a dragon with a false beak strapped to its snout were twisting in and out of a rock slide.

Edwardian danced all alone, like one of his elderly Victorian aunts. Digger cut a rug with a chef and union organizer from the kitchen.

Merlin acted as MC, spinning disks and making a spectacular light show that blinded everyone else.

Then he conjured up a Doris Day impersonator in a pink cloud, who sang 'When I Fall in Love' in dulcet tones.

The children, suddenly nauseated, took the opportunity to grab some sandwiches and lime fizzers.

Gracie, however, seized Neville in her strong arms and they danced a slow waltz alone.

Neville had no idea what to do, but it didn't matter; he held her close, absorbing her into every pore of his being as all thought, all philosophy evacuated his brain.

"Gracie, I, umm--"

"Shh, I know, I know. You don't get around much, do you, poor Neville."

"Do you think a Scottish Elementary Schoolteacher and Maenad can find happiness with a Canadian Experimental Philosopher?" he said.

"Of course. But do go slowly, Neville. We're having such fun, and you're so fragile!"

"Would you like to...ummm...what is the term...go out on a date?"

"Any time you like. There's a big city outside, almost as fascinating as Edinburgh."

The music stopped. Gracie did up her hair again, but the laughter and excitement lingered in her eyes.

Then she took Neville's hand.

The children clapped and cheered, spilling their lime fizzers.

Gracie bowed to them.

"I'm your new housekeeper and mentor," she said. "I know you remember me from when you were very young, this morning. You're much older now and you have a busy schedule. You will have more freedom, but with freedom comes responsibility."

There were assorted groans.

"I suggest we finish our little interlude; it was very nice"--here she gave Neville's hand a squeeze--"but we have work to do. We must prepare you for the interviews tomorrow."

Merlin winked at Neville.

"That went rather well, I thought."

"Did you feed me a love potion, Merlin?" Neville whispered.

"Don't be ridiculous. People don't fall in love unless they want to and--LOVE?"

Merlin peered owlshly at Neville.

"My dear Neville. You do have it bad, don't you."

"Don't be ridiculous; I'm merely examining the notion from an academic perspective."

"I suggest a good, stiff scotch, a cold shower, and an early evening with a technical manual. Things always look better in the morning."

"They look fine right now."

Merlin strode away, poker faced.

That evening, when everyone was tucked into bed, squirming with embarrassment over things they'd said and shouldn't have, or should have and hadn't, Neville had a rough night. He tried glancing over some old lecture notes, but the voice he heard reading them was Gracie's.

Faint echoes of music reached him.

"Do you want to rip my T-SHIRT?"

It was THEIR song! Someone was playing THEIR song!

His feet started moving of their own accord. It was an omen! He had to see Gracie again.

Then he heard a light step in the kitchen. A cupboard door opening and closing. Such clean, economical movements! It couldn't be the children; it couldn't be anyone else. It had to be Gracie!

Merlin had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 115:ANTICIPATION

Neville tiptoed down the hallway and listened outside the kitchen. He heard footsteps, a door opening, then the sudden bang-bang-bang of a hammer.

He stared at the kitchen door in shock. Gracie? he thought.

What was she up to?

There was a brief silence, then more footsteps.

It had to be Gracie! But what was she doing with a hammer? And what exactly was HE, a distinguished professor of experimental philosophy, doing lurking nervously outside a kitchen door, trying to work up the courage to go inside?

It couldn't be just him, he decided. EVERYONE in the house was nervous. There was an evil atmosphere in this place that sapped your will, leaving you fearful and without conviction, like an undergraduate.

Something was wrong.

But what?

Shadows moved along the wall and he gazed nervously at them. They were nothing, really; formless things signifying nothing.

No, not quite formless! There was something deeper within them, something with edges and malevolence, like a grants committee.

His mind's eye traced the image while he listened with half an ear to the sweet sounds of Gracie in the kitchen. She was sawing something now; there was a flurry of vigorous strokes that ended in the clatter of a piece of wood falling to the floor.

In that instant, Neville realized what the shadow on the wall had become; it was an enormous rubber duckie--the matrix that so preoccupied Merlin.

No! Surely not! It was merely a random pattern of shadows cast by--what?

An invisible something?

Neville gazed into the bottomless pools of darkness that were its eyes, and it seemed to him a presence was reaching out for him, trying to pluck him away from all that he knew and loved, trying to draw him inexorably into a whirling mass of evil.

Must resist evil, he thought.

But it was very difficult.

"Gracie!" he moaned, and the spell broke quite suddenly, leaving him breathless and horrified.

Had he really seen an enormous rubber duckie?

Surely not! The Power of Durable Evil would never inhabit a thing that ridiculous!

Had he really cried out Gracie's name?

More importantly, had she heard him?

He listened intently, but she had resumed pounding things with her hammer. There was the sound of a lot of little nails falling out of a box, then a muffled cry of annoyance--"Good grief!" perhaps, or "Darn!"

Curse this house and its odd atmosphere, thought Neville. There was already quite enough to be nervous about, what with the interviews tomorrow.

Everybody was worried about the children, wondering how the little tykes do when they came up against some fool of an interviewer who had no tolerance for creativity and exuberant spirits!

Neville, of course, was more overwrought than any of the others, because he had Gracie to worry about as well.

What if Gracie was merely toying with him? What if she didn't really care for him; she only liked big, Scottish drakes who tossed each other around the heather at the Highland Games?

Impossible, he thought. He had a great deal more to offer than mere flying haggises. He was an academic, after all! He knew how to apply for research grants.

Pull yourself together! he thought. Be a duck! Gracie likes me; she REALLY likes me!

There were more footsteps in the kitchen, then the sound of a cupboard door opening and closing.

Every sound, every footstep touched his heart. Where was Gracie now? At the sink, peeling rutabagas? Or was she standing in front of the refrigerator?

He saw her in his mind's eye, a vision of beauty taking a haggis out of the meat drawer, her delicate Scottish fingers kneading the amorphous clot of meat.

It was an image so vivid it took his breath away. He felt tingly all over and he had to lean against a wall for support.

Then he heard someone open a door deep within the bowels of the house. A few bars of music reached him, and a singer's harsh voice: "Do you want to rip my T-shirt?"

They're playing OUR song, he thought. It's an omen! We were destined to be together; we must have been academics at the same university in another life.

He hummed along with the music, remembering the touch of Gracie's hand on his beak. Gadzooks! Did everyone else feel like this when they were in love!

LOVE! What a strange word; so meaningless in itself, yet so eloquent in its brevity, like a...like an onion.

He had to get a grip on himself. He didn't want Gracie to think he was obsessed with her. It was a well-known fact that if a female once suspected she had power over you, she'd never give you a moment's peace; she'd toy with you endlessly, making you suffer until you broke down and agreed to do whatever she wanted you to do, anywhere, at any time.

Neville had a horrifying vision of himself joining the legions of sad-looking ducks who stood around in malls holding purses while their wives shopped for automotive parts and carpentry equipment.

"Do YOU want to rip my T-shirt?"

Their song! It was driving him mad! He couldn't help himself! He yearned to see Gracie again. He craved the odor of wild rice emanating from her webs. He wanted her to touch his beak again.

Hesitantly, he reached for the kitchen door.

It was a very nice door, actually, made of some sort of wood, with a grainy pattern. Oak or balsa wood or something. Neville wasn't up to speed on different types of trees and their uses.

Stop! he thought. Don't open the door until you've mastered yourself. You have to conjure up exactly the right aura, or she'll scoff at you.

The best thing would be to act surprised when he saw her. Pleasantly surprised, of course, and with the right sort of cultured tone, implying thousands of years of noble ancestry.

The kitchen door stood between them. She was on the other side. All he had to do was open it.

What if she had changed her mind about him? What if she'd decided what she really wanted was a Scottish academic with a big library?

Don't be absurd, he thought. Be yourself! Debonair, cultivated, self-confident. A duck among ducks.

Then he opened the door, tripped over a recycling bag and fell flat on his beak.

"Quack!" he said.

The figure at the cupboard turned as Neville got to his feet.

"Gracie!" said Neville, rubbing his beak. "What a pleasant surprise. I was just thinking about you--"

But the figure at the cupboard wasn't Gracie; it was Edwardian.

"Oh, it's you, Neville!" said Edwardian. "I thought it was one of my aunts."

Neville turned a mottled purple, like sweat socks that have been washed in the same load as a lot of colored items. "Do I look like Victorian window dressing!" he said.

Then a much nicer voice said, "Hello Neville; what a pleasant surprise!"

Gracie stepped out of a pantry, with a hammer in one hand, an anvil in the other, and a T-square tucked into her belt.

"I was just fixing a shelf," she said. "My mom taught me to fix things when I was a little girl. Edwardian is preparing a late-night snack for everyone."

"I'm not eating any trams," said Neville. "Not even if they come from Tewksbury."

"Ha, ha," said Edwardian bitterly.

Gracie put down her carpenter's weapons and squeezed Neville's hand.

"Feeling peckish?" she said.

Neville tried to think of something witty to say, but all he could manage was a plaintive: "Gracie...."

"That's my name."

She rubbed his beak affectionately. "Help me with this anvil."

Neville took the anvil from her and dropped it on his foot.

"Ouch, ow, ow!" he said, hopping around on one foot and bashing into Edwardian.

Edwardian dropped the pot of McBowel's Big-Bang sauce he'd been holding. The lid fell with a clatter and there was a gentle hissing sound as the bilious goop ate its way through the flagstones, smoking like Aetna.

Everyone looked at the sauce.

"I was going to put that on the haggis," said Edwardian.

"What for?" said Neville. "The haggis is already dead, isn't it!"

"The sauce was meant for us."

Neville shook his head in amazement. "I really think you should confine your homicidal tendencies to your aunts," he said.

"McBowel's Big-Bang sauce is a wonderful condiment," said Edwardian indignantly. "It hides all sorts of little omissions and irregularities in a dish of vittles."

"You can't taste anything when your tongue, esophagus and digestive apparatus have been liquefied," said Neville.

Gracie handed out mops, and all three of them set to work cleaning up the remains. When they'd finished, they taped off the crater in the floor with yellow police tape.

Just then, Chester made his way into the kitchen.

"My word!" he said. "Was that one of the children?"

"It was snackies," said Edwardian miserably. "I slaved over it for at least ten minutes."

"You opened a can of McBowel's," said Neville.

"There, there," said Gracie, patting Edwardian on the beak.

At these words, Neville began to emit infrared radiation at an alarming rate. He ground his beak. His eyes narrowed to two little gun slits through which snakes and lizards peered.

Why was Gracie standing so close to that sly, deceiving villain, Edwardian?

Why was she touching his beak? Come to think of it, how long had she been here alone with Edwardian? Had she really been sawing bits of wood, or had that only been a deception, to cover up other, more sinister sounds?

What if Edwardian had been right there beside her in the pantry all along, handling her carpenter's things.

What if Chester was in on it too? What if he was only showing up to take over after Edwardian left?

Neville glared at his chums with new eyes. Traitors all! he thought. What did he really know about any of them?

Then a new sound startled him out of his reverie--an irregular thumping, like a washing machine with an uneven load skipping and hopping along an upstairs landing.

"What's that racket?" he demanded.

"The children are doing the Neville," said Gracie.

Another door opened, quite close this time, and music shattered the pleasant atmosphere of jealousy and suspicion.

"Do you want to rip my T-shirt?"

"They're playing our song, Neville," said Gracie, and she grabbed him and squeezed him tightly around the waist.

Neville melted at once. How could he have been jealous? Gracie loved only HIM, no matter what these other poor fools thought.

"This is our anniversary," he said. "We've been going steady for three hours."

There was a collective groan. Chester and Edwardian stuck their heads in the oven.

"Oh you!" said Gracie. She squeezed Neville's beak and they quacked softly for a time.

Chester drank a glass of McBowel's Interesting Scotch.

Edwardian made himself a sandwich and sat down at the table with a sheaf of cream-colored paper and an HB pencil.

"Good grief; what's in that sandwich?" said Neville. "It's dripping!"

"Clotted cream and pickles," said Edwardian. "My aunt Stahlhelmet invented it as a substitute for marital bliss."

"You aren't pregnant, are you?" said Chester.

"You aren't writing a poem, are you?" said Neville.

"Only a little one," said Edwardian. "It's about you."

"Someone FedEx him to the Transvaal before he erupts," said Neville.

Edwardian put his head in his hands and sobbed.

"No one likes my poetry," he wailed. "My auntie Stahlhelmet pretends to, but she only uses it to clean her guns. And Mommy just pretends to like it because she'd rather have me writing poetry at home than consorting with anarchists and safe crackers in the streets of Tewksbury."

"I think you should have a little talk with Philip Napoleon," said Neville, handing him a cell phone. "You haven't had enough therapy in your life."

Ten minutes later, Philip showed up in his war surplus Harrier and offered Neville an envelope with a bill for services rendered in it.

"Sorry I'm late," he said. "Wellington attacked me in a Sopworth Camel. How long have you hated trams?"

"Not I," said Neville, pointing at Edwardian. "He's the one committing poetry; I'm a famous academic."

Philip squinted at Edwardian. "Really?" he said. "Are you quite sure he's all there?"

"In point of fact, no. That's why you're here; because he's not THERE."

"I don't hate trams," said Edwardian. "Not the ones in Tewksbury."

"How do you feel about buses?"

"I don't like buses at all. They don't run on tracks."

"Aha! And does your mother run on tracks?"

"Mommy drives a Churchill tank."

"I see. Do you have dreams about running over your father in the tank?"

"My father ran off with a department store manikin when I was very young. He said my aunts were bullies."

"Aha! So there were no males in your life when you were growing up?"

"I didn't need male role models; I had the trams."

At these words, Neville and Gracie tiptoed out of the kitchen and went out into the backyard, where they found Digger excavating a mine.

"Look at this!" he said, motioning to some pottery shards.

They was an assortment of pieces around him, each retaining its vivid, canary yellow hue despite centuries of subterranean existence.

Even an amateur could see how they would fit together to make a large rubber duckie. Neville had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 116:ACME AIR-HORN ALARM

Digger quickly assembled the pottery shards he had found in his backyard mine. In fact, the various pieces went together so easily, it was as though they'd sought each other out.

When he'd finished, a malicious looking, pottery rubber duckie glared at him, and he found himself unable to look away from its eyes.

He tried to distract himself by reciting the names of all of the Labour Party Prime Ministers from 1900 to the present day, but it was a very short list, and the rubber duckie kept staring at him in an unpleasant way.

Somewhere deep down inside his mind, a reptilian form began to ooze out of a swamp.

"Socialism doesn't work," he moaned. "Unions impede progress. Globalization helps widows and orphans."

"What?" roared the astonished Neville.

Digger barely heard him.

"Must...have...stock...options...." he moaned.

"Can such things be!" said Neville. "Our Digger is turning capitalist?"

"It's that evil looking duckie," said Gracie. "It's taking possession of his soul. We have to stop it."

"I'll get a wooden stake and a mallet," said Neville.

"There's not enough time," said Gracie, and she bashed the hideous duckie with the flat of her hand. There was a terrifying squeal of rage, then the grotesque object shattered like a Ming dynasty vase at a fraternity party.

A bilious yellow cloud rose into the air, leaving a stench of putrescent rutabagas as it dissipated.

Of the rubber duckie there was no sign; not so much as a fragment of canary-yellow pottery.

Digger staggered and pressed a hand to his forehead.

"What...what happened?" he moaned.

Gracie and Neville rushed to help him.

"It's okay," said Gracie. "You came under the influence of the rubber duckie of evil, but we smashed it in time."

"I had this ghastly waking dream," groaned Digger. "I was drawing up a plan to lay off ten thousand workers the day before Llama's Eve. I was going to ask the Jolly Fat Llama to deliver the pink slips along with the toys and party favors in his loot bag."

"Dastardly!" said Gracie.

"I felt something reptilian oozing out of a swamp inside my head," said Digger.

"Something unspeakably evil."

"We all have one of those," said Neville. "Most of us keep them under control by indulging in occasional acts of depravity or gluttony. It also helps to paint them pretty colors."

"Oh YOU!" said Gracie, looking at Neville with new eyes.

Neville winked at her.

"Surely not EVERYONE carries around a swamp creature in their brain box?" said Digger. "I'm much too ethical to indulge in unrestrained behavior."

"There, there!" said Neville, leading him back into the kitchen. "Merlin will help you. That's what wizards do, you know. You only have to ask."

But Merlin was in a crabby mood.

"We're way off schedule," he complained. "I'm tired of nursing a young whelp who thinks only about rock music. Who would have thought the young King Arthur would lower himself to watching rock videos! Doesn't anyone listen to Doris Day anymore?"

"Are they still watching videos?" said Gracie. "We'll have to get them downstairs at once. We want them fresh and prepared for their interviews."

"They should be studying right now," said Merlin.

"You can't study for an interview," said Gracie.

She paraded through the halls with a Malaysian hammer and gong, but none of the children paid the slightest attention to her.

"It's no use," she said. "They can't hear me. Not even the Scottish Elementary School Teacher's Voice of Doom can break through a Rock Music Video of Doom."

"It's hard to get mad at the little tykes," said Neville. "Especially when some of them are playing our song."

They listened and held hands for a moment while a singer screamed: "Do you want to rip my T-shirt?"

Merlin covered his ears and moaned.

"I could listen to our song all day long," said Gracie. "But we have work to do; we must get the children downstairs."

"I know just the thing," said Neville. "An Acme Railway Air-Horn Alarm Clock. One of my colleagues tried it during a lecture, while all of his students were watching the World Series

on their laptops."

Everyone thought this was a good idea. Merlin grudgingly forked over his credit card, and the two lovebirds climbed into the Edwardian truck, bound for George's Trains, the famous model railroad shop.

Gracie noticed a flock of quacking elephants outside the door.

"What are all of these quacking elephants doing here?" she asked.

"That's just a disguise," said Neville. "They are in fact, aliens from the Alien Planet. Aliens, as you know, are inveterate model railroaders."

The elephants formed a long line, extending all the way down the street to a rose pink condominium building across the street from a cemetery.

"My word!" said Gracie. "I've never seen so many aliens in one place! I wonder if they're plotting something."

"I believe there's a famous model railroader living in that building," said Neville. "I suppose they all want his autograph."

Once inside George's Trains, Neville purchased the alarm clock.

The sound system was a beauty, with forty different train sounds, including a lovely diesel air horn. When it was cranked up to full volume, you could demolish small buildings at a distance of half a block.

Unfortunately, it was an enormous system, preinstalled in a cart.

"I look like a popcorn vendor with this thing," he complained. "What if one of my colleagues sees me?"

"No one will suspect it's you," said Gracie.

"On the contrary; my colleagues will know me at once. They'll think I've become an English professor, forced into part-time work to make ends meet."

Without further ado, they wheeled the cart into the Edwardian truck and drove back to the mansion, where the others inspected it nervously.

Neville plugged in the extension chord and selected the maximum: a sixteen cylinder diesel engine with a warning bell and air horn.

Then he switched it on and turned the volume up to VEGETABLE.

All of the adults screamed in agony.

The children showed up at once, their eyes shining.

"Cool!" said Arthur.

"Is that a synthesizer?" Vladimir.

"Can you make it play heavy metal?" Lady Barbar.

Edwardian writhed on the floor.

"Stop it!" he screamed. "Stop it!"

The mansion trembled; pots and pans clattered together, dishes and glasses shattered; windows shook, and big cracks zigzagged up the walls.

At last, Neville turned off the amazing machine. There was a delicious silence, and everyone relaxed.

Then, from somewhere outside, there came an answering blast that rattled the alchemical teapots on top of the fridge.

Digger peered out the window.

"Good grief!" he said. "There's a diesel locomotive right outside the window. Are we really that close to the tracks?"

"It's trying to look in the window," said Edwardian. "Do you suppose that was a mating call, Neville?"

The diesel hummed and throbbed outside. Heat rose up in waves from its ventilators.

"Great Scott!" yelled Digger. "It's going to start pawing the ground any minute now!"

"It's not going to come inside, is it?" said Chester.

"That's all we need!" said Merlin. "A love-sick diesel locomotive."

"Quick! Unplug the cart," said Edwardian. He reached for the extension cord and was trying to unplug it when he knocked a nurse's cap off the counter.

"What's this?" he said.

"Don't touch it!" yelled Merlin. "It's Nurse Jane's magic cap. You'll fall in love--"

But it was too late; the damage had been done. Edwardian looked around sappily, like a barber shop quartet standing outside Irene Goodnight's window in the rain.

There was a horrified silence.

"I found it in my haggis last night," said Neville. "I didn't know what to do with it, so I put it on the counter. I thought it was a party favor."

"No wonder those two fell in love," said Chester.

"Look at Edwardian!" said Digger. "He's caressing the alarm clock."

"Does this mean you're going to be unfaithful to your tram?" said Sweet Gas, scandalized.

Edwardian gave him a sly look. "She's in Tewksbury; she'll never know, unless one of you betrays me."

"Unthinkable," said Neville.

"Never!" said Chester.

"Good old Edwardian," said Digger.

"Just don't get carried away," said Merlin. "We'll have every diesel locomotive in Canada congregating here."

"Isn't she beautiful!" said Edwardian, caressing the air horn.

"So much for eternal love!" muttered Sweet Gas. "What about your poor Tewksbury tram, waiting sadly in the rain for her true love to return. This is what comes of having a bowel, I suppose. You learn how to betray people."

"What if his tram gets jealous and comes all the way from Tewksbury to bash him?" said Digger.

"It would have to cross the Atlantic Ocean," said Neville.

"It's been done before," said Digger.

"By a tram?"

"During the early part of the twentieth century, the Canadian government advertised its wide open spaces throughout Europe, offering cheap land to immigrants. All sorts of people took them up on the offer."

"Trams took up farming?" said Merlin. "Are you all quite mad?"

"Look, look!" shouted Chester. "See that shadow on the wall! It's the rubber duckie of evil!"

Merlin put on his reading glasses and examined it.

"Will you please stop calling it a rubber duckie!" he said. "It's a matrix. It was designed by Doctor Wacker to contain all of the evil thoughts, wishes, fantasies, and desires of everyone in the Universe of Adjustable Manners. It's only been in service for a short time, and already it's overflowing with malice."

There was a sudden, hollow quack.

"Did you hear that?" said Sweet Gas. "Quick, Neville! Give it a blast with the alarm clock."

"The rubber duckie is gone," said Chester. "It vanished!"

"FOR THE LAST TIME," yelled Merlin, "IT IS NOT A RUBBER DUCKIE. IT IS A MATRIX!"

"Let's leave this place," said Sweet Gas.

"Quiet!" said Merlin. "We have work to do. All of Tockworld depends on us."

Just then, there was an impatient BLAT from the diesel outside.

"Is it still looking in the window?" said Neville.

"It's very shy. Every time you look out at it pretends to be innocently idling on the tracks."

"Now it's leaving," said Neville.

"It looks really sad," said Digger.

"Did you hear that mournful wail," said Chester. "Oh it touches the heart. Maybe it wants to be a parrot."

Neville gazed uncertainly out the window.

Why had it given up so quickly? Did it know something he didn't?
The sound system had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 117: THE PRINCIPAL IS YOUR PAL

The little band of heroes packed the children into their Edwardian van and set off once again for the Toronto Random School.

The front seat was a bit crowded, this time.

Merlin glared across at Edwardian. "Must you bring that air-horn alarm?" he said crabbily.

"You'll hurt her feelings. She has a name, you know. It's Hermione."

Everyone stared at Edwardian in contemplative silence.

Soon enough, however, Toronto's jolly morning traffic distracted the heroes with several near-death experiences.

They were all immensely relieved to find themselves hale, if not hearty, when they pulled into the parking lot.

"We really are alive, are we?" said Digger, pinching his arms to make sure he wasn't an angel in the Great Union Hall in the Sky.

"I can't believe the way these people drive!" said Edwardian. "I think my bowels fell out!"

"Oh there we go again!" said Sweet Gas. "Some of us have so many bowels, we can afford to toss them out the window the moment a big truck threatens to crash into us!"

Neville, meanwhile, watched approvingly as children were dropped off by soccer moms in Zeppelins, flying saucers, and Curtis Jenny bombers.

Something was different this time, however. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but he sensed a change in the general arrangement of things.

Before he could work it out, his train of thought was interrupted by Edwardian, who was squirming like a fish in a gym sock.

"Surely that giant cow wasn't on the roof the last time we were here!" Edwardian said.

Neville glanced up at the roof and saw an enormous cow ruminating on a bit of cud and gazing placidly at the incoming students.

Trust Edwardian to notice petty details, he thought sourly.

Then at last he realized what had been bothering him; the school itself had unaccountably swapped outward appearances with a barn.

"The cow seems to be wearing a hat," said Chester enviously. "I've always wanted a hat like that."

"It's a beanie," said Digger. "With a propeller on top."

"Do you suppose the students have been modifying things again?" said Neville. "I seem to remember the school was less definite about its outward shape when we saw it last."

"The cow did it," said Edwardian. He caressed Hermione uneasily. He didn't trust cows, especially giant cows. True, this particular cow was safely out of the way on top of a barn, but even so, you could never be sure with cows.

Just then, a heron dressed in a beige trench coat and yellow galoshes came out of the school and strode towards them. It was holding a carpet bag and a yellow sunshade, and it wore a green rubber turtle on top of its head.

"Surely that can't be one of the students!" said Neville.

"Maybe it's the dairy maid," said Chester. "A big cow like that creature on the roof would need its very own dairy maid to attend to its milkily needs."

"Milkily?" said Edwardian making a sign to ward off evil. "That sounds like a weapon. I always knew cows were belligerent. My old auntie Stahlhelmet used to say you can always trust a barrel of scotch, but a glass of cow juice will kill you faster than shot from a Russian cannon."

The heron walked right up to them, glanced furtively around as though expecting to be

stabbed in the back, and introduced himself.

"The name is Roger GoBeyond," he said in a whispery voice. "I'm the principal here. It's not my fault, whatever the others tell you. The principal is your pal by the way--that's a little trick for remembering how to spell principal properly."

"Of course it's not your fault," said Merlin. "No one should be expected to spell properly; the English language is as full of tricks as a computer operating system."

Then he introduced the others.

After the various names had slipped into Roger's left ear and out of his right ear, he stood on one leg, tucking the other leg up behind him.

"I'm a werewolf, mind you," he said.

"That's quite an achievement for a heron," said Sweet Gas.

"Well, technically I'm a heron, but I have unusual fantasies about wolves."

Everyone stood back a little to give Roger air.

"Only at night, of course," he said. "And only during full moons."

"You don't flap up into the air and turn into a big cow, do you?" said Edwardian.

"What? Oh, that! That's Isolde. She's an official from the ministry of education. She doesn't usually look like that, but there was an accident in one of the labs. I'm sure it will wear off in a few weeks."

Edwardian eyed Isolde warily. She looked familiar. In fact, if you took the evil cow from the Lady of the Lake's lake and inflated it a bit more.....

"It seems to me that the school wasn't quite so barn-like the last time we saw it," said Neville. "Have you been invaded by farmers?"

"Oh YOU!" said Gracie, patting him on the arm. "Only a Scottish farmer would build such a big barn. Haggises need plenty of room."

"The school changes constantly," said Roger. "That's how we keep the neighbors from suing us; they can't file for legal action if they can't describe the building."

"We're here to enroll our children," said Merlin.

"You are?" said Roger, giving a little start. He plucked a fish out of his pocket and tried to look at the children through it. Then he put on a pair of reading glasses and peered uncertainly at them.

"Amazing! You do have a lot of children, don't you! But then I suppose there are so many of you, and, umm...."

"We're their guardians," said Merlin testily. "I have official papers."

"From the cow? I mean from Isolde?"

"From City Hall."

"Oh, yes, of course; from Vlod. And you are prepared to testify that these are, in fact, children, and not--dear me! They all seem to be dressed up in tins!"

"That's armor," said Merlin testily. "They're knights of the round table. We want them properly educated, so we brought them here."

"Yes, yes. Good, good!" Roger tucked his reading glasses into a pocket and gazed uneasily upon the little party that had gathered around him.

Neville examined him with interest. Long experience had taught him to notice the telltale signs of burn-out in teachers.

It was all there; the fidgeting, the twitching, the strange outfits.

"The truth is, I never really know what's going on anymore," said Roger. "Last month, some of our students hacked into a magic field. Now they get together at the end of each day and decide what the school will look like the next morning."

"I'd put a stop to that if I were you," said Gracie. "You don't want them turning your school into an assault vehicle."

"I don't see why not," said Digger. "A school SHOULD be an assault vehicle, smashing down the ramparts of the established order...."

"It's always a nice surprise, mind you," said Roger. "The school was Godzilla last week. Isn't that amusing!"

"I'm quite large too, you know," said Sweet Gas. "No one calls me amusing, though. I suppose it's because I don't have a bowel."

"There used to be a monster house across the street," said Roger. "A Victorian factory owner built it. He wanted to privatize education and make the students write exams every morning."

"They never learn, do they!" muttered Gracie.

"It was the first thing Godzilla squashed," said Roger.

"Good for him!" said Digger. "Tell him to come and see me when he's finished smashing the capitalists here."

"The factory owner was inside at the time, counting his money," said Roger. "He had a lovely funeral, really, with a closed coffin. The morticians did what they could; they managed to re-inflate him methane gas, but they couldn't get rid of the big footprint."

"That's the best place for a revolutionary's footprint," said Digger, gloating.

"I never knew Godzilla was a revolutionary," said Neville. "I thought he was just a big lizard throwing a tantrum."

"The police came to see us about it, because there were immense footprints in our playing fields," said Roger. "We told them it was a coincidence."

"And they believed you?" said Merlin.

"It was either that, or search the school. Word about a place like this gets around fast."

"So they left?"

"We agreed that the monster house had been squashed by a weather balloon. Anyway, so you really want to enroll the children?"

"We do," said Merlin.

"You aren't insane or anything, are you?"

"Certainly not. At least, not all at the same time."

Roger eyed him nervously.

"We have to be so careful!" he whispered. "The officials keep pursuing us, you know. They keep tormenting us about exams and school ranking and such."

"Burn them at the stake," said Merlin.

"Oh we couldn't do that; they have too many lawyers! What we do is, we make everything up. We PRETEND to test the children."

Roger led them inside, instructing them to don hard hats as they passed through the forbidding entranceway.

Inside, the school looked remarkably like every other school in Tockworld, with stalls for the classrooms, bundles of hay for the teachers, and blast shields around the labs.

"About the interviews...." said Merlin.

"I don't suppose you've got any fish, have you?" said Roger.

Suddenly, a loud MOOOOOOOOO interrupted the festivities.

Everyone looked apprehensively up at the ceiling.

"Was that an evil moo?" said Edwardian.

Neville had a bad feeling about this.....

CHAPTER 118:EXAMS'R'US

Roger glanced nervously around, checking behind boxes and under work tables. "I don't see any evil cows here," he said.

"Surely it wouldn't be hiding under a table!" said Neville.

"We can't be too careful," Roger said. "There are spies everywhere--officials from the ministry of education, politicians, reporters, parents, political-correctness wardens.... You aren't from the ministry, are you?"

"Do they hire trolls?" said Sweet Gas.

"Do you mean on purpose?" said Roger.

At these words, Sweet Gas took umbrage and loomed over the principal. It was an awesome sight--no one can loom like a troll.

"Prejudiced against trolls, are we?" Sweet Gas said.

"What, ME?" squawked Roger. "Not in any way, shape or form. Some of my best friends are sedimentary."

Sweet Gas stopped looming over Roger and patted him on the head.

"That's better," he said. "Some people look down on us trolls because we're made out of rocks."

"It's hard to look down on a troll," said Neville. "Unless you have a very tall ladder."

"Oh, YOU!" said Gracie, squeezing Neville's hand.

"Everyone should be given the same size of ladder," said Digger piously. "We don't want some people getting taller ladders and lording it over everyone else."

"People also look down on us because we don't have bowels," said Sweet Gas.

"I certainly don't regard possession of a bowel as a prerequisite for anything at all," said Roger. "If you had to spend time in a classroom full of active bowels after the children have feasted on beans and cabbage--"

"But I DO have lots of methane gas," warned Sweet Gas.

"The Geneva Convention expressly forbids farting in closed rooms," said Digger. "It's a form of torture."

"ANYWAY," said Chester, covering his ears so he wouldn't hear anything rude, "So the ministry, which may or may not have any trolls in its employ, sends out gigantic, evil cows to harass you?"

"My fear is the cow may be associated with the Power of Durable Evil," said Merlin.

"MY fear is that my children don't understand me," said Edwardian.

"You don't HAVE any children!" said Digger.

"Hermione and I are thinking about it," Edwardian said.

"Good grief; that's all we need!" said Digger. "A lot of little Edwardians puffing down the tracks, blatting poetry at people!"

"ANYWAY," said Neville. "I thought this was a private school."

"Not as such," said Roger. "Technically we're almost independent because we're affiliated with the University of Strange Thoughts, but in practice, the ministry keeps a garrison in the next block. They'll invade at the first sign of independent thinking."

"Quite understandable," said Digger. "The ministry is there to make sure everybody is treated equally. We don't want some little children getting better treatment than others. It wouldn't be fair."

Roger was so surprised he almost forgot his paranoia. He examined Digger very carefully, from a distance, the way one examines a dangerous lunatic.

"Yes, of course," he murmured. "We all want things to be fair, don't we! It certainly is a goal that is very likely to be achieved in the near future."

"Digger has utopian visions," said Neville. "He got them out of a CAPTAIN CANUCK comic."

"Hmm, yes," said Roger, biting his nails. "Well then... Where was I?"

"The ministry of evil--" said Neville.

"Shhh! Shhh!" Roger said. Then, in a much louder voice, he said, "I'm sure you meant to say, the ministry of EDUCATION! I love the ministry; it is so kind and good to our school, and dispenses so much wisdom."

Merlin held up a little, plastic shield.

"It's okay," he said. "You can talk freely now; this will shield your words from prying eyes."

Roger eyed the shield warily.

"That's a toy Captain Zap Jargonizer! You got it out of a box of Omaha Flakes!"

"Wrong!" said Merlin. "It's a magic Jargonizer. It really works. It converts everything you say to the language of bureaucracy. No one will understand a thing."

"But the ministry is full of bureaucrats," said Roger. "All government departments are. They can understand everything a Jargonizer emits."

"They pretend to, but they can't really," said Merlin. "When bureaucrats need to communicate something, they E-mail emoticons, or they get their secretaries to translate everything into the common tongue."

Roger examined the Jargonizer, which looked like a little green puffer fish.

"Hold it in your left hand and squeeze it gently while thinking about Revenue Canada," said Merlin. "You'll be quite safe."

Roger squeezed the little shield. After a moment, a crooked grin formed on his beak and his pallor decreased very slightly.

"I do feel a slight shifting of the burden," he said. "In fact, I think I shall have a dram of scotch when I escape--I mean, when I go home tonight."

"About the ministry...." said Neville. "Do you, in fact, have independence? We don't want Arthur growing up to be a cubicle dweller, emitting reports and sitting through committee meetings."

"I have a vast quantity of methane," warned Sweet Gas.

"Yes, you mentioned that," said Roger. "Is it something the ministry wants now? I'll inform the staff, but I doubt if any of our teachers has the energy for production on a large scale. Will there be funding for workshops?"

"Methane is a useful deterrent," said Neville. "If anyone from the ministry questions you, simply threaten them with a wooden match."

Just then, a diesel locomotive sounded its air horn outside the barn.

Roger uttered a squawk and leaped to the top of a filing cabinet.

Then a voice came through an overhead speaker: "It's the ministry boxcar with a shipment of new exams, sir."

"Oh," said Roger. "Very good, Agor. Carry on." Then he made an elaborate pretense of yawning, as if to show that it was quite normal for principals to leap to the top of filing cabinets.

"No need to panic," he said. "The exams are harmless. We get a new shipment every morning."

"Isn't that a bit excessive," said Gracie. "One exam should do for a whole term."

"The ministry officials have to appease the politicians. If they don't keep up a steady flow of exams, the politicians will go on a rampage and sack the ministry."

"Politicians must really enjoy writing exams," said Sweet Gas.

"They're not the ones writing them," muttered Gracie. "It would be quite a different story if every politician had to write three-hour exams on the principle exports of Etobicoke, or the chemical composition of haggis."

"You can't blame the politicians," said Roger. "They take their orders from the parents, and the parents insist on exams because they want precision teaching. You do know what happens to a politician who defies an angry mob of parents?"

"That's how the people from McBowel's obtain tripes for McBowel's Minced Tripes," said Chester.

"Yes indeed," said Roger. "So we do what we can to make the ministry look good, which makes the politicians look good, which keeps the parents from extracting their vital parts."

"So the students write lots of exams?" said Edwardian unhappily. "I don't see why the parents prefer this to education."

"Teachers aren't opposed to exams as such," said Gracie. "But there's such a thing as going too far."

"This is what happens in the World of Work," said Roger. "Parents are herded into cubicles where their every move is assessed and measured. This makes them miserable, of course, so they want their children to be miserable as well."

"We don't want that for Arthur," said Merlin.

"Not to worry," said Roger, biting his nails. "Other schools have capitulated. THEIR students recite the principle exports of Etobicoke every day, but OUR students concentrate on launching haggis into orbit, and determining the chemical composition of McBowel's Inflammable Porridge."

The diesel locomotive in the loading area blatted impatiently, and Hermione gave an answering call.

"Please control your pet," said Roger. "This is a school, not a kennel."

"Hermione is not a pet," said Edwardian indignantly. "She's my significant other."

Roger gave Edwardian a worried look.

"He's harmless," said Neville. "He only emits poetry when he's allowed out of his cage."

"If you say so."

Roger jumped down from the filing cabinet, yawned again, and led his new chums out into the hall.

"I have to check on the exams," he said. "If the shipping clerk gets careless and spills any, we're answerable to the ministry."

The loading dock was at the far end, near the milking machines.

Roger motioned to a forklift truck wheeling several cartons out of a boxcar.

"It's a very big boxcar," said Chester.

"Send it right back," said Gracie. "The children need a break from testing. They need time to learn things."

"Shhh, shhh!" said Roger. "The walls have ears you know." He glanced nervously into the shadows, looking for spies.

"Trust in your Jargonizer," said Merlin.

"You're quite sure you don't work for the ministry?" said Roger.

"I don't think they hire parrots," said Chester.

"They most assuredly do. But you're a dragon."

"Only until I have the operation."

"Anyway," said Roger, "we learn subterfuge when we're dealing with the ministry. Just because we receive a shipment of exams doesn't mean we use them."

"I wonder why it says, 'Dated Contents; open before June; you could be a winner!'" said Digger.

"They like to motivate the students," said Roger.

"Honestly, if your teachers have to dispense all of those exams, I don't see how they find the time to teach," said Gracie.

"There might be some benefit in that," said Neville. "Teachers would be much nicer and more relaxed if they didn't have to spend so much time--"

"Oh you old platypus!" said Gracie. "Some of us LOVE teaching. There's nothing more stimulating--ALMOST nothing more stimulating--than watching a child begin to think outside the boundaries and get excited about new ideas."

"You're hired!" said Roger. "We'll give you whatever you want; we'll even hire your friends."

"I'm busy," said Gracie. "But I might consider a temporary job. I'll want to have a few words with the parents, though."

All at once something whizzed through the window, narrowly missed Edwardian's nose; then bounced off a wall and fell to the floor, where it lay prostrate for a moment, catching its breath.

Neville eyed it carefully, wondering if it was a rogue exam.

"It's a homunculus," he announced. "I haven't seen one of those since my days as a wild young college student, when we summoned nubile--I mean SCHOLARS and other woodland creatures to our weekly picnics."

Everyone stared at Neville for a time. Gracie patted him on the arm.

"You do have a hidden side, don't you!" said Gracie.

"Sometimes we'd get a homunculus by mistake," said Neville. "We'd have a devil of a

time sending it back."

The little creature got up and bellowed, "Did you know you could be paying far too much for your mortgage? Call us and get a free--"

There was a sickening splat as a student dropped a ten-ton safe on the little fellow.

A woman in a lab smock and spiky green hair stepped out of the shadows and made a note on a clipboard.

"Good for you, Rebus," she said. "Did you measure distance, velocity, and mass?"

"Yes Ms Gleen."

"That's Ms Gleen, one of our physics teachers," said Roger. "She's on exchange from the University of Odd Ideas, in Edinburgh. Her class is running tests on different kinds of spam filters."

Ms Gleen winked at Digger.

"We've found that killing the messenger gets the best results," she said.

Then she reached behind Gracie and snatched a McBowel's Rechargeable Pizza box from a work table.

"Product placements!" she snorted. "They're worse than pop-up ads. We have to be diligent or they'll replace the entire curriculum with commercials."

Digger was speechless. Never had he seen such a lovely creature.

"Are all Scottish physicists so beautiful?" he breathed.

Ms Gleen turned crimson.

"I like your powers of observation," she said. "Would you care to see my greatly magnified etchings of porridge molecules?"

Digger blushed.

Neville had a bad feeling about this.....

CHAPTER 119:CHALK CIRCLES

Digger spent an adventurous hour with Ms. Gleen, then returned to Roger's office, where a number of teachers had gathered to inspect the weird new parents.

Everyone examined Digger attentively for side effects.

"We were discussing the French Revolution," he said irritably.

"Really?" said Neville. "I should have thought Hadrian's Wall would be more--"

"Enough," said Merlin. "I'm beginning to have doubts."

"Have some lichen," said Sweet Gas. "It makes you bland."

"I have doubts about this school."

"That's a good sign," said Roger.

The teachers glanced uneasily at each other. They understood doubts. They knew about despair and battle fatigue.

Who, they wondered, would be the next to go? Smythe-Robinson, with his nervous habit of chewing on his shoelaces? Lector, with his growing interest in snakes? Or Cohen, the Art teacher, who fidgeted and squeaked in the grip of an unbearable anxiety unless he stood precisely in the middle of one of the magic circles he had drawn in various parts of the school?

Everyone looked surreptitiously at Cohen.

He seemed normal enough today, but only by the standards of the school.

Cohen stood perfectly still inside one of his circles, eying the others in case they knew something he didn't.

The circles protected him from the insatiable Monster in the Closet--the one who dwelled among exercise books, chalk, and forgotten goat-cheese sandwiches.

Cohen had drawn the circles in invisible ink, of course, because he knew the monster was obsessed with them.

The monster sneaked out at odd times of the day, armed with an eraser in hopes of

discovering the circles and rubbing them out.

Cohen knew about this ploy because he kept a careful count of all of the erasers in the supply closet. Three erasers had mysteriously disappeared in the last month alone!

Lately, however, Cohen had begun to notice a change in the atmosphere--a certain jubilation emanating from the Closet Zone. He suspected the monster had invented a special fluid that would reveal anything drawn in invisible ink.

Several times now he had noticed the janitor being unusually punctilious as he swabbed the floors with his mop.

This unwonted attention to detail had tipped Cohen off. The monster had kidnapped the janitor, devoured him, and festooned himself in the poor fellow's special janitor's uniform--the fluorescent purple trademarked Spandex one with the enormous 'J' embroidered on the front.

This was confirmed when Cohen caught him in the act of staring at his hat.

No normal person would stare at a red, stovepipe hat with such passionate intensity. There was nothing special about interesting hats; they were as common as leaping lords and partridges in pear trees.

Even the famous shrink, Philip Napoleon, wore an interesting hat. It was just one of the things patient and doctor had in common....

Cohen, who was a kind and gentle fellow under most circumstances, led his charges back to the classroom, being very careful to step into each of the magic circles he had drawn in the hallway.

Once inside his own little bit of the barn, he made sure to position himself in a very powerful magic circle before resuming his lecture on indeterminacy and sub-atomic pop art.

He noticed the children were uneasily smirking and whispering in his presence.

Perhaps his own uneasiness had communicated itself to them. He would have to ration his nervous glances into the closet and under his desk so they seemed more impromptu, and less like a harried inspection of the perimeter.

The children had no idea there was a monster stalking him, of course; there was no point in alarming them.

Meanwhile, the other teachers had returned to their own classrooms, and the school was settling into its normal chaotic routine, broken only occasionally by odd chirps, yells and squawks.

"I won't have evil in this school," said Roger. "If you find out who made the rubber duckie--"

"Matrix," sighed Merlin.

"If you find out who it was, please send him to my office."

"I don't think you want to meet him," said Merlin. "His names I Doctor Amadeus Wacker."

"The famous mad werewolf?" gasped Roger.

"Mad, perhaps," said Merlin. "Not famous, surely."

"Perhaps you give us a look at him in your crystal ball?" said Roger. "You ARE a wizard, aren't you?"

Merlin glanced nonchalantly into the sleeve of his robe.

"I am, but I can't help you today," he said. "I left my crystal ball at home."

"That's the feeblest excuse I've ever heard," said Digger. "You're afraid of Wacker, aren't you, Merlin! You're afraid to peek into Wacker's domain because he might turn you into a canary."

Merlin waxed wrathful. He beckoned a passing Latin teacher with a bald pate, and motioned to him to sit at a child's desk.

"This will do nicely," he said, rubbing the bald pate with his sleeve until it gleamed like a Packard Trilobite hubcap.

The others gathered around as he waved a hand over the Latin teacher's head.

The gleaming patch began to shimmer like a computer screen. An eldritch mist swirled

within, and a dark image began to form.

It was a page of verb conjugations: laudo, laudas, laudat....

"Latin homework," said Merlin irritably. "I was going to teach Arthur the important things in life, but no one wants to learn Latin anymore. They all prefer rock videos."

Then he waved his arm again and a figure materialized within the misty depths.

It was tall and lean, wrapped in a black cloak, its face hidden by a cowl. A wolfish snout jutted from the shadowed features, and white teeth glittered.

Roger leaped up on top of a filing cabinet. "This is Dr. Wacker?" he said nervously. "He looks like a school inspector I know."

"Shh," said Merlin. "He's plotting evil."

"He can't see us, can he?" said Roger, chewing on his sleeves.

"Relax," said Merlin. "I'm an expert at this; he has no idea we're watching him."

"Wasn't he a famous advertising executive before he became a mad werewolf and a threat to the whole of Tockworld?" said Roger. "I seem to remember him sneaking advertising copy into the curriculum materials in my old school."

"He was always a threat to Tockworld," muttered Digger. "Especially when he was a famous advertising executive."

"He has mysterious powers," said Merlin. "He can make people crave deadly and addictive substances."

"Rutabagas?" said Chester. "I don't like rutabagas. It would take a genius to make me crave them."

"ANYWAY," said Merlin. "About Dr. Wacker...."

They all gave their attention to the Latin teacher's bald pate again.

Wacker, meanwhile, was still lost in thought, plotting things.

"Doctor Wacker flew into a homicidal rage when Vlod began regulating advertising," said Merlin. "He disappeared into the north woods, where a kindly old sorcerer found him running with the wolves. The sorcerer tried to heal him with pictures of famous railway locomotives, but Wacker only pretended to feel normal and civilized. All the while, he was absorbing the sorcerer's magic like a sponge."

"Reminds me of our students," said Roger.

"Eventually, when Wacker had become powerful in his own right, he subscribed to MODEL RAILROADER," said Merlin.

"Whatever for?" said Digger. "I should think a magazine on carrion comfort food would be more fitting."

"By that time, he'd read THE GOLDEN BOUGH, you see."

"Oh no!" gasped Chester.

"Oh yes!" said Merlin. "That was how he learned about sympathetic magic. Build a little model of a thing, and you can use it to control the thing itself."

"Ding und Dang!" said Neville.

"Hoot mon!" said Gracie.

"Diabolical!" said Edwardian, petting Hermione. "All of these model railroaders look so normal in their fancy engineer's caps! Do you suppose Vlod Ironbeak knows about sympathetic magic too?"

"Do pigeons decorate statues?" said Digger.

"Good grief; does he do that too?" said Edwardian.

"This is why Vlod wants a reconstruction of the model railway Lenore McBeauty envisioned before the haggis killed her."

Roger had a bad feeling about this....

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