

THE DUCKS OF DOOM
Chapter 121-150
A WEEKLY SERIAL
With all of the Boring Bits Left Out
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CHAPTER 121:QUICK LEARNERS

"How did it come to this?" Cohen said. "Not only am I being stalked by closet monsters, I'm caught in a love triangle with a radiant Scottish beauty and an academic pear."

"It's hard being part of a triangle when the other sides don't even know they're doing geometry," said Jerry.

"I'm doomed," moaned Cohen.

"Stop bleating about it and do something," said Jerry. "Buy her some rutabagas. Ask her out to the ritual sacrifices."

"I'm too shy; what if I make a fool of myself?"

"You won't notice the difference."

"Maybe not, but SHE will."

"So check the closet; that always makes you feel nice and anxious."

"What a wonderful friend YOU turned out to be!" said Cohen.

Then, because the closet had been invoked, he peered into it.

"There'd better not be any monsters in here," he said.

Gracie gave him an encouraging smile.

"That's the spirit!" she said. "You have to be firm with monsters. They'll hate you at first, but they'll soon learn to respect you."

Neville put a protective arm around Gracie. "Next time, let ME chase the monsters away," he said. "I can protect you."

"I know," said Gracie. "I feel much safer now that I've got my big brave Neville to protect me."

Cohen ground his beak, watching jealously as Gracie put an arm through Neville's and patted him on the tractor tire. "My big pear!" she said.

Smoke issued from Cohen's nostrils. He clapped a hand over his snooter and went cross-eyed trying to hold in the telltale billows, but even so, little tendrils escaped through his fingers, coloring the air blue.

"Smoke gets in your eyes," said Jerry.

"Ha ha ha; very funny!" said Cohen. "Have you no respect for my broken heart!"

"Not so loud," said Jerry. "The others will think you're flipping out. Talk about something important."

"Quite right," said Merlin. "Enough mooning about! We have important business to discuss."

"I AM NOT MOONING," said Cohen. Then he hid in the closet for a moment, because everyone was staring at him.

Seconds later, realizing where he was, he uttered a terrified squawk and leaped out

again.

"Did you see a monster in there?" said Neville maliciously.

"No one believes I'm plagued by monsters!" said Cohen. "You'll all be sorry when they start breeding."

"Coming soon to a closet near you!" said Jerry.

"I can't think what it wanted with erasers," said Gracie. "Scottish monsters prefer haggis."

"Perhaps it was hoping to rub something out," said Neville.

"Oh you!" Gracie patted him on the arm.

Flames of jealousy shot up Cohen's spine, scorching it. He glared at Neville with murder in his eye. How dare that puffed-up tractor tire stand next to MY girl, he thought.

Then a sudden, ghastly sound broke into his reverie. It was the janitor listening to popular music again.

"Do you want to rip my T-shirt?" yelled a hideous voice.

"Oh listen to that, Neville!" said Gracie. "They're playing OUR song."

Cohen couldn't believe his ears. That was THEIR song?

"Do you want to rip my T-shirt?" screamed the singer.

The two lovebirds smiled tenderly at each other.

Cohen felt sick. His eyes turned green and little puffs of green smoke billowed out of his ears.

"Calm down, big beak," said Jerry. "She ain't the only fish in the ocean."

"She's the only fish for me," said Cohen.

At that moment, Sweet Gas trundled in from the hall, where he'd been examining a slab of granite some careless student had dropped.

"What's this about a monster?" he said.

"Took you long enough," said Digger. "What have you been doing?"

"Looking for a bowel. I thought I saw one running down the hall, but it was only a teacher fleeing a horde of parents."

"Oh that was Gollywogs," said Cohen, brightening up. Anything bad that happened to Gollywogs was richly deserved. "He's in charge of the school play. Some of the parents are a little aggressive about getting more stage time for their children. Personally, I think closet monsters are far more dangerous than mere parents."

Gracie looked at him in surprise. "Really?" she said. "How long have you been teaching!"

"The monster's gone," said Edwardian. "Gracie killed it."

"I don't suppose it had a bowel, did it?" said Sweet Gas.

"It evaporated," said Cohen, eyeing Sweet Gas nervously and hoping against hope the big rock pile wasn't planning on enrolling in one of his classes.

"You don't hide in closets, do you?" he said.

"Why should I do that?" said Sweet Gas. "Do you keep bowels in your closet?"

"I generally keep them in here," said Cohen, patting his abdomen.

Sweet Gas peered into the closet. "You never know," he said. "People are forgetful; they misplace things all the time."

"They misplace their bowels?" said Cohen.

"It's been known to happen," said Sweet Gas. "People are so stressed out these days!"

Cohen gazed in morbid fascination as Sweet Gas trekked deeper into the closet. Who was going to win this one? The monster, or the pocket mountain? At the very least, there'd be a rock slide of epic proportions, and perhaps a chilling scream, or a bellow of rage, or...

Cohen covered his eyes.

Then he heard a low, rumbling noise--the unmistakable sound of a troll in seventh heaven--and he peeked through his fingers.

Sweet Gas had found a plastic model of the organs of a sheep.

"Do you mind if I investigate this?" he said, holding it close to his chest in case Cohen

tried to take it away from him.

"You might as well," sighed Cohen. "My students never look at anything that smacks of education. I'm glad someone will benefit from it."

"A bowel won't help you," said Neville. "After years of careful research, I've come to the conclusion that nothing is beneficial."

"You're telling me!" said Chester. "I've been wearing this false beak for ages, and what have I got to show for it? I ask you!"

"What I MEANT," said Neville testily, "is that NOTHING, meaning the total absence of SOMETHING, is, in fact beneficial."

"Nothing is better than something?" said Chester. "You must be a politician."

"What, precisely, does this have to do with a plastic model of a sheep's intestine?" said Cohen.

"Well, the intestine IS hollow," said Sweet Gas.

"Until you've eaten something," said Cohen. "Then it fills up rather quickly."

"What a horrible thing to do to an intestine!" said Sweet Gas. "You should cherish it and read bedtime stories to it during the long nights, to help it fall asleep."

"So THAT'S how you do it!" said Edwardian. "My old auntie always said the only way to put a restless bowel to sleep is to drown it in Scotch."

"I don't approve of medicating bowels," said Cohen.

"Anyway," said Neville testily, "Nothing is profitable."

"I could have told you that," said Chester. "I tried selling electronic books once, and--"

"I'm surrounded by capitalists," muttered Digger. "Nothing is real unless you can make money out of it!"

"What I mean to say," said Neville frostily, "is that you can make money out of nothing. You can package it in Self-Help kits for people who want to get ahead in life."

"Or they could just worship parrots," said Chester.

"What's so special about nothing?" said Cohen sarcastically. "You can't even see it unless it's part of a donut."

"Precisely," said Neville, beaming. "Obviously you're a heron of genius, Cohen; you have an intuitive grasp of Irregular physics."

Cohen's opinion of Neville pivoted on a dime. He beamed back at the big pear, modestly.

"I've seen lots of donut holes," boasted Chester.

"I've got a plastic sheep's bowel," said Sweet Gas.

"But THIS donut hole is special," said Neville. "It's the foundation of the universe."

"Ha, ha, ha!" said Digger. "The foundation of the universe is a donut hole? And you capitalists want to sell it!"

"They can't have my plastic bowel," said Sweet Gas.

"No wonder my poetry disappears so quickly," said Edwardian. "People lose track of it while they're gobbling donuts."

"This is no time for trivial digressions," said Chester irritably. "I'm very upset; I've just learned that all of this busy, crowded world is merely the filling around a donut hole! All of these blackboards, pictures of clowns, bits of old pizza and scraps of art are little more than window dressing."

"Strange but true," said Neville, puffing out his chest.

Cohen glanced furtively at the closet in case Darkest Nothing was closing in on him; then he stepped into a chalk circle.

"There aren't any monsters in this big donut hole are there?" he said.

"Not as such," said Neville.

"I'd be safe inside a donut hole," Cohen said dreamily. "I'd never have to sleep with one eye open again."

"Who invented this super hole?" said Edwardian. "He must have been a loony."

"The Supreme Being invented it," said Neville, quickly stepping away from the Smiting

Zone.

"Why would he want a hole?" said Edwardian.

"For the god who has everything," said Jerry.

"Isn't it obvious!" said Neville. "You can't have something without nothing."

"Yes you can!" said Edwardian. "If you take the hole out of the donut, you've got a bun."

"Not a very nice one, surely!" said Chester. "You bite into it expecting a nice hole in the middle, and all you get is more fat and cholesterol."

"No theology in the classroom, please," said Cohen. "You'll start a religious war. Many people will be burnt at the stake and tortured to death."

"For eating donut holes," muttered Digger. "First they take away the proletariat's donuts, then they burn us at the stake for trying to eat the holes."

Cohen ignored him and peered into the closet to make sure there weren't any theologians hiding in the shadows.

"We're all doomed, don't you know!" said Merlin. "Dr. Wacker knows all about the donut hole. He's planning on stealing it."

"It's invisible," said Neville. "You need special 3D glasses to see it."

"I should think you'd need more than three dimensions," said Chester.

"These glasses are powered by MacroHard Angst," said Neville. "They crash when you find something interesting."

"Does he want the hole with or without the donut?" said Edwardian.

"He can't have my plastic bowel," said Sweet Gas.

"I knew it!" said Digger. "First the capitalists leave you with nothing, then they take THAT away too."

"We'd better stop this villain before he destroys all of Tockworld," said Neville.

"My hero!" said Gracie, patting Neville on the tractor tire again.

"First things first," said Merlin. "We have to finish bringing up Arthur so that he can destroy Van Von in a corporate battle and regain control of the Underworld for Disser. The boy needs a proper education."

"The gloves are off!" said Digger.

"What sort of a curriculum did you have in mind?" said Cohen.

"Business intimidation, sleight of hand and advanced conjuring, I should think," said Neville.

"If it's education you want, you've come to the right place," said Cohen.

"You can teach him all of this?" said Neville.

"Oh we don't actually teach anything here--we don't need to. We just provide the proper learning environment and make sure our students don't send each other into parallel worlds."

"But surely the foundations of knowledge are important," said Gracie. "You have to teach them SOMETHING. You can't cook a haggis without a recipe."

"My, my!" said Jerry. "Competence rears its attractive head."

"Be quiet!" said Cohen, smiling all around to show that, in spite of appearances, he wasn't the one who had spoken. "Anyway, we summed up all of the wisdom of past ages and printed it in a teeny-tiny book. I'm sure you've seen it on countertops in bookstores and gift shops."

"So you're the ones responsible for those evil little books!" said Edwardian. "'Selections from Dickens', 'Happy Thoughts for a Happy Day': that sort of thing."

"Yes, well...to an extent," said Cohen. "Anyway, each child gets one copy and is expected to read all twenty pages before graduating."

"Gosh!" said Edwardian.

"Some of us toil in the mines for the sweat of our brows," said Digger.

"How very biblical!" said Cohen.

"Be that as it may," said Merlin, "Do you think you can educate Arthur and his chums in such a way as to foster ruthless competitive behavior?"

"Of course!" said Cohen. "This is the art department! You only have to look at our graduates!"

"I see what you mean," said Neville.

"Be careful what you wish for, though. Arthur may go beyond the limits you have set for him."

These words cast a pall over the happy band. As one, they made their way out onto the playground to check on Arthur and his chums.

They found their young charges in the sandbox, busily assembling various bits and pieces of wrecked equipment into something bizarre and frightening.

"What are they doing?" gasped Edwardian.

"They seem to be building a carnival," said Neville.

"It's a pocket carnival," said Cohen. "I've read about this kind of thing in horror comics. There's The House of Endless Car Commercials, the Tunnel of Spam, and the Pavilion of Telemarketers."

"Brilliant!" said Merlin. "They'll take on Van Von with brutal competition."

"I don't see how...." said Neville.

"Do you see the sign out front?" said Cohen.

"The one that says, 'It's Not Our Fault'," said Neville.

"No, the one that says, 'Carnival of Lies, franchises available; enquire within.'"

"Diabolical!" said Edwardian. "I never knew you could do that with machinery."

"Capitalism without a mask," said Digger.

"They're not using my bowel in one of their rides," said Sweet Gas.

"You did want him to learn something about commerce," said Cohen. "This is fiendish. They don't have the capital to take on Van Von alone. But hundreds of franchise owners could do it. It would be death by a thousand cuts."

"They'll never get insurance," said Gracie. "One tiny scratch on a child's finger and the parents will sue."

"That's part of the attraction," said Cohen. "People come to these things to get rid of inconvenient family members."

Gracie and Neville inspected the wobbly rides.

"If this carnival is so good, won't it bankrupt the Underworld?" said Edwardian.

"Disser's no dummy," said Merlin, "As soon as he sees how the flames are burning, he'll do a corporate merger. It's called synergy; it'll give him a presence in the World."

"Doesn't he already have one?" said Neville.

"You're thinking of Old Nick, the corruptor," said Merlin. "I wouldn't bandy his name about, if I were you; he's liable to come and tempt you with something."

There was a silence. Cohen stepped into a chalk circle.

Gracie had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 122:TROJAN HAGGIS

Cohen's first official act as Arthur's teacher was to explain the meaning of art to him.

"Creation is the easy part," he said. "Anyone can make a work of art! The hard part is creating a demand. Today we are going to learn about the most important aspects of art--publicity, commoditization, and brand management. Shall we begin--"

"Will it never end!" muttered Digger. "Have the capitalist armadillos invaded even the sacred precincts of the muses!"

"I don't think armadillos are any more avaricious than the next fellow," said Neville.

The children ignored this little spat. They sat quietly in a glade on the bosky campus as Cohen explained marketing plans.

Meanwhile, in another part of the wasteland, Hank of Just Ur stopped at the very edge of

the Land of Milk and Honey and raised his arm.

Thunderbags, who had been stumbling along in a pleasant dream of absolute theocracy, bumped into him.

"What's going on?" he demanded. "More smiting?"

"Don't tell me we're lost again!" said Brubaker. "My feet can't take any more wandering."

"STILL lost, you mean," said the gym teacher.

"We are now at the border of the Land of Milk and Honey," said Hank. "There's a rumor I might not make it across. I'm doomed to expire on unpromised land, forever excluded from the verdant acreage of our hopes and dreams."

"What border?" said Brubaker. "Borders are supposed to have grog shops, tourist traps, and greasy spoons. I don't see any of those things; all I see is a lot of sand. I'm really tired of sand."

"Who started this rumor?" said Thunderbags.

"The Supreme Being," said Hank.

"Good grief; more smiting!" said Brubaker, taking a step back in case there was something horrifying in the offing.

Everyone followed his example, until Hank was all alone in a little island of emptiness and silence.

Then the camels repented themselves and closed in on their leader, choosing to share his fate rather than abandon him.

Loyalty and devotion will often trump caution.

"It's not fair," said the gym teacher. "If it wasn't for Hank, we'd never have gotten this far."

"Amen, bro," said Odd Camel. "We'd be back in Just Ur, having fertility rites."

There was a bonking sound as a heavy clay pot ended its useful life in a spectacular collision with Odd Camel's head. Only fragments remained, some of which eventually made their way into the Museum of Strange Things, where certain curators assumed it had been dropped by a careless Canaanite.

The handle, however, remained firmly attached to Sari's fist.

No one else mentioned Just Ur and the fertility rites again. The Supreme Being was a distant threat; Sari was close at hand, like a volcano.

"I don't see any clouds," said the gym teacher. "Smiting is usually associated with big clouds."

"Not as such," said Thunderbags. "It's the thunderbolt that counts. Any time SB feels like it, he can hurl down a thunderbolt and flash-roast your organs to the consistency of McBowel's Porridge Briquettes."

"Must you be so graphic?" said Hank.

"I can't help it. I'm an iron-age poet, not an academic."

"I suppose there might be such things as clear-air thunderbolts," said the gym teacher doubtfully.

"Out of the blue empyrean, you mean," said Thunderbags.

"Sure," said Odd Camel. "They hit you when you least expect it. There you are, taking your seat in the privy, or sneaking along in the desert, hiding from the dish-washing committee and munching on a bit of haggis, when a clay pot smites you."

"Thunderbolt, you mean," said the gym teacher.

"Same thing."

"That's what you get for eating haggis," said Secrets of the Pyramids. "Meat is bad for you. It oppresses the poor beasts who contribute their flesh, and it attracts thunderbolts."

"It does?" said the gym teacher.

"You should avoid meat and eat organic fruits and vegetables."

"What other kinds of fruits and vegetables are there?" said Bad Cabbage.

"We aren't birds, you know," said the gym teacher. "Red meat builds muscle. Think of

Bob the Barbarian! He eats one cow a day, and then goes out and smites dozens of big warriors, knocking them right off their big Clydesdales, eviscerating them and placing their organs in canopic jars; then chopping off their heads and extracting their brains through their nostrils."

"I think you're confusing him with the Egyptians," said Thunderbags.

"The desert sands are littered with the bones of Bob's victims," said the gym teacher. He should be a lesson to all of us."

"Bob is just a fictional character invented by a reclusive Babylonian genre writer," said Secrets. "Besides, he's eaten so many cows, he moos during moments of intense emotion."

Bad Cabbage gave Secrets an intense look.

"How would you know, my dear?" he asked.

Secrets blushed. "I asked him," she said.

"Really?"

"I met him at an embassy cocktail party. He wasn't mixing very well, so I engaged him in polite conversation."

"This is polite conversation? Asking him what sounds he makes during moments of intense passion?"

"It's so hard to think of anything to say at these embassy functions!"

"Hmmm."

"So if you don't want to moo while you're spooning with your sweetheart, don't eat cows," said Secrets. "Eat fruits and vegetables."

"Do you see any fruits growing around here?" said Brubaker. "Any pear trees in the sand? Any apple trees on the dunes?"

"Enough small talk," said Thunderbags. "It's time for evasive action. If we know that SB is thinking about hurling thunderbolts at our fearless leader, we have to resort to disguise. We have to smuggle Hank across the border."

"How?" said Odd Camel. "Disguise him as a platypus?"

"Blasphemy!" gasped Thunderbags. "Everyone knows the platypus is one of the most important symbols of the Supreme Being!"

"What do we do about his humps?" said the gym teacher. "They're a dead giveaway, you know!"

"We could attach little bits of silver foil to them," said Odd Camel.

"I didn't hear that!" said Sari, picking up another large, clay pot.

"When you have a feature that sticks out, don't try to hide it," said Bad Cabbage. "Call attention to it."

"To his humps?"

"We can disguise him as a hunchback sheep, dress him up in an acolyte's robe and cowl, put a lightning rod on his head, and call him Igor."

"Hmmm; not bad," said Brubaker. "Do hunchbacks normally run to two humps? That's a bit excessive, isn't it!"

"Some people are more generously endowed than others," said Bad Cabbage. "It's nothing to boast about."

"Do you really think this will fool SB?" said the gym teacher.

"Not as such," said Odd Camel.

"You wouldn't want the Supreme Being to take offense and smite Hank out of pique, would you?" said Thunderbags.

"We could sacrifice something by way of propitiation," said the gym teacher.

"Sacrifice what?" said Odd Camel. "Another sheep? SB must be getting sick of sheep by now."

"You're just trying to weasel out of it because it's your turn to supply a sheep," said Thunderbags.

"I've only got one left and he's my friend," said Odd Camel. "We tell each other jokes at

night and we comfort each other in our affliction."

Everyone stared at Odd Camel.

Secrets of the Pyramids patted him on the shoulder.

"It's okay to have a sheep as a friend," she said. "It shows you're sensitive."

Bad Cabbage was consumed with jealousy. "I like sheep too," he said. Then he tried to pat a nearby sheep, but it growled and bit him.

"Why don't we sacrifice some of the fruits of the land we've been passing through?" said Odd Camel.

"Like what?" said Thunderbags.

"Scorpions, flesh-eating spiders, rocks...."

"How do you sacrifice a rock?" said the gym teacher.

"You pound it with a hammer until it shatters."

"That could be dangerous; what if you hit your thumb, or get splinters in your eyes?"

People are not generally known for their biblical language on such occasions."

"I wouldn't be so sure," said Odd Camel. "A curse is still a curse."

"Enough small talk!" boomed Hank. "I am Hank of Just Ur. I will not stoop to disguise, nor will I engage in subterfuge in my dealings with the Supreme Being. Whatever my fate is, I embrace it."

Everyone clapped and cheered.

"Good old Hank!" said Odd Camel.

"We could always disguise somebody else as Igor the Sheep," said Thunderbags. "It's called a scapegoat. Any volunteers?"

Surprisingly, there were none.

"Very well, then," he said, producing a fistful of straws. "We'll draw for it. Short straw gets a near death experience."

The camels reluctantly snatched straws from Thunderbags' hand.

Bad Cabbage drew the short straw.

"Why me?" he moaned.

"Well said!" grinned Thunderbags. "You've learned the mantra already; you'll make an excellent Camel of the Negev."

"Too bad I won't be around to enjoy the distinction."

Thus it was, Bad Cabbage got himself up in fancy togs like Igor the Sheep, and prepared to venture forth and draw the ire of the Supreme Being away from Hank.

Thunderbags sacrificed nine scorpions, eight centipedes, seven cactuses, and six rocks.

"Wagons, HO!" roared the gym teacher, and the camels set out.

But Hank, being a natural leader, would not let another suffer the fate meant for him. Girding up his loins like Charlton Noble Brow, he strode across the desert sands, a few paces in front of the hapless Igor Bad Cabbage.

The rest of his flock marched apprehensively behind the two clay pigeons, waiting for a doom to strike.

Much to their surprise, however, they crossed into the Land of Milk and Honey without incident.

Unfortunately, the incident joined them after they'd been trekking for an hour or so through the promised land.

"So this is the Land of Milk and Honey?" said the gym teacher.

"It looks just like the place we left, if you ask me," said Brubaker. "Sand, sand, sand, and sand."

"I don't see any honey trees," said Odd Camel.

"I don't see any milk bushes," said Brubaker.

"Maybe we're supposed to plant our own," said the gym teacher.

"You mean earn the sweat of our brows with our haggis again?" said Brubaker. "We could do that back in Just Ur."

"Can I change out of this ridiculous Igor costume?" said Bad Cabbage.

"I like it," said Secrets. "I find it strangely provocative."

"You do?"

"You should dress up in strange costumes more often."

"Shhh," said Thunderbags. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"Laughter. Somebody's laughing."

"I hear it too," said Odd Camel. "It's coming from up above us."

"It's very deep laughter," said the gym teacher.

"No camel laughs like that."

"It takes up the whole sky."

"Run away, run away!" yelled lots of camels. "It's the Supreme Being!"

"SB has a sense of humor?" said Odd Camel.

"Of course!" said Thunderbags. "He made humans, didn't he!"

"SHE made humans," said Sari.

"That's true," said Odd Camel. "You have to have a pretty good sense of the absurd to make humans."

"So maybe he enjoyed our little charade," said the gym teacher.

Just then there was a glimmer in the sky, then a bolt of lightning hissed out of the empyrean and struck the lightning rod on top of Bad Cabbage's noggin.

The air around Bad Cabbage turned crimson. Sparks flew out. Pinwheels and roman candles whizzed about, scorching various camels.

Thunderbags leaped into the air as a spark burned his posterior. Odd Camel howled when a bit of fire torched his scalp.

The sheep, who had been trudging along behind the camels, laughed and laughed.

When it was over, all of the camels lay prostrate, their heads in the sand like ostriches.

The mysterious laughter rolled away into the distance, and the last of the sparks faded.

Hank was the first to stand up.

Sari got up next and applied soothing balm to Bad Cabbage's wounded noggin.

"Is this the afterlife?" said Bad Cabbage.

"It better not be," said Odd Camel. "It looks exactly like the beforedeath."

Bad Cabbage got to his feet and carefully felt various parts of his body.

"That was a warning," said Hank. "Don't try to pull the wool over SB's eyes. Don't disguise yourself as a sheep. And don't try to evade thunderbolts with lightning rods."

Just then, what was left of the lightning rod fell from Bad Cabbage's conker and turned to dust.

From that day forth, all of the Camels of the Negev put up lightning rods on their rooftops as a token of their respect for the Supreme Being.

"I guess it was just a false rumor about you not making it into the Land of Milk and Honey, Hank," said Thunderbags.

"An echo of some previous episode on a parallel world," said the gym teacher.

"What's this mark on Bad Cabbage's scalp?" said the Odd Camel.

"What mark?" said Bad Cabbage, alarmed.

"This one," said Odd Camel, pointing.

Bad Cabbage was growing frantic. "I can't see it!" he said. "It's on top of my head."

Everyone gathered to look.

"Oooh, I'll be that smart," said Brubaker.

"That's never going to come out," said the gym teacher.

Bad Cabbage was going crazy.

"Will somebody please tell me what it is," he said.

"Looks alien to me," said the gym teacher. "What do you make of it, Thunderbags?"

"Well the round, yellow thing is a circle," said Thunderbags. The two little dots look like eyes, and that big curving thing looks like a smile."

"A very big smile," said the gym teacher.

"Why is it smiling?" said Odd Camel.

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

"What does it mean?"

"It's theological. Smile and the whole world smiles with you."

"I don't think that's what it means," said Brubaker.

"Why not?" said Thunderbags.

"Because those Canaanites aren't smiling."

"What Canaanites?"

"The ones guarding that city on the hill."

Everyone turned to look.

It was a fairly large city, strategically located on a rocky eminence overlooking a sheep.

There were a lot of mud-brick houses, there was a temple to Marvin, and there was a high stone wall.

Guards occupied the top of the wall.

Hank checked his map, fumbling through a dozen or so cuneiform tablets before he found the one he wanted.

"That's Bucket," he said. "An important Canaanite city situated on a rocky eminence, overlooking a sheep."

"What kind of a name is Bucket?" said Brubaker. "There's no glory in attacking a place called Bucket."

"It's the Canaanite word for Pail," said the gym teacher. "It's named after the sacred Pail that Jack and Jill dropped."

"The one that got them kicked out of Valhalla?" said Odd Camel.

"The same," said the gym teacher.

"We don't call it Valhalla; we call it Paradise," said Thunderbags.

"Anyway, what's it doing here?" said Bad Cabbage. "The sacred pail belongs in Paradise."

"There was a hole in it, remember?" said Odd Camel.

"That doesn't make any sense," said the gym teacher. "How could a divine pail have a hole in it? Things are supposed to be perfect in Paradise."

"Not since the Great Dropping," said Thunderbags. "Why, oh why did those fools drop the pail?"

"It was Jane's fault, wasn't it?" said the gym teacher. "She wanted a pet snake."

Just then, Sari loomed out of the desert.

The gym teacher hid behind a sheep.

"Umm, of course we all know it was Dick, really," he said. "You know what they say about snakes and puppy dogs' tails!"

"There was no prohibition against fraternizing with snakes in Paradise," said Sari.

"But this was old Nick," said Thunderbags.

"In the guise of a snake," said Odd Camel.

"Some of us believe he pretended to be a hose," said Thunderbags. "He was a deceiver."

The camels gathered around Thunderbags. They knew there was a sermon coming, involving one of the good old stories they loved so well.

Thunderbags drew himself up to his full height, wiggled his humps, and began the sermon: "Old Nick, who was also known as Auld Nick said unto Jane: 'Why bearest ye that heavy pail of water like beasts of burden? Are ye not in Paradise?'"

"When do we get to the slaughtering part?" said Odd Camel.

"Later," snapped Thunderbags. "There was no slaughtering in Paradise."

"Were Dick and Jane really naked?" said the gym teacher.

After some hesitation, Thunderbags consulted a cuneiform tablet. Then he said, "Yes."

"Cool! Are there any woodcuts in that cuneiform tablet?"

Thunderbags hastily stuffed it into a pocket of his robe. "But NOT naked in the same way you and I become naked when we bathe in fresh water," he said.

"I should hope not!" muttered a young camel named Wanda. "I'm not getting naked with an old fart like him."

"Tell us about the snake!" said the gym teacher.

"No; tell us more about the nakedness," said Odd Camel. "We need to contemplate this for the good of our spiritual development."

"There was no raiment in the garden," said Thunderbags.

"None?" said the fascinated camels.

"None whatsoever."

"Not even a Gucchi bag?"

"Not a stitch. Dick and Jane were appareled in the glory of celestial approval."

"Oh that's nice, that is!" said Darlene, a filing clerk. "Hides the wrinkles, don't it!"

"You have wrinkles, Darlene?" said her friend, Eliminator Jean.

"I was speaking hypothetically."

"There are no wrinkles in Paradise," said Thunderbags. "Neither are there any jowls, nor any cellulite--none whatsoever. Nor is there any getting of your haggis with the toil of your sweat."

"Oh yeah! Why were Jack and Jill toiling up and down that hill with a bucket of water if there's no toiling?" said Brubaker.

"Yeah, it says in the Great Big Book of Things That Really Happened that we were created in the Supreme Being's image to be his servants and help out with the chores," said Odd Camel.

"Just a minute," said Bad Cabbage. "What was that Thunderbags said?"

"You mean about the chores?"

"No, I mean the part about SB's image."

"We were created in SB's image," said Thunderbags.

"The Supreme Being has TWO humps?"

"He made us in his image, did he not?"

"But some of us only have one hump."

"Well you get the extra one when you go to Paradise. It's like a gold star."

"Really?"

"It happens when SB summons us from our resting places and glues us back together."

"Fawww; that's gotta stink!" said Brubaker. "Especially the recently deceased."

"You dare to make fun of SB?" said Thunderbags. "He made us from the dust of the ground. Re-assembly is nothing to the Great One."

"I don't know about this," said Brubaker, wrinkling his nose. "Some of you guys already smell pretty bad. I can imagine how you're gonna reek while you're waiting in line to be reassembled for the afterlife."

"There's always the Underworld," said Thunderbags.

"Okay by me! Disser has a carnival. You don't have to stand around singing in choirs or doing the chores in the garden. You can go on the rides as many times as you like."

"The Underworld is for those among us who wish to save themselves by repenting," said Thunderbags. "Those who merely wish to prolong their sinful pleasures go elsewhere."

"Oh, you mean the Inferno, where old Nick tortures people."

"Old Nick doesn't torture anyone," said Brubaker. "That's just a myth perpetrated on a gullible populace by cartoonists."

"Whew! I'm glad of that," said Odd Camel. "Now I can get back to--"

"He does something infinitely worse," said Thunderbags. "He reveals your innermost being so that you can see exactly what you are. Usually it's some sort of crawling, scuttling, beetle-like thing."

"Ooh, nasty!" said Brubaker.

"It's never too late to repent," said Thunderbags.

There was a silence while everyone examined the ground for creepy crawlies. You can never be too careful. The centipede in your boot might be an ancestor.

Thunderbags surveyed his tribe with a tear in his eye. He had spoken well today. He had affected even himself.

And yet, there remained the Canaanite City.

"Why are the guards on that wall making faces at us?" said Brubaker.

"Because they know we're going to attack them, sack their city, slaughter all of the males, and enslave the women," said Thunderbags mildly.

"Gosh," said Odd Camel. "Isn't that a bit excessive?"

"This is no time for bourgeois sentimentality," said Secrets of the Pyramids. "Those people are counter-revolutionaries. The minute you turn your back on them, they'll start privatizing things."

"Gosh, she won't let us eat sheep because it hurts the sheep, but she doesn't mind slaughtering people who disagree with her," said Odd Camel.

"Do we really have to do this?" said Brubaker. "Some of us will come out of this with a lot of spears sticking out of our bodies."

Hank spread his hands. "Ours not to reason why."

"So how do we sack a city, Hank?" said the gym teacher. "We've never done it before."

"I picked up this book at a roadside stand," said Hank. "It's called THE BIG BRONZE BOOK OF SIEGE WARFARE FOR DUM DUMS. There are lots of diagrams of useful military equipment. Do you think you could help us with this, Bad Cabbage?"

Bad Cabbage eyed the book.

"We'll need an increase in the military budget," he said.

"How much?" said Hank.

"Well, when you're building a weapon, you can't just use ordinary wood and ropes and stuff. You have to buy special, one-off ropes that cost a lot more."

"Hmmm," said lots of camels.

Thus it was the camels set up their tents in the desert, below the city of Bucket, and the defense contractors waxed wondrously jubilant.

In tent no. 51, a black tent set some distance apart from the rest, so that no one would notice it, Bad Cabbage worked with a secretive group of camels, devising a new type of catapult.

It was a catapult with very expensive parts.

"I don't like this, Hank," said Thunderbags. "They've already blown half our budget and all they've got is this tent."

"Patience," said Hank. "We have to make sacrifices."

Several weeks later, a delegation of camels paid a visit to Bad Cabbage to see what they were getting for their money.

"Why is the catapult so expensive and so far behind schedule?" said Hank.

"This is just the prototype," said Bad Cabbage. "These things take time."

"And what's this bill for two million shekels for a lot of stones?" said Brubaker "Are you crazy! Stones I can get you for free!"

"Careful," warned Bad Cabbage. "Those aren't ordinary stones. They're haggis bombs, imported from Scotland."

Bad Cabbage and his team pulled the catapult outside onto a secret proving grounds.

While they were setting up, Hank examined the obscure writing on the frame.

"'Acme Catapult'," he read. "This is the creature's name?"

"Umm, it's the name of the chief contractor," said Bad Cabbage, and he gave the signal to release the catapult.

A haggis flew straight up into the air, then dropped straight down again, smashing the catapult.

"Needs work," said Brubaker.

Bad Cabbage dusted himself off.

"We do have something else," he said. "It's still in the experimental stage, mind you." His team pulled a goatskin cover away from an odd-looking device on a stand.

"Behold, a bagpipe!" said Bad Cabbage.

Everyone contemplated it with fascinated attention.

"How do you aim it?" said Brubaker.

"What kind of missiles does it fire?"

"Where do you put in the batteries?"

"Oh ye of little faith!" said Bad Cabbage. "Used properly, this will shatter a wall."

"Ha, ha, ha!" said Odd Camel. "I've heard everything now."

Bad Cabbage fumed.

"Do you know the story of the three Canaanite pigs and the big bad wolf?" he said.

"You mean the one about the wolf who got boiled in a pot because he couldn't blow down a brick house?" said Odd Camel.

"That's the pig version," said Bad Cabbage.

"There's another one?"

"Yes there is; it involves a wolf with a bagpipe and the shattered walls of a brick house. History is written by the victors."

"So if the wolf was the victor, how come we get the pig version?"

"Because it's politically correct."

"Wait a minute," said Brubaker. "How would you know? We don't associate with pigs."

"I should say not!" said Odd Camel. "Have you seen what they eat?"

"Have you seen what fish eat?" said Brubaker.

"Fish are clean; they take a lot of baths."

"I think we'll need a backup plan, Hank," said Thunderbags. "That bagpipe is not going to shatter a wall."

"Is there anyone here who can play a bagpipe?" said Bad Cabbage.

A camel named Jock MacGolfbag stepped forward and picked up the weapon.

"How hard can it be?" he said. "You blow into this thing and put your fingers on the stops here."

"What's the bag for?" said Brubaker.

"It's just a decoration," said Bad Cabbage. "We copied this from a rune stone we found in Egypt. We suspect the engineers needed some place to stick the colorful tartan, so they made a bag. They probably keep snacks in it, in case they get hungry while they're blowing down walls."

"Okay, give it a try," said Hank.

Everyone ducked down behind a wall.

Jock blew into the weapon.

"Good grief, that bag is swelling up like a camel at a bean fest," said Odd Camel. "Run away! Run away!"

"Somebody should warn Jock," said Brubaker. "He's turning as red as a red, Red Tse."

"How come there's no sound coming out of it?" said Hank.

"Squeeze some air out of the bag before it explodes," said Bad Cabbage.

Jock looked back in surprise, then he reached down and squeezed the bag.

A sudden, ear-splitting wail issued from the bagpipe. It was like the cry of a demon expelled from a video arcade.

A short distance away, behind the stout defensive walls of their city, the Canaanites gazed at each other in wonder.

"Can such things be?" said a Canaanite slacker.

Jock made a quick recovery and picked up the bagpipe again.

"I think I'm getting the hang of it, Hank," he said. "I'll give it a try now, shall I?"

"Isn't there something about this in the Geneva Convention?" said Brubaker.

Thus it was, Jock marched out into no camel's land, between the camels and Bucket, and the soldiers of the camel tribe followed in a ragged line, whimpering a little as the first

uncertain notes of the piper's song commenced.

Then it rose to the full power and majesty of the pipe, and the camels belted out a rousing chorus of 'How Much is That Doggie in the Window?'

The Canaanites screamed. Walls cracked, clay pots shattered, altar stones trembled etc.

But the wall girdling the city remained intact.

"Amazing, sir, but not quite powerful enough," said Jock.

"We can't go on like this," said Brubaker. "We'll do as much damage to our own army as to theirs."

"We do have one more weapon, sir," said Bad Cabbage.

Everyone limped back to Tent 51, and Bad Cabbage whipped the goatskin covering off an immense, mysterious blob on wheels.

"Good grief!" said Hank. "What in the name of Charlton is that?"

"It's a Trojan haggis, sir," said Bad Cabbage.

The camels had a bad feeling about this...

CHAPTER 123:ABORIGINAL CAMELS

An eerie silence descended as the camels stared in awe at their new weapon.

At length, Hank mastered his superstitious dread and approached the device, prodding it delicately with a finger.

"What is a Trojan haggis?" he said.

"It's a very special haggis, sir," said Bad Cabbage. "It's hollow, of course, and made out of mud bricks. There's a door...."

Bad Cabbage tugged at a small door, which eventually popped open, revealing the mysterious interior.

"Bring the machine oil!" he yelled. "And next time, we make the hinges out of bronze instead of mud bricks."

Hank peered through the doorway into the clotted shadows.

"Where's the meat?" he said.

Bad Cabbage grinned.

"This is the good part," he said. "We select a few volunteers, they climb into the haggis, and then we close the door."

"I'm sure they'll be very grateful for the experience," said Hank. "In what way does this solve our problem with the Canaanites?"

"Wait, sir; there's more! Once the soldiers are nice and comfy, we tow the haggis to the walls of the city. Then we pretend to leave this place and creep away in defeat, singing anti-war songs."

"Have you been eating something peculiar, Bad Cabbage?" said the gym teacher.

"Very funny!" said Bad Cabbage.

"I've been eating lots of peculiar things," said Odd Camel. "How come nothing ever happens to ME."

"That's because it already happened in a big way," muttered Thunderbags.

"Negative waves, Thunderbags! You should learn to relax before the mainspring pops right out your brain and skewers someone."

"ANYWAY," said Bad Cabbage, "There's more! The Canaanites will think we're offering them a gift, you see. They'll have a big party, with lots of drinking and fertility rites."

"Some people have all the fun!" muttered Brubaker.

Bad Cabbage cast a nervous glance in Sari's direction, but she was busy straightening Hank's tie.

"I see," said Hank. "You're hoping the Canaanites will get drunk and smite themselves."

"Not exactly, sir. This is the good part. While the Canaanites are sleeping off the effects of too much fun, Jock MagGolfBag will sound a blast on the bagpipes. That will be the signal for our warriors to pop open the door--"

"Assuming it can, indeed, be popped open without a crowbar," said Thunderbags.

"It's the contractor's fault, not mine," said Bad Cabbage. "Anyway, no worries, it'll be fixed in time. The warriors will jump out of the haggis, open the gates, and let our army in."

"The army that left this place," said Thunderbags.

"PRETENDED to leave this place," said Bad Cabbage, making a tremendous effort to stifle his rage. Why was it always so hard to explain military strategy to civilians!

Hank shook his head. Why were military strategists so eager to try out their new toys!

"I suppose we do have to do SOMETHING," said Thunderbags. "This larking about in the shade of a tumtum tree is sapping our moral fiber. Have you seen what our young people are doing?"

"Reading our FAQ and our book of ten thousand food rules, I should imagine," said Hank. "They have a lot to learn."

"Umm, Hank...."

Hank sighed wearily and rubbed his eyes. Why ME, he thought. So many camels to choose from, and the Supreme Being has to pick on an old, tired camel who just wants to relax in a hot tub and pretend he can't feel the arthritis and the blisters and the spider bites!

"We can't go on like this," said Thunderbags. "Our young people have begun fraternizing with the Canaanite young people. They're wearing flowers in their hair and bones in their noses, and they've formed a rock group called Bronze Camels. They're singing subversive songs."

"They are?" said Hank. "Our innocent young children?"

"Can't you hear them?" said Thunderbags.

Hank listened carefully.

"You mean that screeching, wailing sound?" he said. "I thought it was one of our sacrificial offerings."

"Ha, ha, ha!" said Thunderbags. "It's the young people. They're singing something very strange."

"Screeching, you mean," said Hank. Then he cupped his ear, straining to make sense out of it.

"Do you want to rip my T-shirt?" yelled the camels.

"Do you WANT to rip my T-shirt?"

"DO you want to rip my T-SHIRT?"

"Good grief!" said Hank. "What kind of song is that? And what's a T-shirt?"

"See what I mean, Hank! And that's not all. They're rolling up our tent ropes into sheets of papyrus, setting fire to them, and puffing on the smoke."

"Horrors!" said Odd Camel, hiding his smirk.

Hank stared at Odd Camel, who was now holding his breath for some reason.

All at once a puff of smoke issued from his lips, and he smiled beatifically.

"Apostate!" muttered Thunderbags.

"Take it easy, Thunderbags, baby," said Odd Camel. "Those are beautiful people out there."

Hank gave his attention to Bad Cabbage's new toy again.

"You really think this will work?" he said.

"What could go wrong?" said Bad Cabbage.

Hank was dubious. He knew a lot about scientists.

"What happens if it breaks down?" he said.

"It won't sir. We've gone over every part of the haggis very carefully."

"Except the door."

"That will be fixed."

"And this hole in the side?"

"What hole? Oh, that hole. Umm; it's a feature."

"It's a hole," said Hank. "Three of the bricks fell out; I can see them right here, in the sand."

He nudged the bricks with his foot, and impaled Bad Cabbage with a look familiar to anyone who has ever submitted an underwhelming science project for evaluation.

"Umm, it was--"

"The contractor?" said Hank.

Bad Cabbage grinned. Then he yelled at a subordinate.

"Get a tube of Mighty Glue," he roared. "And some more mud bricks."

"You should really keep an eye on your contractors," said Hank. "They cut corners."

"Yes sir. I'll have them eaten by lions, shall I?"

"Only a little bit, Bad Cabbage. You'll need them for other projects, won't you?"

Bad Cabbage looked down at his feet like a small boy caught in the act of launching a nuclear weapon.

"Yes sir," he said in a tiny voice.

Hank patted him on the head.

"Very well," he said. "We shall try your new toy. How long will it take you to complete your repairs?"

"Five minutes, sir. You won't regret this. Bucket will be in your hands very soon."

Thus it was, Hank agreed to a daring new strategy.

That night, under low, scudding clouds, by the light of a horned moon, a small band of camels towed the gigantic haggis to the gates of the Canaanite City.

Then they pretended to leave.

"I GUESS WE'LL NEVER BE ABLE TO SACK THIS CITY!" yelled Brubaker. "MIGHT AS WELL GO HOME NOW."

"YOU GOT THAT RIGHT!" yelled Bad Cabbage. "WE CAN'T EVEN TRICK THEM WITH CLEVER SURPRISES. I HOPE THEY LIKE THE NICE PRESENT WE'RE LEAVING THEM TO SHOW THERE'S NO HARD FEELINGS!"

Then the camels folded their tents and sneaked into a convenient hiding place, behind a sand dune.

"Okay, synchronize your watches," whispered Bad Cabbage.

"Synchronize our what?" said Thunderbags.

"Umm, it's a new thing I made. An hourglass that you can wear on your wrist."

"Don't you have to hold your wrist a special way?"

"Well, it's a small price for enjoying the convenience of a wireless clock."

"But you have to keep turning your wrist every few minutes."

"Like I said, it's a small price to pay."

"And you have to keep staring at it, to make sure you know when the sand runs out so you can turn your wrist again."

"Hey, it's in beta, okay. So it has a few problems; give it time!"

"Shh!" said the gym teacher. "It's working. The Canaanites are interested."

"They're laughing themselves sick!" said Brubaker.

"Send in the pipes," said Bad Cabbage.

Hank signaled Jock MacGolfBag, who climbed over the sand dune and advanced on the wall, blowing into the pipes for all he was worth.

"Why aren't they making any noise?" said the gym teacher.

"SQUEEZE THE BAG!" yelled Bad Cabbage.

"What?" said Jock. "Oh, aye. I forgot."

Then he squeezed the bag.

The preternatural silence was shattered by an alien wail.

"Holy cats!" said Brubaker. "This will bring about global warming!"

"Take it easy," said Odd Camel. "The pipes make a lovely sound when they're played by someone who knows what they're doing."

"What's happening now?" said the gym teacher. "Why haven't our warriors jumped out?"

"What's that hammering noise?" said Thunderbags.

"I think they're trying to open the door," said Hank, gazing fixedly at Bad Cabbage. Bad Cabbage offered a sickly grin.

All at once the door popped open with a loud screeching noise, and the warriors jumped down.

"There's something wrong with this picture," said the gym teacher.

"Aren't they supposed to be INSIDE the city walls?" said Thunderbags.

Bad Cabbage stood up and gaze in stupefaction across the sand.

The warriors, meanwhile, hurried back to their own lines.

"Well, that was interesting," said Thunderbags.

Now the quarrelling and recriminations began.

Hank, meanwhile, girded his loins and prepared himself for a chat session with the Supreme Being.

When he returned the next morning, scorched and dazed, he met a delegation of Canaanites trooping across the sand under a flag of truce.

The most impressive of the lot, a portly Canaanite wearing an official mayor's hat, with lots of feathers dipped in purple die that had been a gift from a Phoenician defense contractor, raised an arm in greeting.

"More taxes!" he said, which, is the universal civic language for "Welcome to Our City; Did You Bring Your Credit Cards?"

"Thank you," said Hank.

"I am NimHaHa, the mayor of Bucket," said NimHaHa.

"We came to offer you safe passage through a Philistine City, one hundred miles away."

"We can't accept your offer," said Hank. "This is where we're supposed to be."

"What do you want from us?" asked NimHaHa. "We're busy getting ready for the fertility rites."

"We need your city; we've been told to sack it."

NimHaHa looked crestfallen. "Why would you want to sack our city?" he said. "I ask you, is that a nice thing to do! We spent hours and hours building it. Besides, you scared away our sheep with that wailing platypus of yours. We loved that sheep; it was our claim to fame. People come from all over Tockworld to admire it."

"Sorry," said Hank. "You can have the haggis, if you like. It's hollow, but no one will know if you close the door."

"Psst; It's a few bricks shy of a load, Hank," whispered Thunderbags.

"But Bad Cabbage told us that was a feature."

"We don't want your haggis," said NimHaHa. "We want our sheep. It's written up in the guidebooks. Bucket is situated on a rocky eminence, overlooking a sheep."

"Well you could overlook a haggis," said Hank.

"I suppose," said NimHaHa grudgingly. "But it's not the same."

"We'll throw in some unleavened bread."

"With marmalade?"

"Scottish. The best. And once the sheep realizes the haggis hasn't been attacked, I'm sure it will come back."

"Well, okay, we accept. But why exactly do you insist on camping in front of our city?"

"I'm sorry," said Hank. "The Supreme Being said we could live here; it's the land of Milk and Honey."

There was a snickering among the delegates.

"Tourists!" muttered Raging Nom, NimHaHa's acolyte. "They think honey grows on trees!"

"But your people already live here, Hank," said NimHaHa. "You're indigenous."

"Really?" said Hank. "Since when?"

"Ha, ha!" said Brubaker. "That's why I have blisters on my feet; from marching on the spot!"

"See those archaeologists over there, in the midden?" said NimHaHa. "They told us about you people being indigenous.

"Nonsense," snorted Thunderbags. "We came from Just Ur."

"Ha, ha, ha," said NimHaha. "Nobody comes from Just Ur. You think a sophisticated urban camel is going to leave the shopping malls and the espresso bars of Just Ur to set up tents in a wilderness and be slaughtered by a lot of Canaanites?"

"Hank," whispered Brubaker. "He has a point. "Let's go and check into a Best Eastern and rack up some R and R."

"Of course I have a point," said NimHaHa.

"I'm sorry," said Hank. "We have no choice. We have to seize your city; it's in our contract."

"What contract?" said NimHaHa.

"It's invisible because it was drawn up by the Supreme Being. There's lots of 'thou's' and 'thee's' in it."

The Canaanites looked up apprehensively. Then they discussed the matter among themselves.

"This could be bad," said NimHaHa. "They are lean, hungry and muscular from wandering around. We, on the other hand, are pear shaped."

"But we have an army," said Raging Nom.

"A privatized army."

"So what do we do?"

"Negotiate."

"Drat. I hate negotiating over my own future."

Thus it was, the camels and the Canaanites parleyed.

"Look, we don't mind a bit of slaughter," said NimHaHa. "We all do it from time to time."

"Well said," agreed Thunderbags.

"Truer words were never spoken," said Odd Camel, between puffs of something.

"There's no life like it," muttered Brubaker.

"But a warless economy leads to corruption," said Raging Nom. "We have to cleanse our communities. Our children are sneaking out here and smoking tent ropes and putting flowers in their hair."

"Tell me about it!" said Thunderbags, glowering at Odd Camel. "The only tent ropes we have left are the ones that aren't made out of hemp."

"Have you seen how much food they eat after they smoke those ropes!" said the gym teacher.

"Big Snyderman's is making a killing selling boxes of unleavened bread with bits of dead fish and peppers and stuff on top," said Brubaker. "I think we should all get a piece of the action."

"Have you see the poetry they write?" said Thunderbags. "Look at this!"

He showed them a very long cuneiform tablet with lots of strange symbols.

"It's called 'On the Caravan'," he said. "It's about a bunch of camels who hop on caravans and ride all the way out to the coast."

"What coast?" said Raging Nom.

"Umm...what's that bit on the other side of the Pillars of Hercules?" said Thunderbags.

"Oh, you mean the Bermuda Triangle!"

"Anyway, they don't work; they just get together and eat fermented yogurt and read these hockey poems."

"Haiku," said Odd Camel.

"Whatever," said Thunderbags. "Anyway, the Supreme Being is going to be very angry

about this."

"Marvin is going to have a fit," said Raging Nom.

"We have to do something about these wretched young people or there won't be any more slaughters," said Thunderbags."

"Tell me about it," said NimHaHa. "And who's going to work in the cubicles, tending sheep?"

"They won't listen to their priests," said Raging Nom. "They'll start going to each other's temples, taking a little bit of this and a little bit of that."

"They won't pay taxes," said NimHaHa.

"There was a collective gasp."

"Draft them!" yelled the gym teacher.

Hank shook his head.

"Do you chaps mind if we have a time out?" he said.

"Of course," said NimHaHa. "Feel free. We brought you some snacks."

He waved his arm and one of the Canaanites offered a picnic basket.

"It's not much; some bits of lamb squashed between pieces of bread, with some squished weeds and things. We got the idea when one of our camels sat on a lunch basket. We call them Big Buns."

Hank offered some unleavened bread in return. The Canaanites puzzled over this for a time, then they began gluing pieces together, making scale models of mud-brick houses and temples.

"So what do we do?" said the gym teacher. "We're indigenous. This whole thing was a waste of time."

"I don't believe it," said Thunderbags. "This is something our descendants worked out as a practical joke."

"We could ask for proof that we're indigenous," said Hank.

"I'm here, you're here; that proves it," said Odd Camel.

Thunderbags snatched away his burning rope.

"You need a brain transplant," he said.

Thus it was, the camels returned to the parley with renewed skepticism.

"Show us," said Hank firmly. "Prove it."

"Sure," said NimHaHa. "Walk this way."

Then he led the camels past the Trojan haggis and through the city gates into the heart of Bucket.

It was quite an experience for the camels, watching hundreds of Canaanites going about their business as if nothing terrible was in the offing.

"Look at the poor fools," said the gym teacher. "They have no idea they're about to be sacked."

Several of the delegates wandered off course and found themselves unaccountably in the precincts of the temple of Marvin, where a number of priests and priestesses were conducting themselves in a manner familiar to aficionados of fertility rites everywhere.

Thunderbags rounded them up.

"We don't do this!" he said irritably.

"I don't see why not!" said Brubaker. "How does the Supreme Being expect us to be fruitful and multiply if we don't actually do the math homework?"

"You do it in the privacy of your own home, with your spouse," said Thunderbags.

Just then, NimHaHa and his chums found them.

"We thought we might find you here," he said. "It's a popular spot. We call this Demolition Dating. Try your luck, if you like. You never know; you might be selected."

"For what?" said Brubaker.

"Those who are selected by priests or a priestesses get to marry them. That's the prize."

"You can tell last year's winners by the dazed looks on their faces," said Raging Nom.

"They're worn out?" said Brubaker hopefully.

"It's not what you think," said Raging Nom. "It comes from actually living with people who would submit to this process."

Thunderbags dragged his charges away.

"You know the rules," he said

"Do I ever!" muttered Brubaker. "If it's fun, it must be corrupting."

"Auld Nick is ever vigilant."

"Nobody ever tells HIM they have a headache," said Brubaker.

"Yes, and he can look forward to being sealed up in a volcano and permanently sundered from the delights of Valhalla," said Thunderbags.

NimHaHa smiled diplomatically.

"I enjoy these little interfaith dialogs," he said. "But here we are at the museum shop."

They all stopped in front of a bright yellow building.

A sign said, McBowel's Gifts, Authorized reseller of Museum of Strange Things reproductions.

It was very small, building, barely large enough for half a dozen camels together.

The camels were not fooled, of course. It was obviously a magic shop, bigger on the inside than it was on the outside.

Sure enough, once through the doorway with its tinkling chimes, they found themselves in a much bigger shop on a parallel world.

"We're going to prove to you that you really are indigenous, Hank," said Raging Nom.

Hank had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 124:REVISIONIST CAMELS

The camels looked around in awe.

Shelf after shelf extended away into the misty interior, as far as the eye could see. There were genuine reproduction campfire remains, pottery shards, and bronze nose-hair clippers.

There were cuneiform tablets exhorting people to try special pills that would enlarge certain body parts. Other cuneiform tablets invited people to take a gander at sprightly young Canaanites wearing NOTHING AT ALL.

Thunderbags loomed over certain delegates who were examining the sample images.

"Brubaker...." he intoned.

Brubaker looked up irritably. "What?" he said. "Isn't it written, 'know thine enemy?'"

"It is also written, 'Lead me not into temptation'."

"There's a difference between curiosity and temptation," said Brubaker.

"Curiosity killed the camel," warned Thunderbags.

"But what a way to go!" said Odd Camel.

"THIS WAY, ladies and gentlemen," said NimHaha. "One of our clerks has assembled some reproductions from the early Camels of the Negev period."

The camels trooped after him to a shelf near a StarShekels coffee shop by a window.

Inside the coffee shop, Canaanites came and went, talking of Charlton NobleBrow.

Hank listened carefully for any hints as to why he was here, and who really built the pyramids.

"I'll have the one-cubit latte, please," said a customer adorned in ostrich feathers. "With organic cow's milk, this time, not goat's milk!"

"Do you have an outlet where I can plug in my stylus?" said a Phoenician dressed all in purple. "I need to work on my script."

"So I told her," said a Philistine, "'Maybelle,' I says, 'You have to quit this new diet; it's making you pass gas like a goat!'"

NimHaHa took a clay pot from the clerk and showed it to Hank.

"See this?" he said. "See the little camel inscribed on the base? See the inscription?"

Hank read it aloud for the others: "Made in Bucket by the Camels of the Negev, 1300 BCE. Genuine reproduction made in Shanghai by the New Bright Toy Company."

"We have the original in our museum," said NimHaHa. "Some reassembly required, of course."

Hank was furious. "Who made this?" he said, glaring at his compatriots. "Whoever did it, step forward now or the whole class gets a smiting."

"It was made by indigenous camels, Hank," said NimHaHa. "Your people have always been here!"

"Oh sure!" muttered Brubaker. "We grew out of the desert like rutabagas."

"Rutabagas aren't indigenous, Brubaker," said the gym teacher. "I can see you never paid attention in school."

"I distinctly remember being in Just Ur," insisted Hank. "I've never been in Bucket before."

"Hey, I recognize that inscription!" said Odd Camel, who was examining a reproduction of an object used in fertility rites. "It's my long lost great uncle's seal."

"What, the New Bright toy Company seal?" sneered Brubaker.

"No, this part here; the camel with a hat that looks like a slab of unleavened bread. I'm sure my great uncle Sue drew that. And look at this! Tsk! He never could spell 'camel' properly; it's a family joke."

"You had a great uncle who was named Sue?" said Brubaker. "No wonder you're a bit strange."

"Hey, watch the negative waves!" said Odd Camel. "For your information, his dad called him Sue so he'd learn how to fight other guys and be strong. He was hoping Sue would join the Marines."

"This worked?"

"Not really. The 'fight the other guys' part worked, but the fact is, Sue was female all along. Her dad was kind of near-sighted. She did join the Marines, however. She won a bronze star in the battle of the wooden Platypus."

"It's just what I've always said," muttered Brubaker. "Names make the camel. Call yourself Bob, and you'll be a mighty warrior. Call yourself Sue and--"

Just then, a camel named Sue, who had been discussing unarmed combat techniques with a camel named Lisa, loomed over Brubaker.

"So I was wrong!" said Brubaker. "Haven't you read Hegel? First you make one mistake, then you make another. It's called 'historical necessity'."

"Anyway, someone pointed out Sue's true gender to my great uncle," said Odd Camel. "He was so embarrassed, he left Bucket and trekked all the way back to Just Ur, where he contributed substantially to our branch of the family."

"Why didn't you mention this when we were starting out?" said Hank irritably.

"Hey, you got your marching orders from the Supreme Being," said Odd Camel. "I don't meddle in theology. There's far too much smiting in it!"

"I had a great aunt who went missing after her boyfriend left her for a dolphin," said the gym teacher. "There was a rumor she made the trek to Bucket because she thought there was an ocean here, with dolphins and octopuses. I thought it was just an apocryphal story."

"Apocryphal!" snorted Brubaker. "That's just a fancy name for superstition and legend. You round up all the bats in the family attic and squeeze them into the special 'Apocryphal' folder and you can have it both ways--you can tell people you know how crazy the stories are, but, secretly, you can read all of the exciting, fantasy parts."

"This conversation is wandering perilously close to blasphemy," said Thunderbags in a menacing voice.

"Anyway, my great aunt met the dolphin while she was on a cruise ship on the great, shiny waters," said the gym teacher.

"Have you been smoking some of Odd Camel's tent ropes?" said Brubaker.

"Of course not! I'm a nonsmoker! Anyway, the fact is, no one ever saw my great aunt again. There was a post card from her once, but it got broken in the mail. Whoever baked the cuneiform didn't do a very good job. All you could read was, 'Ka...anite...fer...lity rites.... Even if the tablet hadn't been broken, we wouldn't have known what it was all about--my great aunt never could spell."

"Hmmm," said Odd Camel, lasciviously.

"It seems there are plenty of rumors of long-lost relatives who may actually have been indigenous to the Land of Milk and Honey," said Hank. "I wonder why I wasn't told."

"Well, there WERE occasional postcards," said the gym teacher: 'Come and visit me in the Olde West. Wish you were here, ha ha!'"

"We never figured out where the Olde West was," said Bad Cabbage. "We thought it might be the Land of Nod."

"No one goes to Land of Nod!" said Brubaker. "It's a dippy little burgh in the middle of nowhere."

"This is somewhere?" said the gym teacher.

"Bucket is in the Land of Milk and Honey, and it's quite large," said Raging Nom, indignantly.

"I still haven't seen any honey bushes," said Odd Camel.

"No honey today," said NimHaHa. "And I'm afraid the milk is sour because we don't have any refrigerators. You should go home and enjoy your modern appliances."

"Warm milk is good for you," said Thunderbags. "It makes you appreciate your scotch."

"I had an aunt once who used to swear by warm milk," said the gym teacher. "She lived to be one hundred and ten. Her husbands all died young, from drinking warm milk. They left her millions of shekels!"

"So how come you didn't get any of the loot?" said Brubaker.

"She took it with her."

"It is written that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle--" began Thunderbags.

"We're camels, in case you hadn't noticed," said Brubaker. "Anyway, it depends on the size of the needle, doesn't it! You can buy a pretty big needle with millions of shekels."

Thunderbags glowered and loomed.

"There will be punishment for this," he said.

"Anyway," said the gym teacher. "There were fabulous bedtime stories about other camels who joined the people from the sea and started wearing feathers in their hats."

"I've heard those," said Brubaker. "There was one about some WWF wrestler with the head of a bull."

"I heard about those people," said Bad Cabbage. "They're so crazy about labyrinths, they built their palaces to look like labyrinths."

"There's a rumor they went with the Phoenicians across the great big shiny water," said Odd Camel. "It took them MONTHS to get across it, if you can imagine."

"That's a crock!" said Brubaker. "No lake is that big!"

"But wait; the story gets even weirder," said Odd Camel, enjoying himself. "When they finally got across the water, they found a whole civilization of really weird people. These people made ziggurats, of course--everyone makes ziggurats!"

"WE don't," said Thunderbags.

"Well, we're a bit strange if you ask me," said Brubaker.

"So how come we haven't we heard any more about this?"

"It's a trade secret. The Phoenicians don't want anyone else dealing with these people because that's where they get a lot of their gold. So they covered their tracks and told everyone their explorers died in a horrible, poisonous wasteland where giant mosquitoes attack anyone who shows up with blood in their veins."

"Those Phoenicians are really sneaky!" said Thunderbags. "It's no wonder they weren't chosen for torment, suffering, and wandering in the desert!"

"Wait a minute!" said Brubaker. "If we have relatives here, why haven't they come out to welcome us?"

"They don't like to draw attention to themselves," said Raging Nom."

"Why not?"

"It's a survival instinct. They just want to be left alone to relax with their sheep and read quietly. If it ever got around that they were indigenous, hundreds of relatives and spongers would show up. Besides, they don't want to get spammed."

"Well I never!" said Bad Cabbage. "The least they could do is come out and invite us into their homes."

"What, all sixteen thousand of us?" said Brubaker.

"Thirty thousand," said Odd Camel. "You did say be fruitful and multiply, and it gets pretty boring on these long treks."

Just then, a delegation of indigenous camels showed up.

Their leader, Kilroy, introduced himself.

NimHaHa beamed all around.

"I'm SO glad your families are reunited and can pay more taxes," he said.

"You guys where here all along!" marveled Hank. "I can't believe it!"

"Not as such," said Kilroy, squirming with embarrassment. "We meant to write, but we've been sick a lot."

"You were here all this time, and you never even tried to build a great nation!"

"What's a nation?" said Kilroy.

"It's a lot of people pretending to have something special in common," said Brubaker.

"Listen, I know about special," said Kilroy. "Special gets you into trouble with your neighbors; they try to bonk you all the time because you look different."

"The supreme being wants us to be special," said Thunderbags.

"What for?" said Kilroy.

Thunderbags gasped. "You dare to question SB?"

"Well he didn't tell US to come here," said Kilroy.

"That's because you botched it," said Thunderbags. "You were already here and you became just like everybody else."

"We've always been just like everybody else," said Kilroy. "What are we supposed to do? Grow a third eye?"

"You're supposed to memorize the ten thousand food rules, for one thing."

"Listen, we only have one food rule! Don't eat anything that's twitching. It's not exactly crawling with food in this place. Do you see any supermarkets or convenience stores?"

Thunderbags handed Kilroy the hotel and motel edition of the ten thousand food rules.

"Are you kidding!" said Kilroy, groaning. "We'll never be able to remember all of this stuff!"

"We can help you with it," said Thunderbags.

"SB really wants us to learn all of this?"

"Of course! There's a rule for everything!"

'Oooh, according to this, we've been doing all of our sacrifices wrong."

"That's because you've been using the metric system instead of cubits. The same thing happened to the Franks when they tried to launch a Goth into orbit. They mixed up their measurement systems and the rocket crashed. The Franks were so discouraged they swore not to try again for another three thousand years, at least."

Hank shook his head. "Speaking of discouragement...." he said.

"Relax, Hank!" said Thunderbags. "It doesn't matter if some of us were already here. Obviously they had no intention of building a great nation. It's up to us. That's why we were chosen. That's why we had to trek across the desert and deal with famine, anguish, blisters and slavery; it's part of the contract."

"Some of us should have looked at the fine print," muttered Brubaker. "Contracts can be negotiated, you know."

"How would we negotiate?" said Thunderbags. "What have we got to offer SB that He doesn't already have?"

"That's the trouble with theology," said Brubaker. "You always run into the same problem--what to give the god who has everything."

"Chocolate?" said the gym teacher.

"Precious stones?" said Bad Cabbage.

"Love," said Odd Camel. "We all want love, baby! It makes the world go around."

Everyone glared at Odd Camel.

Meanwhile, far away in the future, the evil Dr. Wacker watched the camels in his crystal ball and grinned to himself.

They were bickering among themselves yet again.

Good, very good!

Soon he would make his move.

The Hippopotamus of Fate had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 125:WEREWOLF MAKEOVERS

Dr. Wacker observed the quarreling camels with malicious glee. "They'll never get anywhere at that rate," he said. "I couldn't have planned it better myself. Hank must be prevented from building a nation; it would change the course of history."

Carrion Snipe, his acolyte, looked up from the shredded remains of his snack. A tentacle dangled from his mouth, twitching like a garden snake.

"But haven't they already built a great nation?" he said. "I mean, it's there, isn't it! Last time I looked, it was."

"There is SOMETHING in place, I grant you," said Dr. Wacker. "It is not, however, what was called for in the original contract--a GREAT nation, stretching from the Nile to the Euphrates."

Carrion sucked in the dangling tentacle and delicately wiped his jaw.

"I thought SB was an ecologist," he said. "Paving over that much desert would alter the climate."

Dr. Wacker waved this way. "It wouldn't be the first time," he said. "This is the chap who drowns innocent Koala bears and lemurs because he's upset about people getting rid of their nasty inhibitions and letting it all hang out. Calls it wicked, if you can believe it!"

"He was making a point," said Carrion. "It was a question of emphasis."

"Are you defending SB, Carrion?" said Wacker in a dangerous voice.

"Who, me, master? Do I look like the sort of creature who plans on a boring afterlife, frisking about on a lot of fleecy clouds, playing the bagpipes and singing cheerful songs of praise every time SB shows his face?"

"Hmm," said Wacker.

"No siree!" said Carrion. "It's an afterlife of gashing and rendering for me. The excitement of the chase, the crunching of bones, the weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth in the outer darkness...."

Wacker was mollified.

"The fools at the Museum of Strange Things are trying to thwart me, Carrion," he said. "Those silly curators think they can change the past to fit their new discoveries and their smarmy theories! I'll soon take care of them."

"I'm sure they'll be properly horrified, sir."

"They'll soon regret blackballing me when I applied for membership in their silly order."

There was a pregnant silence. This was the first Carrion had heard of his boss applying to the Secret Order of Curators.

And they had blackballed him!

This was a chunk of data as hot as an erupting volcano. In fact, it was so hot, Carrion

pretended it wasn't there.

"It's just as I've always said, master. What's done is done, unless it's undone."

Wacker puzzled over this for a moment, then he waved his arm over the surface of his viewer, a sheet of chrome taken from a Pickard Trilobite--a Luxury Glorious and Majestic coupe with two-tone paint job and optional sunroof.

A pale, moon-shaped object swam into view on the gleaming chrome.

"What is that?" Wacker demanded, peering suspiciously at it.

Carrion Snipe shook his head. "Probably something the curators are examining in their secret chamber in Museum of Strange Things."

"You needn't sound so impressed," said Wacker. "It's just a drafty little room with a glitchy computer model of Tockworld."

Carrion saw the look on Wacker's face and adjusted his tone. "I'm sure it crashes all the time," he said.

"And turns blue!" said Wacker, examining the moon shape, which was growing larger and brighter. "What IS that thing?" he said.

"A moon," said Carrion in a strange voice. "Um, have you seen today's funnies, master? There's a particularly good Captain Zap--"

"That's one of the curators, isn't it!" said Wacker. "He's mooning us!"

"Um...."

"They know I'm watching them. They're laughing at us!"

"It might be a gesture of submission. You know how baboons and such present their bottoms to alpha males to show that they don't want to be torn to pieces and scattered to the four winds--"

Wacker waved him to silence and changed the channel.

An image of the Toronto Random School swam into view on the chrome.

Wacker spotted Arthur and his carnival and zoomed in for a close up.

"What's that urchin doing?" he demanded. "Is he mooning us?"

"He appears to have built a carnival," said Carrion.

"I know that, Carrion. I've been to carnivals. If you wait long enough, you can usually find someone who's tumbled out of a roller coaster or gotten lost in a house of mirrors. It's all junk food, of course--they've gorged themselves on sugary confections and questionable hotdogs, but there are times when I crave junk food."

"I have some spam artists in my picnic basket, master. We could have a snack time...."

"Not now, Carrion. I must study Arthur's new project. I wonder if I can make use of it for my own ends. Children can do a lot of damage, you know."

Carrion sucked in his cheeks. He wasn't keen on children; they tormented his pets and wrecked his lab equipment, and flooded the airwaves with music that set his teeth on edge.

"Children are never too old for evil," said Wacker. "Remember how helpful they were on Earth once we really got going with our ad campaigns?"

"But the adults objected," said Carrion.

"Some did, but not all. You know how adults are! So desperate to be cool, they wear what the kids wear, and they listen to the ghastly music of the younger generation."

"You couldn't say that of Hank, boss. Hank is incorruptible."

"He is indeed! But look how easily his people are swayed. They're already fraternizing with the Canaanites, making plans to have fun. No one wants to suffer anymore. My plan is bound to succeed, because it puts people in touch with their inner beasts."

"You're a genius, boss."

"I know it only too well, Carrion. It doesn't make me happy though. In fact, I'm quite melancholy. I lack something."

Oh, oh! Thought Carrion. He knew about Wacker's moods; they were always quite simple, and they always involved lots of mayhem.

There's only one thing I need to be completely happy," said Dr. Wacker."

"Control of the world?" said Carrion.

"I have that, Carrion. I mean I'm GOING to have it. No, my young acolyte; what I want is a son. I need someone to share my dream."

Carrion caught his breath. Good grief! This could lead to untold complications, and eventually, to a rebellious teenager in the lab.

"What kind of son do you want, master?" he said. "Shall we check the online catalogs?"

"You mean purchase one, Carrion?"

"No, I suppose not. I'm an acolyte, not an expert in these things. I think you have to find a creature of a different gender and um...."

"Don't be disgusting."

"There's a certain amount of technology involved. Organic of course. I assume you have the proper attachments--"

"Enough small talk. I already have someone in mind."

"Really? What does she look like? Is she a wolf of the northern forests, or a wolf of the steppes? I like the steppes."

Dr. Wacker took out his wallet and showed him a grainy photograph of Allura.

"Oh, that one," said Carrion.

"What do you mean 'that one'!" said Dr. Wacker in a dangerous voice. "You have something against my intended?"

"Um...it's just that, Allura has a mind of her own."

"We all have THAT," said Dr. Wacker. "Though some of us keep it in a foot locker."

"I'm just thinking of you, sir. She does have a thing with Vlod Ironbeak."

"Vlod the Wimp, you mean."

"Well...."

"Leave Vlod to me."

"You're sure about this, sir?"

"I realize she may not strike you as a perfect match. I'm not fool enough to think she's the most beautiful werewolf in the world."

"She does have her off days, boss. She doesn't always look as pretty as that; sometimes she looks like a duck."

"We all have our off days, Carrion. She'll be happy with me; we can write advertising jingles together."

"Have you um...ever asked her on a date?"

"Not yet, but I'm going to soon. I found this book. "

With that, Dr. Wacker produced a well-thumbed copy of DATING FOR DUM DUMS; the one with a woodcut of a hot duck on the cover.

"Hmmm," said Carrion, trying not to smirk.

"I'll have to do something about my appearance, of course," said Dr. Wacker. "I'm a bit too charismatic. It's the evil in me; it's so vivid and compelling!"

"Yes master."

"I could always use advertising to win her over but that would be cheating. I want her to love me for who I really am. I want her to see the inner beast."

"Good for you, sir."

"I'm glad you see things my way, Carrion, because I'll need your help. I want you to go out into the world and find out what's cold, so I can adopt it and be seen by others as frigid."

"I wonder if you mean 'cool', sir."

"Whatever."

Carrion sighed. Sometimes being an acolyte wasn't worth the tripe.

Meanwhile, Allura was trying to figure out what it was aliens liked in their mates. It wouldn't be easy seducing someone like Bessemer Converter.

And everything would be much harder now because she was morphing back into a werewolf.

How to approach him? What would attract an alien disguised as a quacking elephant? Did he have interesting cravings?

She could wear an engineer's hat, perhaps.

She checked her lipstick and makeup. Cosmetics on a wolf looked a bit odd, she had to admit. Heavy black eyeliner around werewolf eyes made them look like infrared range finders.

The lipstick was perhaps a bit too garish, but then, it looked garish on her beak as well.

Blush on feathers was bad enough; on fur it looked like congealed blood.

But what could she do? Parts of her body kept shifting around like caffeinated gophers in a bag. There was nothing in Elizabethan Ardent's Handbook of Images that explained how to deal with a problem like this!

Madame Butterflies had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 126:Acme Appliances

Allura was growing irritated.

What would impress Bessemer, she wondered. Did he like the innocent, virginal kind? The sort of girl that got sacrificed on altars, or tied to stakes and left for dragons?

She looked through her wardrobe, but there isn't much you can do to soften a werewolf's image.

Perhaps a gauzy veil? A Peter Pan collar? A frilly lace bodice?

Ultimately she settled on a white sweater, opting for purity and innocence. The sweater made her look like a Scandinavian resistance fighter on her way to attack a Nazi-held heavy water plant, but at least it was a start.

She'd never master the art of making herself conventionally pretty; her wiles were based on natural animal magnetism.

Allura attracted males by terrifying them.

Now for one last crack at the makeup.

She found a subtle lip gloss, but her hand slipped as she applied it to her muzzle. Then she growled and got lipstick on her choppers.

"Perfect!" she groaned. "Now I look like Lizzie Borden on a bad fur day! Why do females use this junk anyway?"

"It's a feature," said a voice overhead. "It's bundled with your operating system."

"Oh, it's you. Hello Cletus. Where have you been?"

A crow flapped down onto her cosmetics table.

"Yoga class," he said.

"You've been eating your instructor; there's a bit of blood on your beak."

"Sorry." He wiped it off. "I don't like being told to twist myself into a pretzel."

"Then you shouldn't go to yoga classes. That's what they do."

"I wanted to meet a girl."

"Ha."

"You should talk! What's with the war paint? You want to meet a boy?"

"I'd rather be eating haggis," muttered Allura.

Then she threw down the lip gloss and strode down the hall into her forest glade.

Modern werewolves have taken to building forest glades inside their homes.

Allura was no slouch in that respect; her glade was more elaborate than most--big enough to accommodate the tallest of pine trees.

There was even a dark, inviting pool of icy water, with Precambrian stones scattered about the shore.

Powerful air conditioners kept the whole affair at a comfortable, sub-alpine temperature, summer and winter.

The air conditioners burned through quite a lot of double 'A' batteries, of course, but Allura spared no expense.

Besides, she saved energy by recycling old boyfriends in her backyard particle accelerator. They made excellent fuel rods.

The water was just right. She felt good in here among the ice cubes. She loved floating on her back, looking up at the cathedral ceiling as bankers and financial advisors ghosted past overhead, hooting and screaming while they patrolled the sky under a horned moon.

Then she shook herself off and relaxed in her little museum of natural history, beneath a fresco depicting wolves and what they like to eat.

A colorful mosaic showed a pack of wolves bringing down a spammer, the terrified beast stumbling over its own computer as it fell to the mottled snow.

Cletus watched disapprovingly from an overhead branch. Water was for drowning things so they could be eaten by crows.

"Why am I doing this?" Allura said. And then, because it seemed to follow naturally, she said, "Who am I? Where am I going? What is the meaning of all this?"

Only the first question really interested her at the moment.

Who am I?

She had only the vaguest memory of her past, and it was a false memory at that. Someone had told her the stories about herself that she recited to herself in the long hours of night.

Few of her memories BV--before Vlod--had the ring of truth about them. She hadn't really become herself until she'd met Vlod.

Had he bitten her?

But that would have made her a vampire, surely; not a werewolf!

Was Vlod a closet werewolf? Did he dress up in furs in the secret heart of the night and prance about in the forest primeval, tearing hapless creatures to pieces and devouring them?

Would the mayor of Toronto do such a thing?

"Who am I?" she said aloud.

"Depends who you've been eating," said Cletus.

Allura doffed her sweater and tried on a frilly blouse with a Peter Pan collar.

"How do I look?"

"You want my honest opinion?"

"Of course."

"You look like a werewolf," Cletus said, backing off a little in case there were repercussions.

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it! What's the occasion?"

"I'm supposed to seduce Bessemer Converter, the captain of the alien invasion force. They're disguised as quacking elephants. They were spotted up around George's Trains, ogling the model railroads in the window."

"Did you ever consider wearing an engineer's hat?" said Cletus.

Allura beamed at him.

"You're a genius, Cletus! It's exactly what I was thinking!"

"Fame at last." Cletus said preening himself. Then he took a closer look at Allura, just to make sure there hadn't been any bitter irony in her words.

But Allura was pleased. She found an engineer's cap and coveralls in her wardrobe and tried them on..

"It's a Ralph Klam," she said. "You like?"

"Toot, toot!" said Cletus.

Allura cocked a hip and winked at him.

"Are you coming with me?"

"I'm not dressed for a seduction. Will it be a formal occasion?"

"I have a conductor's uniform you can wear."

"I'll go as I am, thank you."

"You can be the dispatcher," said Allura. Then she turned away and gazed out the window, her mood changing.

"I can't do this," she said. "It's dishonest."

"Did that stop you with Macklin?"

"Macklin was an important cause."

"And you owe Vlod big time."

"Yes, but I don't know why."

"Maybe you don't owe him a thing. What if he made it all up?"

"Now you're being skeptical."

"Okay, okay; call me Mr. Missouri. "

"Besides, I like Macklin. I wanted it to work out. If it hadn't been for goody two-shoes Gladys, we might be an item. He's not Vlod, mind you, but still--"

"Goody two-waffles Gladys, you mean,," said Cletus.

"Are you making fun of webbed feet?" said Allura menacingly.

"You're a werewolf."

"That's only a part-time job. I'm really a duck."

"Are you?"

Allura shook her head. "I don't know WHAT I am!" she wailed. "I'm no good at anything. All of my relationships go bad!"

"Well you might get a little further if you stopped tearing people to shreds the moment they disagree with you! You should enroll in one of Philip Napoleon's anger management classes."

"I didn't know he offered any."

"You know his motto! 'You warp 'em, we shrink 'em!'"

"Maybe I should ask him about my past too. I'm tired of these false memories. I'd like to know more about my parents. I wish they hadn't both died before I was born."

"So thoughtless of them!"

"And if I ever find out who turned me into a werewolf....."

"I thought you found out. Wasn't it a human refugee? Jason Weedybits, the marketing manager from that big tobacco company that started World War III."

"I thought so too, but it turned out he just wanted to dress up in leather and crawl around on all fours."

"Boring!"

"I'm so angry I could bite someone."

Cletus flew up to the ceiling.

"You really don't like being a werewolf?" he said.

"It has its moments, but I want a relationship."

"You have me, your old friend and eating companion."

"I mean with someone who will give me children and be kind to me in my old age."

"Dream on!" said Cletus.

"Is it too much to expect?"

Cletus spread his wings. "You're asking me?" Crows make their own way when the going gets tough. Whatever you kill and eat, can't hurt you."

"I'd really like to settle down with Macklin, or someone like him."

"Easiest thing in the world! Check out any big hospital. You'll find lots of comatose people."

"That' not what I meant."

"Come on, admit it, Allura! You like him because he's helpless."

"What am I going to do, Cletus?"

"You really want my advice? Call Philip Napoleon."

Allura glared at him. "Are you saying I'm a loony?"

"Course not! If you were a loony, you'd be just like everybody else around here. You're special."

Allura thought about this for a moment. She hated being manipulated by Cletus, but anything was better than these nagging doubts about herself.

She called Philip Napoleon's office, and got right through, without even a hint of an automated answering machine.

"You want to be a patient?" said Philip. "Oh goody, goody gumdrops! We're very busy, but I'm sure I can fit you in. Let me see. NOW would be a good time."

There was a silence, then Allura heard him calling his secretary.

"Josephine? Oh Josephine!"

"What is it!" growled Josephine. "I'm busy. The script writers are here to look over our patient files and the stupid computer crashed again."

"Oh dear! Will there be punishment?"

"Not now!"

"That Josephine!" said Philip, chuckling. "She's so nasty, but she's got a heart of lava. Please come over immediately."

Allura wasn't so sure about this anymore, but she leaped onto her waiting Harley-Davidson and roared over to Philip's office.

Cletus flew above her, keeping an eye out for snacks.

At the same time, but in a different context, Arthur had been approached by representatives of the Acme Manufacturing Corporation.

Their scouts had spotted the wonderful carnival he'd built and were so impressed, they offered him a contract on the spot.

Merlin was pleased, but his chums were nervous.

"Shouldn't we put a stop to this!" said Neville. "Commercial exploitation of minors and all that sort of thing?"

"Nonsense!" snorted Merlin. "Arthur will do the exploiting."

"I knew it!" said Digger. "That's what the medieval period was all about, you know! Crushing the workers and making them wear ridiculous costumes."

"Shh!" said Merlin. He waved his arm and produced an image of the Acme Corp's research and development facility, near the old Wire and Cable plant on Laird Drive.

"There's Phineas Godolfin," he said, motioning to a woodpecker that looked as if it had just gone through electroshock treatment. "He owns the company."

Godolfin was pushing an unwieldy looking contraption onto a concrete proving ground.

"Internet-enabled washer, dryer, and toaster," said Merlin. "I wonder where it's going today."

Neville had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 127:Warrior Secretaries

From the reception area, Philip Napoleon's office looked like any other office--there were some walls, a ceiling, a floor, a few chairs, some wrecking and decorating magazines, a desk, and an overworked secretary.

Secretaries, as you know, are the only ones who understand what really goes on in modern offices. Without secretaries, civilization as we know it would simply crumble to dust and blow away in the wind.

Anyway, in Philip's office, appearances were deceiving.

If you looked closely at the paintings, for instance, you'd see they were actually portraits of famous lunatics--many of whom occupied seats of power in governments and corporations around Tockworld.

They were all very nice people because they were on medication that Philip had made especially for them, using organic weeds from his backyard.

Anyway, when Allura entered the office, she found Josephine, Philip's efficient secretary, busily smashing a computer with a sledge hammer.

"I'm teaching it a lesson!" she snarled without looking up from her task. "If it ever crashes again, I'll do something REALLY nasty."

"I'm a werewolf, mind you," said Allura.

At this, Josephine looked up and examined Allura closely for a moment.

Then a gleam of recognition came into her eyes; she dropped her sledgehammer and embraced Allura. "A kindred spirit!" she said. "Welcome, sister! I'm so glad you've come!"

"You are?" said Allura.

"You have no idea how starved I am for the company of normal people with healthy appetites and rages."

Allura was almost too shocked to hug her back. Josephine liked her; she really liked her!

Cletus, meanwhile, flew to the safety of a nearby curio cabinet, coming to rest on top of a bust of Jack the Ripper (who was really a chap named Bruce LittleThing, and was quite charming when occupied with his day job as a clerk in a shop that sold ladies' bloomers).

"And who's that?" said Josephine, motioning to Cletus. "The black crow of happiness?"

"That's my friend, Cletus," said Allura. "He likes to eat dead things."

"I love crows!" said Josephine. "I love to watch them ripping open corpses and gorging themselves on the entrails. It makes me think of my boss."

Cletus bowed. He, too, was unused to affection, and didn't quite know where to put it.

"I like you too, sweetie," he said. "We should go out and do the town. I know where lots of ripe bodies are buried."

Josephine winked at him.

"That makes two of us," she said. "Oh, I'm so happy! "You have no idea how glad I am to see you. I'm fed up with neurotics."

"I'm not exactly uncomplicated," said Allura.

"It's not your fault," said Josephine. "The male conspiracy convinced you that something is broken because you have normal female desires."

Allura blushed. "Well, I--"

"It's sheer hypocrisy," said Josephine. "We females aren't supposed to want to crush enemies and see them driven before us."

"Oh, THOSE female desires," said Allura.

"Anyway, it's quite normal to have overwhelming passions," said Josephine. "I don't care what Revenue Canada says!"

Allura was shocked. There was nothing wrong with her? It was normal to feel the way she did?

"You're just like me," said Josephine. "We're the kind of girls who want the simple things in life --frightened husbands, obedient, loving children, bullwhips, spittoons, large dogs...."

"Those are good things to have," agreed Allura. "But I need to find out what happened in the past."

"That's what the Museum of Strange Things is for," said Josephine. "You can go there anytime and submit a question. Depending on the size of your sacrificial offering, a curator will be glad to--"

"I mean in MY past," said Allura. "I need to know what happened to me when I was younger, who I really am, and why I can't get any satisfaction."

Josephine rubbed her hands. "You've come to the right place," she said.

Then the remains of her computer beeped.

"Not again!" she said. "You can't believe how many times that thing crashes. It's down more often than it's up."

"It's kind of smashed and broken," said Cletus. "Maybe that has something to do with it."

Josephine shook her head. "It's guaranteed against bumps. I called tech support and they told me to open it up and see if there were any spiders inside it. They said there's a big problem now with spiders getting into computers."

"Can't they fix it?" said Allura.

"They said spiders are the customer's fault. I opened it up so I could find the little beggars, but there weren't any; there was just a scruffy old armadillo. I FedExed it to Vlod Ironbeak, just to remind him he owes us money."

Allura stood in front of the smashed computer for a moment. Then she growled and snarled.

Instantly, a smiling, boyish face appeared on the cracked screen.

"What was I thinking?" it said. "Where do you want to be yesterday? You can trust all of your files with me."

Just then, Philip stuck his head through the door. When he spotted Allura, his eyes grew as large as tea trays in the sky.

Oh, how do you do!" he said. "How DO you do!"

Josephine smirked.

"Listen to the little cad putting it on," she said. "He's just itching for punishment."

Allura looked him over. He wasn't exactly well endowed in the male accessories department, but he did have a certain aura.

"Who's the scrawny boy then?" said Cletus in a smarmy voice. "Not enough meat on you to feed a sparrow. We'll have to fatten him up, Allura."

"Is he any good?" said Allura.

"In what capacity?" said Josephine. "I suppose he'll do in a pinch, if he's primed--"

"As a shrink, I mean."

"Oh, that. I guess so. He's probably a genius. Lunatics go into his office, and then they come out again."

"Doesn't he kill them and eat them?" said Cletus, disappointed.

"Dead people don't pay bills," said Josephine.

Philip gleamed at Allura.

"I'm ready now," he said.

"Go ahead," said Josephine. "If he bothers you, just tear him to shreds. He likes that."

"Sounds good to me," said Allura, still in shock because someone actually liked her.

"And Cletus can have the corpses," said Josephine.

"They don't come any better than you, sweetie," said Cletus. "You could become a habit!"

Allura felt amazingly good as Philip ushered her into his office.

For a long moment, he just contemplated her, his face shining like a flood lamp.

Then he took a seat on a wooden rocking horse.

Behind him, a large painting depicted Napoleon Bonaparte overrunning Wellington's forces at Waterloo.

"How long have you hated your mother?" said Philip.

"I don't hate her," said Allura. "I never met her."

"Hmm. It's difficult to hate your mother when you don't know who she is. This could lead to an unhappy childhood and bad behavior as an adult. One of us will have to be punished."

"Probably you," said Allura. "I'm not very good at accepting blame."

Philip beamed at her.

"Let's see if we can find any clues," he said. "Do you think she was female?"

"I hope so."

"Did she meet your father before or after you were born?"

"Umm....are you suggesting I'm a test-tube baby?"

"That would be feasible, I suppose. But I notice you didn't immediately think of alien abduction and subsequent impregnation using exotic devices on a flying saucer."

"No, that's true; I didn't," said Allura.

"I wonder why not?"

"I guess I've never met a flying saucer. Did you have someone in mind?"

"I wonder why you find it so difficult to think about aliens. How long have you hated

them?"

At these words, a sudden, inexplicable tide of anger went through Allura. She heard herself snapping and snarling at Philip, and she grew hot with embarrassment.

There was a sort of blur as Philip dived behind the barrel next to his desk.

"Sorry," said Allura. "That was bad manners."

"Is there any particular alien that inspires these feelings?" said Philip. "Or is it a generalized prejudice against Tockworld-challenged creatures?"

"I don't know any aliens!" snapped Allura. "I DON'T KNOW BESSEMER CONVERTER. I NEVER HEARD OF HIM, AND EVEN IF I HAD, I WOULDN'T WANT TO SEDUCE HIM AND, AND...."

"Aha!" said Philip. "Tell me what you remember about this mysterious alien you never met."

"Are shrinks usually that direct?" said Allura. "Aren't you supposed to use hints and free association?"

"Depends on your credit balance and how long you want therapy to last."

"I hate him," said Allura.

"Aha! I think it's time for hypnotic regression to some point in the past. We'll need restraints."

"Must we?"

"It's your own protection, my dear. I don't want patients hurting themselves in here. You needn't fear the equipment, by the way. Most of these things are one-off prototypes; they're not ready for mass production yet."

He led the way to a table beside a lot of complicated electronic equipment. There were scorch marks where some of the wires rested on the metal surface.

There was a brief struggle, then Allura finished securing Philip to the table.

"Um, this is nice, of course," said Philip, "But I think the patient is the one who's supposed to be on the table."

"I could tickle you, if you like," said Allura.

"Shrinks aren't supposed to have fun. Look into my eyes and I will hypnotize you."

Allura looked into his eyes. What could he do? He was strapped to a table. She had only to reach for the switch--the one that had the little icon of broccoli on it and.....

Then a very strange thing began to happen.

A soothing calm took possession of her. She felt the little bubbles of rage in her blood stream begin to fade back into the background lava.

"Comfy?" said Philip.

"Yes," she said in a voice that wasn't her own. And yet it had a familiar ring--it was a child's voice, and it came to her across a gulf of time, provoking unwanted memories.

Allura had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 128:VISIGOTH ACCOUNTANTS

Allura was used to being in control. She hated it when strange voices echoed through her mind.

"Go away," she said weakly. "I'M in charge here."

"That's right," said Philip. "You're in charge. But WHO are YOU?"

A bit of smoke puffed out of his mouth, forming the words 'who' and 'you' as he talked.

"I have no idea who I really am," said Allura. Then she pushed the Special Effects button, and static electricity began crackling along a set of wires leading from a generator to the table.

"Good, good," said Philip, who was devoting quite a lot of his attention to the static electricity. "Questions about identity are very post-modern. Now it's time to do some serious

questing. I want you to imagine you're writing a story about yourself, like James Barrie. Tell me about your headaches."

"I don't have headaches; I give them to other people, with my hammer."

Sparks showered down from an overhead wire. Philip squirmed and glowed greenly on the table.

"You WILL write your story," said Philip. "It is I, your shrink, who tell you this. Look into my eyes and narrate!"

Allura looked into his pinwheeling eyes. The spiraling patterns drew her deeper and deeper, whirling her around and around.

Voices came to her; images formed and vanished in her mind. Then the past closed over her and she was nothing more than a voice, a story....

Once upon a time, a young girl whose name was Allura lived in a small village high in a mountain pass.

It was the kind of village that invited massacre and doom--there were lots of huts in the snow; there were blacksmiths' forges; corrals for chickens and Clydesdales; thatched office towers with wattle and daub walls; many StarShekels coffee shops with internet connections; big chariots that had been converted into diners where you could buy bratwurst or corned beef and cabbage; quaint bed and breakfasts with maniacs lurking outside shower stalls, and pubs.

Lots of people worked outside, in the snow, performing quaint, barbarian tasks and looking virtuous.

Others filed into thatched-roof office towers with their briefcases, bearskin suits and ties, and stilettos.

Allura was happy in this village. She spent her days catching fish, playing with the wolves, and larking about with ice bears.

Her dad, a kindly duck with a nice leather briefcase and four suits, was executive vice president at a weapons facility. At the time this story took place, he was working on a deal to sell a large quantity of swords to some strange people in a far-away place called the Pre-Columbian Era.

Allura's mom was human resources manager at the same company. She designed benefits packages for all of the blacksmiths, figured how to motivate them to make more swords for lower wages, and arranged company picnics and Llama's Eve parties.

She was also in charge of ritual sacrifices, commonly known as pink slips.

Allura's aunt was a marketing exec who spent a lot of time at trade shows, demonstrating swords and showing videos of troops using the company's swords to skewer pacifists.

Allura was happy; it was a pleasant life in a nice village. There wasn't too much development, though a few of the big franchises had crept in--Happy Bob's Fun Time Convenience Stores, Starshekels, Ceiling mart, etc.

There was also a Canadian Tire and a Hudson's Bay Company, but these had been around for such a long time, they were part of the scenery, like snow and toques.

Allura was a bit of a loner because she was happier wrestling bears and spearing sharks than skipping rope or playing with Shamash and Nonni dolls like the other girls.

One day, her dad decided to take her up to the top of Mount Big Thing to talk about swords, the proper way of skewering people with swords, and the religion of swords.

For this special occasion, he had changed out of his suit and tie and slipped into a comfortable loincloth, bearskins, and sword.

After three days of climbing, they reached the top. Allura's dad made himself comfortable and put on a virtuous expression.

"There are many gods in Tockworld, Little Allura," he began, patting her gently on the beak. "Most of them are useless. You can propitiate them with simple god trading cards, or with sticks of gum, boxes of chocolate, and dead spammers."

"What about Marvin?" said Allura. "Doesn't he want really big sacrifices?"

"He's an important god in the East," said her dad, "but he's no concern of ours. He spends his time presiding over fertility rites."

"What are fertility rites, dad?" Allura asked.

A far-away look came into her father's eyes, and he was silent for a moment.

"Dad?" said Allura.

He blinked. "Ah yes; where was I?"

"You were explaining fertility rites."

"Hmm. Yes. Well. Since I met your mom, I don't need those things. Anyway, those gods don't matter. Your god is Wolfie. He lives in a nice corner office on the top floor of an office tower in the Gothic forest."

"Does he look after us?" said Allura.

"Not as such. He does want us to suffer and prove ourselves."

"I thought all gods wanted that. It makes them feel important, having little people around that they can squash and scorch."

"Yes, but Wolfie wants us to crush enemies. It's a way of thanking him for telling us how to make swords and cut people open with them."

"What does he look like?" said Allura. "Are there any statues of him?"

"He looks like a granite boulder with fur and teeth. Some say he doesn't exist. Ha!"

"Will he help me by making the other girls fall into bear pits?"

"He helps all warriors. And that brings me to the other part of our discussion, which involves socializing you and teaching you the secret of teamwork."

"What IS the secret of teamwork, daddy?"

Allura's dad drew a deep breath and puffed out his chest.

When you're going to say something profound, it's important to clear a passage so that lots of air can pass through your body.

"The secret of teamwork is as follows," said Allura's dad. "You can't trust ANYONE, little Allura. They all want to stab you in the back, steal your work, curry favor with your boss, make you look incompetent, and get you fired."

Allura thought about this. It seemed rather bleak to her. She'd been hoping it had something to do with rounding up lots of males and making them obey her.

"Why would they do that?" she said.

"It's called competition, my dear, and there's no life like it. The same applies to hockey games and soccer matches. The more dead bodies, the more exciting the game. Let that be a lesson to you."

There was much more--how to kill and skin a cave bear, what to do when your computer freezes, how to tell an organic carrot from a synthetic carrot, but the first part was the important bit.

Afterwards, they went down the mountain on the chairlift.

It's one thing to perform arduous tasks as a prelude to the giving and receiving of momentous truths, but there's such a thing as pushing virtue too far.

Allura was topped up with wisdom now, and it took her several days to digest it.

She stopped going out into the woods to play with bears and wolves. She put away her Bob the Barbarian dolls and began to get serious about her education. She wanted to start her own company so that she'd never have to work for an evil incompetent middle manager.

But it was not meant to be; the Hippopotamus of Fate had other designs for little Allura.

One day, while she was fishing on the ice under the shade of a tumtum tree, reading Clausewitz on marketing, a figure emerged from the Gothic mists, panting with the effort of a marathon run.

It was a woman dressed in a power suit, with tattoos of corporate logos on her forehead.

Behind her rode black figures on horseback--blood-maddened lawyers, accountants, and investment bankers.

Before anyone in Allura's village realized what was happening, the raid had begun.

Quickly her dad snatched up his sword and his briefcase and ran out to do battle. In seconds he had cut down three investment bankers.

A huge figure in a helmet shaped like a balance sheet pointed his sword at Allura's dad and roared, "Kill that one!"

Special torts lawyers raced across the ground and leaped at his throat. Allura struggled to reach him, but it was too late. It was over in seconds. The lawyers stripped her dad of his assets so quickly, he died before he realized he was bankrupt.

Soon only Allura's mom was left. A strange figure in a black suit climbed down from a black helicopter and stared at her.

Upon his head was a helmet in the shape of a duck with fangs.

He took off his helmet, revealing a bright yellow duck's head, and shook out a cascade of platinum blonde hair.

A strange and compelling force emanated from his hypnotic blue eyes.

Allura's mom held up a magic business plan, but it was a useless gesture.

With a single blow, the mysterious figure cut off her head.

For a moment, Allura was too shocked to react. No one had ever cut off her mother's head before! She couldn't believe this was happening.

Still in shock, she was manacled and led away with some of the other children to a foreign land and a life of slavery, flipping hamburgers and washing horses.

No one knew why the strangers had come, though some said it was because they wanted to build a theme park on village land.

Allura, meanwhile, contemplated revenge.

Philip had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 129: YOUNG LOVERS

Allura's time of woe and flipping hamburgers lasted until she was eighteen.

Few could endure the monotony of such an existence, deprived of the psychological war games of high school life, forbidden the pleasures of math homework and Shakesbeake, ignorant of punk rock, never even imagining the furtive smooching behind furnaces or the opportunities for honorable death on football fields and in basketball courts!

Only her burning desire for revenge kept her going.

Many were the grief counselors who urged her to work through the seven-step program, from shock to closure and Moving On to the Rest of Your Life.

Allura always listened politely to these well-meaning people and promised to read their instruction manuals carefully.

And the moment they left her hovel, she always went back to visualizing her enemies glowing cheerily in the warm core of a nuclear reactor.

On her eighteenth birthday, Allura was sold to Teddy Homeboy, a cold, evil piccolo player who owned a very special club in Yorkville, near the entrance to the Underworld.

Teddy wasn't interested in smooching with her, by the way--he got as much of that as he wanted from the cellist and the zither player in his garage band.

Teddy had other plans for Allura. Having noticed a certain largeness about her, he thought she might appeal to his customers, so he forced her to dress up in a humiliating bunny costume and serve hot chocolate and Scotch in his club.

Teddy's club was ostensibly a hangout for off-duty bagpipe players, but that was just a front. In reality, it was an illegal coliseum, where people could pretend to be in a video game and kill each other for fun.

Every so often, a wealthy customer would grow weary of the usual gladiatorial combat, and toss in one of the club's bunnies.

Most gladiators were kind-hearted chaps who loved their moms and would never dream

of hurting a bunny. They'd leer and make faces and pretend to dispatch the fearful creature, but it was usually just illusion and fakery.

Some gladiators, however, drunk on the club's cheap, artificial Scotch, would mistake the bunny costumes for armor.

Allura was never tossed into the gladiatorial pits; she was entered into the lists.

This is how it happened:

Shortly after Teddy introduced his new bunny to the regulars, he began to notice certain puzzling occurrences.

A number of his regular customers simply vanished, leaving customer-sized holes in the walls. This might have been bad for business, were it not for the fact that the old boys were soon replaced by hordes of freshmen.

The new customers all seemed to prefer Allura to the other bunnies--many of whom were far more attractive, in Teddy's humble opinion.

The customer is always right, of course, especially when so many of them demanded the same bunny, and when they lined up so politely and submissively.

After a few evenings of this unusual state of affairs, Teddy decided to check on what was happening.

So he purchased the new spy camera he'd seen advertised by a spammer in his email, and installed it in the Bunny Petting Room.

This, by the way, was similar to the petting zoos we all know and love so well, but there were differences....

As it happened, the night the new camera was installed, a customer named Bunkerbuster Joe returned from a short holiday.

Joe, a sort of organic wrecking machine, had been away for a time, sacking the Roman Empire.

The moment he spotted Allura, an evil grin formed on his meaty face.

Teddy, watching in his control room, squirmed with anticipation.

"Oh my goodness; a little bunny in special gift wrapping, just for me!" said Joe, clapping his hands. "It's not even my birthday! How sweet!"

Allura had grown used to formulaic come-ons by now, and knew how to deal with the clumsy groping and pawing emanating from drunken customers. She had discovered on day one that they couldn't do much groping when they were stretched out on hospital beds with their arms and legs in casts while the glue hardened along the fracture lines in their skulls.

There was something special about Joe, however.

Many people have wondered about the strange, irrational compulsion that drives certain females into the clutches of despicable cads like Joe.

Many shrinks feel that it might be a repetition compulsion, based on traumatic events endured in childhood.

Philip Napoleon, however, says that it's a strange, irrational compulsion. Philip believes it can easily be corrected through the use of electroshock and the application of lots of money to a shrink.

At any rate, Allura was dazzled by Joe's aura of inhuman cruelty.

No one, not even Teddy, had desired her so ardently before.

Ardent desire, by the way, is not the same as lust, which is based on a spring-loaded mechanism with a hair trigger. Nurse Jane is not keen on spring-loaded mechanisms.

Allura, meanwhile, felt an inexplicable yearning, a warmth, a tide, etc.

Can this be love? she wondered.

Joe hoisted her up in his beefy arms.

"Har, ha!" he said lustfully, with dark, beetling brows, like Denmark, and with brooding passion as well.

Allura's heart melted. She tried to swoon, but of course, she couldn't. Swooning only happens at rock concerts, when the lead cellist hurls his underwear into the crowd.

Then Joe tried to grope her.

In a trice, the smarmy veil dropped from Allura's eyes. There was a noise like a thunderclap, and a Joe-shaped hole appeared in the ceiling as if by magic.

Teddy, watching from his control room, gaped at the absence of Joe in the smoky bunny room.

Joe's mead horn hovered in the air for a moment like Wile E. Coyote treading atmosphere just before he realizes the shelf of rock that had been holding him up is now merely a memory of its former self.

Fortunately a passing dwarf saw the danger and snatched the horn out of the air before it could drop. Then, risking his life to save others from getting splashed by falling Scotch, he drained the contents at a single gulp.

Dwarves are nothing if not public-spirited, courageous and bold.

Across the street, a patron in a bait shop was put off his feed when a barbarian crashed through the ceiling and dropped into his bowl of maggots.

Joe wasn't exactly unconscious, but he was geometrically challenged. He'd been reassembled in a strange new fashion, voiding the warranty.

None of his appendages functioned according to specs.

The disgruntled patron wiped the squashed maggots from his kisser, tied a rope around Joe's waist and dropped him into the shark pool to see what sort of fish he would entice.

And that is why the Roman Empire escaped a return visit from Joe Bunkerbuster.

The Romans, however, unaware of Allura's part in saving their bacon, put up a statue to Edward Gibbon instead.

Teddy, aghast at the loss of such a loyal customer, was about to fire Allura, when he noticed the long line of customers, still patiently waiting for her attention.

"Oooh, I'll have some of what Joe had," said a barbarian in a leather harness.

The boss watched fascinated as the big fellow got down on his knees in front of Allura.

"Please, Ms., could I have some more," he said, holding out his bowl.

Teddy rubbed his hands and gloated. A new idea had congealed on the oily surface of his mind.

Thus it was, on a cold, bleak night in July, somewhere in Toronto, Allura found herself toggled out in Drake Lauren gladiatorial rags, facing a chap as heavily armored as an armadillo.

A greedy mob of spammers, telemarketers and junk faxers howled and roared in the stands, waving drinking horns and cauldrons of mead.

They all began roaring along with the cheerleaders:

Kill that one!

He shoots, he scores!

Peace, order and good government!

Make him fly Sea Kings!

Scotland forever!

Let's kill as many things as we can!

Eat McBowel's haggis before it eats YOU!

The only good neighbor is a dead neighbor!

No more baths!

You can't have my porridge!

Allura tuned out the noise. She watched with mild amaze as armadillo duck trundled towards her. Was he going to introduce himself and ask her out for a date?

Was there no end to passion and smooching in this decadent world?

Armadillo duck puffed himself up, shook his trident at her and yelled "Hearts bolder the bonk be cruel salt foam part B the A is not if on Part C will function, swords the sharper, many helms tobroken."

Allura was completely mystified.

"Will that be with fries or salad, sir?" she said uncertainly.

There was a clashing noise as armadillo duck's cumbersome mental apparatus switched gears, trying to adjust to this difficult terrain.

Eventually a thought emerged.

"No thank you," he said. "I like steak with nothing on the side."

Then he jabbed at her with his trident.

Allura's mental transmission was quite a bit faster than Armadillo duck's. She even had time to smile at him as he sailed over the heads of the bloodthirsty ducks in the peanut gallery and smashed through the oak door of the mead hall, leaving an armadillo-shaped hole and a bent trident.

The Viking raiders who had been taking advantage of the weekend mayhem in Toronto to sneak up on the mead hall were so astonished when a flattened armadillo tumbled out of the sky and killed their chief, they took it as a sign from the Supreme Being.

Thus it was their new leader, Scalded Leif, enlisted them in an Irish monastery in what is now Yorkville, just above the entrance to the Underworld.

They became quite good at the monk business, actually; they developed several new varieties of brandy, illustrated a number of informative manuscripts on what to do on your wedding night (some assembly required--contents may not match picture on box), and learned to play harps and saxophones.

To this day, the ghostly voices of the Viking monks may be heard on certain nights, issuing from the grounds of the ancient monastery (now a quaint office cubicle) singing "How much is that doggie in the window?"

Giseppe Macklino taught them that song.

The citizens of Toronto never knew how close they'd come to learning Danish and memorizing the sagas.

Allura, meanwhile, went from victory to victory

But she was not a happy gladiator.

The fans were disappointed. Blood sports like hockey, soccer and Bingo are supposed to be drawn-out affairs in which you actually get to see entrails oozing out of unzipped bodies, and you get to hear the snap of bones, accompanied by screams of agony.

It's no fun when the whole thing is over so quickly, you never even saw it happen, and the victim is standing in line at one of the rides in the Underworld before pain even has a chance to twitch a single nerve.

So people began staying away in droves and watching combat Bingo. This was more satisfying; baby boomer senior citizens could be relied upon to beat each other up with crutches and tear out each other's plates, pins and pacemakers with huge magnets.

Who says old people have lost it all! They sure know how to have fun!

Anyway, Teddy was through with Allura.

One wild and stormy night, when low, black clouds scudded across the sky and a horned moon gleamed down on Gothic sheep, he made his way into Allura's penthouse hovel.

She was watching Frodo Baggins on a late night talk show.

"Take this!" said Teddy, handing Allura a wallet stuffed with credit cards, money, bank accounts, and an identity downloaded from the department of agriculture. "Leave my house! You are free!"

Allura could hardly believe her luck. Without a second thought, she ran down the twenty stories, straight over to the Harley Davidson shop across the street, then over to big Aesop's for a slinky red femme fatale dress with a slit up the side.

At last, she would have a chance to seek vengeance, to find out who she was, why she was here, and who really built the pyramids.

Just then, aliens abducted her.

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

CHAPTER 130: MANCHURIAN CANDARD

It's not easy trying to make a life for yourself when you've been abducted by aliens.

Allura woke up on a table in a strange room and found herself surrounded by cartoon characters.

She'd never seen them before, of course, because TV reception had been very poor in her barbarian village.

She did, however, recognize them, because she'd watched a lot of TV from Earth in the future.

Time and space don't amount to very much, really. If you don't like them, you can always try something else.

As you know, everyone in the Universe of Adjustable Manners enjoys Earth TV. Humans were considered to be even funnier than platypuses.

Anyway, Burt and Ernie smiled at Allura from their outdoor museum while an elderly duck in spats and a red waistcoat watched her suspiciously, in case she tried to sneak into his money bin.

Someone began singing the birthday song in a scratchy voice. It wasn't the copyrighted human version, of course; it was the more famous one that goes: Happy birthday, happy birthday; eat as much cake and chocolate ice cream as you want because everything is good for you.

"How am I doing?" said a scratchy voice. "Do you like your abduction so far?"

"Huh?" said Allura, rubbing her eyes.

"I made this room especially for you. I thought you'd enjoy the cute motif."

Allura pushed herself up, waiting for the punch line. It was bound to include something about a weird drink with two little umbrellas in the glass, and how most people slipped into a coma after drinking just one of them, but YOU had to go for seconds!

"Who are you?" she croaked.

"What?" said the scratchy voice. "You mean ME?"

"No, of course not; I meant the other alien who looks exactly like you but just happens to be completely different."

There was a whispered consultation.

Allura listened for a moment; then she devoted herself to the tricky problem of figuring out if she really existed, and if so, in what state of being.

What if she was someone else who'd left the party with the wrong identity?

How am I supposed to get my own identity back if this one doesn't belong to me, she wondered.

Then she said, "I'm waiting...."

After that she thought, What party? There wasn't any party? I was....somewhere....

"Who ARE you?" she demanded.

There was a silence filled with background chatter. It was the kind of silence you get when a telemarketer is frantically scanning a computer screen to find out who just answered the phone.

I must be me, thought Allura. Who else would get into this mess?

She got to her feet, waited for the dizziness to pass, and began exploring the room.

She couldn't see any walls, just an eerie glow. The floor was a shimmering, canary-yellow pool of light.

She walked around the room without actually encountering any walls, and eventually found herself back where she had started.

What if I'm not even real, she thought. What if I'm just a cartoon character?

"Who are you and what is this place?" she said.

A throat was noisily cleared, then a deep, hoarse voice said:

"She axed you a question, boss."

"She WHAT?" said the scratchy voice.

"She axed--"

"I heard you the first time. This isn't one of your precious gangster movies, Bagless! Drop the 'axed'."

"Sure boss."

"And stop calling me boss. I'm your captain."

"Yes boss--captain boss."

"That's better. Now where's the whopzammer remote?"

Allura tried to make out her captors, but all she could see was the annoying, shimmering light.

"I AXED YOU A QUESTION!" she said, growing angry. "Who am I?"

"That's not what you axed the first time," said the scratchy voice. "You said, 'Who are you?'"

"That's what I said!" yelled Allura. "Who am I?"

"YOU' is not the same as 'I'," said Bagless.

"Would everyone just please drop the 'axe'," said the captain. "Is this some new loan word from the Xwxrg's? I'm so weary of language pollution. Does everyone speak like this now? Have I been too busy with my career plan to notice the debasement of human speak?"

"She's being sarcastic boss--"

"How many times do I have to tell you? It's 'captain', not 'boss'!"

"Humans are always sarcastic, boss. It's their way of coping with sexual deprivation."

Allura was scandalized.

"Human?" she said. "You think I'm a human? Did you even bother to look at me before you abducted me? Did you notice the beak? And the webs. Did you bring me all the way up here just to insult me!"

There was a silence.

Then, the captain's voice, conveying infinite weariness in a sort of bored scratchiness, said: "Bagless?"

"Yes boss--CAPTAIN."

"Did we make a mistake here? Did we read the wrong entry in the reference manual?"

"I'll check."

Allura spotted something glittering on the air. After awhile she could make out a large, yellow book with a picture of a duck on the back cover. Then she saw the title: The Great Big Book of Things to See and Do.

"Show me a human," said Bagless.

An image rose up from the book and floated on the air. It was a human female in a bikini.

"That's a human?" said the captain. "Where is she from?"

"It says she's Miss July. It seems to be some kind of swimsuit calendar."

"Why is she wearing those medical bazimbis? Did she injure herself?"

"That's a swimsuit."

"Really? And what are those big things sticking out?"

"Umm, just a minute...it says they're mammalian--"

"No, no, no! On either side of her head. They look like Mogestalanzumian sea shells."

"Oh, THOSE. Umm...those are ears."

"Remarkable! What do humans do with them?"

"It says they're used in courtship displays. Really advanced humans can wiggle them sometimes."

"The book is wrong!" said the captain. "Anyone can see the ear thingies have holes, like vzts. They must be a sort of ventilating apparatus."

"I don't think--"

"Of course they are!" said the captain, with an edge to his scratchiness. "Humans are so large, they must be in constant danger of overheating. That's why they wear such skimpy

outer garments."

Allura was growing more and more irritated. She decided to ignore her underlying angst and accept herself for who she really was. For the time being.

"Do I look like a human in a set of bandages to you?" she said.

"Well, you ARE wearing more garments than Miss July," conceded the captain."

"And you aren't sticking out your ziggybundlesbonders," said Bagless.

"My what?"

"The beak I suppose is a giveaway," said the captain.

"Lots of humans have beaks!" said Bagless. "Look at the wonker on this one!"

He had summoned a new image. It was Mr. Fabsy Boy, a body builder with a grandiloquent schnozz.

"He's wearing medical bazimbits too," said the captain.

"Just one."

"It's not much bigger than Miss July's."

"This is a male."

"I don't know how you can tell. He has ziggybundlesbonders too."

"They're smaller than the female's."

"All of his muscles seem to be cramped."

"Ooh, that must be painful."

"Anyway, that's not a beak. It's what the humans call a nose."

"Everyone calls it a nose now," said Bagless. "That's what we get for watching human TV."

"Yes, yes, I know, I know! American English has become the official language of commerce and psychotherapy. Spare me!"

"You don't like it, captain?"

"We have a perfectly good language of our own, you nosx!"

"But we're the only ones who speak it, captain," said Bagless. "With English, we can communicate our desire for conquest and looting to other peoples."

"If you speak English, you can answer my questions," said Allura.

"So you're a big duck?" said the captain. "Amazing!"

"Her entire being radiates sarcasm, captain. These people use it as a weapon. Instead of tearing open their enemies, sucking out their brains and spitting them into industrial effluent like everyone else; they use sarcasm."

"Really? I hate sarcasm."

"It's an occupational hazard, captain."

The captain sighed. It sounded like tumbleweed on a sheet of plastic.

"You know," he said, "I never asked for this assignment. I applied to invade Earth, but the humans blew it up before I could get to it. I ask you!"

"Well you did invade wzx," said Bagless. "And there WAS a bit of a misunderstanding...."

"That was an accident. How was I to know they were all made of volatile substances?"

"They're atoms now. Subatomic particles."

"We're all subatomic particles. In fact, we aren't even here; we're just accidental inversions."

Allura, meanwhile, growing frustrated, threw the table at the parade of cartoons encircling her.

A cartoon duck shook his fist at her and said, "Wack, wack, wack!"

"Did you see how she tossed the table?" said Bagless, awed.

"So?"

"We could make a killing! We could set up a fairground ride. We strap our customers to the table and then the human--"

"DUCK!" said Allura.

"And the CANARD tosses the table through a wall of gzzths or something."

"Too violent," said the captain. "Somebody might sue us."

"Maybe she could just tickle them?"

"We don't have time for this. We have a job to do."

"Okay, okay. I'm just looking out for your interests, boss. I am an acolyte, after all.

Looking out for the boss is what we acolytes do best."

"Shhh. She's looking for us."

"She'll never find us up here in the light fixture."

"Bagless, you idiot!"

"Aha!" said Allura. Then she said, "WHAT light fixture?"

After that she stood up on the night table, knocking over a Kermit the Frog lamp. The light fixture was an odd shape, like a teddy bear hanging from a balloon.

Green light shone from the bear's toes and ears.

Allura grabbed it by the waist and squeezed.

"Captain?"

"Okay, okay!" said the captain. "Zap her with the mabimbobob!"

A current of intense pleasure flowed through Allura. It was a sensation akin to that which discriminating people get when they bite into a perfectly made chocolate bar after a day of eating nothing but rutabagas and pickled herring.

Allura went limp and fell off the night table.

MUST BE STRONG! she told herself, and she bethought herself of her poor old dad, torn to pieces by mean, nasty people. She also bethought herself of her mom, as headless as Anne Boleyn, but not for the same reasons.

It's a sad, sad world we live in, my masters!

"Look at her, captain!" screeched Bagless. "She's getting up! Not even the mabimbobob can keep her down."

"Okay, this has gone far enough," said the captain. "We'll have to start Plan 'B'."

Allura braced herself for a war. Before she could tear out the overhead fixture, however, the ambient light fluttered and changed, and the room became a corner office.

There was a view, through a window, of the entrance to the Yorkville subway station.

Two creatures stood in front of an enormous desk. They looked like electrified hairballs with purple arms and legs.

"Don't try anything funny," said the captain. "We know all about you. We've been watching your TV for years."

"Psst, boss. It's not the same TV. She's not human."

"We have many questions for you," said the captain.

"I won't answer them until you tell me who I am," said Allura, folding her arms.

"This isn't getting us anywhere," whispered Bagless.

"Do you think she's the One, Bagless?"

"I'm sure of it, captain. If she's not the One, I'm Miss July!"

"One what?" said Allura.

The aliens ignored her. "She seems to have a makeshift identity, boss," said Bagless. "Someone has been messing with the program again."

"Probably some wingnut from the Bureau of Advanced Manipulation. I imagine they downloaded a personality from Toronto's department of agriculture."

"Toronto has a department of agriculture?" said Bagless. "What do they grow?"

"How should I know!" said the captain. "Let's download the Manchurian Canard and release her."

"Do you know what we do with hairballs on Tockword?" said Allura in a menacing voice.

"I don't know if we can install the program, boss. There's an extra bit of code in her that might conflict with it."

"So? Delete it!"

"We can't. It's burned into ROM."

"Ignore it then! Lots of people have conflicts. Some of my best friends are psychotic."

Has she got anything else running?"

"Just MSN."

"What's that?"

"Macrohard Supplemental Neurons. It's a sort of verbal screen saver."

"Just point the whoomerzog at her and install the program."

"No you don't!" said Allura, clenching her fists.

There was a beep and an ear-splitting curse.

"What's wrong, Bagless; you look like the aftermath of an invasion."

"It won't install, captain."

"Maybe the disk is scratched. Let me see it...LOOK--it's smudged. You got marmalade all over it. Where did you get marmalade?"

"It's Sartre's Infamous Marmalade, captain. "I traded a box of rutabagas for it."

"And you didn't offer me any?"

"I was going to, captain. As soon as I checked to make sure it really was Sartre's Infamous, and not peanut butter. I know you're allergic to peanut butter."

"Try the disk again, Bagless."

"It's working this time."

Allura blinked. Something touched her mind very briefly, then vanished. It was neither painful nor pleasurable; just alien.

"What did you do to me?" she demanded.

"Nothing," said the captain. "We give up. You defeated us."

"Answer my question or I'll trash your flying office saucer. Who ARE you?"

"We're your guardian aliens," said Bagless. "We're here to look after you and guide you along a righteous path."

"Is that why you downloaded something into my mind?"

"Look, do you think we like this assignment?" said the captain. "I had other things to do, you know. I was going to get married when this assignment came up; now they've all left me."

"They?"

"My components."

"She doesn't know what you're talking about, captain," said Bagless; then he turned to look at Allura.

"Marriage on our planet means you find a set of components that you really like and you attach them," he said. "There's a special ceremony involving a flute and a mechanical frog."

"It's very beautiful," said the captain. "Every component is a different gender, of course. Sometimes on your wedding night you see Judy Garland."

"I think you mean rainbows, captain," said Bagless.

"Whatever."

"Meanwhile, we're here to be your guardians," said Bagless. "So no components for us."

"I don't want any guardians," said Allura. "Let me out of this madhouse."

"But of course," said the captain.

Thus it was, Allura found herself, dazed and speechless, in the middle of a seance organized by a party of elderly piccolo players.

She felt perfectly normal.

Her dress, however, had not survived the journey.

"Umm, boss?" said Bagless.

"I know, I know!" said the captain. "Do something about it right now."

"I'll just replicate the red dress and transport it, shall I?" said Bagless.

His first attempt was a failure. A crimson platypus dropped out of a ceiling vent and tumbled into a cauldron of McBowel's Deconstructionist Scotch.

"If at first you don't succeed, sacrifice a newt," he said, grinning.

His second attempt was a success.

Allura donned a magic red dress with a slit up the side and strode away, with dignity and conviction.
Twenty-five love-struck piccolo players and one lascivious ghost followed her.
Bagless had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 131: GURU, EH!

Bagless and the captain watched Allura adapt to her new circumstances.
The captain was puzzled.

"Where is she going, do you think, Bagless?" he said.

"Dunno boss. If it was me, I'd want to find the nearest bar and drink enough Shoggoth's Special Olde Fertilizer to scorch my roots. Then I'd magnetize my hair at a power station, and go looking for a date with a hot component."

"I see," said the captain in a chilly voice. "The stress of working with me drives you to anhydrous ammonia, does it?"

Bagless sighed.

There were times he hated being an acolyte. You had to be so careful all the time, in case your master got the blues. Then you were expected to put on a happy face, sing a little song, and be Mr. Cheery Sunshine.

It was enough to make him want to discharge himself into a capacitor and hand it over to a funeral director for immolation.

Here lies Bagless Gorm, loved by many components, faithful to his master, done in by the moody blues.

Ah well....

"I wasn't commenting on our wonderful relationship, boss," he explained. "I was simply putting myself in Allura's shoes."

"Pretty big shoes, Bagless. They look like waffle irons on spikes to me."

"It was a metaphor, captain. I was trying to imagine what I would do if I were Allura, and NOT me."

"I should think you'd take one look at me, scream 'Oh my gosh, an alien!', and swoon."

"I don't think that's Allura's style. If memory serves, she tried to kill us."

"Yes, in our own flying saucer too!" The captain shuddered.

"Anyway, boss," said Bagless, putting on a happy face, "To be honest with you; in my own mind, I'm me. I'm Bagless the happy acolyte, forever whistling a happy tune because he has such a delightful master."

The captain turned away to hide his smile.

"That will do, Bagless," he said. "You'll find an extra jug of fertilizer in your berth tonight. McBowel's Rotting Haggis, with fermented beans. Extra strength."

"Oh captain! Oh joy!"

Bagless turned aquamarine with pleasure. McBowel's Rotting! The most potent thing imaginable, unless you actually went out and stuck your roots in a fresh cow pie.

It was amazing to think people on Tockworld disdained good old fashioned ammonium, nitrogen and phosphorous for mere alcohol! Why, alcohol was practically devoid of nutrition, and it killed all of your lovely nodules and loosened the bonds between you and your components!

The captain summoned him to the viewer, where he found himself gazing down at the troublesome Allura.

"I suppose we'll have to go down there and look after her," said the captain.

"What?" said Bagless. "Down there? You and me in the middle of all of those crazy Tockworld ducks! I don't see why we have to do that."

"We're her guardians. It's our assignment."

"She's already got twenty-five guardians, by the looks of things."

"Those are piccolo players!" the captain said.

"What's wrong with piccolo players?" said Bagless, scandalized. They can be as ruthless as anyone else when protecting their young."

"I don't think that's a precise summary of their relationship to her," said the captain. "It's certainly not apropos of the ghost. I wonder why it's tagging along; it seems keenly interested in her."

"I imagine it wants the same things we all do, boss. A nice job with a good pension, six bottles of liquid fertilizer a day, a house in the country, true love"

"Don't change the subject, Bagless. We have to go down there."

"It's too risky, boss. People will notice us. They'll try to sign us up for talk shows."

"I don't see why they'd pay any attention to us. They're all so busy killing each other in cars and attacking each other in offices, they'll never know we're there. Who has the time to notice a pair of aliens?"

"Other aliens," said Bagless.

"There aren't any."

"Are you kidding boss? Have you seen the garage bands on that planet? Check out their rock videos and tell me they haven't been influenced by aliens!"

"Oh very well! I suppose we'll have to choose disguises. Check the manual and look for something that will help us blend in."

Bagless produced the big yellow book again, opening it at random.

An image of a hockey goalie popped up.

"It says hockey is a very popular activity in Canada," said Bagless. "Should we dress up in hockey outfits, boss?"

The captain eyed the illustration skeptically.

"What's that little black disk he's holding in his glove?" he said.

"Um...it's a subway token, I think. In case he has to leave in a hurry."

"Who in their right mind would dress up like this?" the captain grumbled.

"Aliens," said Bagless, dropping a coin into the Stuff'R'Us machine near the model railroad and making a wish.

Two shiny new hockey goalie outfits fell out of the dispenser and dropped into a puddle of fertilizer.

The aliens poked at the confusing array of pads and components for a time, then Bagless consulted the manual.

"This doesn't make any sense at all," he muttered. "Put the Part B sur le petit nodule B avec not touching z. Failure to bend part E CAREFULLY along invisible dotted line X will result in pads the puck not stopping. Warranty void if any part of the outfit is used. Have a nice day!"

"The duck who wrote this manual must have been tripping out on cow pies," grumbled Bagless.

"Just do it!" said the captain, picking up a pad. "Millions of ducks dress up in these things every day. How hard can it be!"

Very hard, as it turned out. They had to stop time with a special alien device to make sure Allura wouldn't wander off while they were struggling with their new possessions.

Possessions, as Epictetus tells us, make up a sort of prison.

But then, Epictetus was a teacher--what did he know about the profit motive and the trickle-down theory? He hadn't even read Samuelson!

Eventually, once the aliens learned to put the skates and the gloves on AFTER the jockstraps, they began to make progress.

The next question, of course, was what to do with the skates when you had actually affixed them to your roots.

"What are these little bits of steel for?" said the captain. "Are they supposed to hold you down in case you lose all your gravity?"

"We walk on them, boss."

The captain rolled his eyes and bethought himself of his true loves, waiting patiently in the great big hope chest in his bedroom.

Conquest and loot are ephemeral things, but true love is that which parting the never from, nor with alteration, tailors finds.

It took practice. Eventually they solved the wobbly ankle problem by taping up their ankles with ankle tape, and by holding their arms out like beginning trapeze artists.

"This will make us famous, like Margaret Mead," said the captain.

"She was a human," said Bagless.

"So are we now."

"No boss; we're ducks."

"I don't want to be a duck! I hate beaks. I'm allergic to feathers."

This argument continued in a desultory fashion while Bagless looked for a place to park their flying saucer. He found it difficult operating the controls while wearing a goalie's gloves.

Eventually, however, he managed to extricate their machine from the crater it had made in Mississauga, and steered it towards a city-owned parking lot near George's Trains.

No one was hurt during the impact that made the crater, by the way--the pre-crater scenery had included an abandoned cigarette factory and an obsolete theme park.

The crater, as you know, is now the holiest of holy places in the deconstructionist list of places to NOT revere.

It is here, at the bottom of the crater, that the goddess does NOT appear to the faithful.

Anyway, the parking lot attendant made the captain buy thirteen tickets because of the number of spaces the flying saucer occupied, but otherwise he seemed uninterested.

There was a documentary about aliens on the little TV set in his booth.

The captain and Bagless noticed it as they walked out.

"I've seen that one," said Bagless. "It's all fake. They doctored the film."

"No they didn't," said the captain. "That one showing the flying saucer over Mexico City looks genuine. And the Mexicans scrambled fighter jets to intercept it."

"It was probably a cloud formation. Why would aliens come here?"

"WE'RE here."

"We're different. We're GUARDIAN aliens!"

They were still bickering and quarrelling when they made their way out onto the sidewalk.

In short order, a hostile crowd drew near.

"These hockey outfits seem to be attracting the wrong kind of attention," said the captain.

"I don't see why. Toronto is part of Canada, isn't it? And these are Canadian hockey uniforms, aren't they? Correct me if I'm wrong, but Montreal is part of Canada, isn't it?"

"A different city, perhaps."

"Yes, but surely they must all just get along."

"I don't think so, boss. We need a time out."

They hurried back to their flying saucer, their ears ringing with the taunts and jeers of an inexplicably hostile crowd.

Once inside, they quickly absorbed some nutrients from the three important food groups and reconsidered.

"Hockey uniforms are no good," said the captain. "What else do Canadians dress up in?"

"Well, it says in the book beavers are an important symbol," said Bagless.

"Aren't beavers the ones that bite off their own gonads when they're threatened?" said the captain.

"I think that's an urban legend, boss. It says Canadians enjoy peace keeping, flying Sea King helicopters, and watching Reality TV. They take their vacations in Florida, with the Mouse, and in California, with the Mouse."

"How can the Mouse be in two places at the same time?" said the captain.

"Beats me. I've heard he's a bit like that Jolly Fat Llama chap who hands out toys and bundles of Durum wheat all over Tockworld in a single night."

"I don't think that's quite right," said the captain. "We should find a guru who can tell us what a Canadian is so we can disguise ourselves properly."

"Where do you find gurus, boss?"

"In a high place, of course. A mountain, or on top of a Pizza Hut."

Thus it was they left the parking garage and flew out into the undeveloped countryside, thousands of miles away, carefully avoiding crop circles and weather balloons.

In short order, they found their guru--a caterpillar shaped duck wearing a goalie outfit and sitting in a canoe on top of a beaver dam.

Perched on his head was a splendid toque.

In his fist was a Big Mac, with pickles and poutine.

He watched with mild interest as the aliens struggled up to the top of the beaver dam and prostrated themselves.

"Eh?" he said.

Bagless had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 132:WEATHERWOMAN

Bagless and the captain eyed the Canadian guru. He looked harmless enough, but what could you expect from a Canadian! They were all the same. They lulled you into a false sense of security with a bit of charm, a 'please' and a 'thank you', and a cheery, 'what about those Leafs, eh?'

Then they dragged you out onto hockey rinks, threw you against the boards, and bonked you.

If you survived that, they dropped Sea Kings on you.

No wonder the place had never successfully been invaded by aliens!

Many tried, but most gave up soon enough and went shopping.

"You do the talking, Bagless," said the captain. "Ask him!"

"No, YOU do the talking, boss. You're the boss."

"How many times do I have to tell you; I'm the CAPTAIN, not the boss."

"Really?" said Bagless. "You're not the boss of me? I can do whatever I like?"

"Of course not. I am the boss in that sense, but you don't CALL me boss; you call me captain. We're in the military now; we have more class."

"Right boss."

"So go and ask him. He's waiting."

"How do you know he's a male, boss?"

The captain rolled his eyes. "It's obvious, Bagless. The females of this tribe are too smart to sit around in canoes on top of beaver dams."

"It isn't a dam," said the guru. It's a lodge. There's a difference."

"Who cares?" said the captain. "It's made out of sticks, it's in the water, what else do you need to know."

"Psst, captain!" said Bagless. "He's a guru! You shouldn't talk to a guru like that. It's not respectful."

"He's a CANADIAN guru," said the captain. "He's too polite to take offense."

"I keep telling you about hockey," said Bagless. "It's all a ruse. He's lulling you into a false sense of security."

"What is it you want?" said the guru. "I haven't got all day, you know. My time is worth a thousand pounds a minute."

"I've heard that somewhere before," said Bagless.

"We came to find out what a Canadian is, oh guru," said the captain.

"Maybe I read it somewhere," said Bagless.

"What sacrifice did you bring?" said the guru.

"I wonder if I heard it from my lawyer," said Bagless. "He has a big meter on his desk...."

"Did you hear that, Bagless?" said the captain. "The guru wants a sacrifice before he'll speak to us. Did we bring anything?"

Bagless searched his pockets. They weren't really pockets, of course; they were hairballs affixed with Velcro to various parts of his hairy form, and marked with large trademark notices to indicate where exactly they were, and how many lawyers were standing guard over them.

"How about this?" he said, plucking out a small box with a picture of a loon on the lid.

"Hand it over," said the Guru.

"Wait!" said the captain. "What is this, Bagless? What if it offends him?"

"A deck of playing cards!" said the guru with obvious delight. "With pictures of famous Canadian accountants! I shall treasure this."

"Don't you want us to sacrifice it, sir?" said Bagless.

"Good heavens, no! I'm a non-violent guru."

"But the sports; the hockey--"

"Hockey is not sport, gentlemen; it's LIFE!"

Bagless and the captain looked at each other. "Mental note," whispered the captain. "If either of us was thinking of invading this planet, it's off!"

"At least the Canadian part of the invasion is off," said Bagless.

"And Europe is out because of the soccer and the French," said the captain.

"What does that leave?" said Bagless.

"The Chinese?"

"Have you ever seen a Jackie Chan movie, captain?"

"I never wanted to invade this place anyway," said the captain. "I just want to get on with our task, whatever it is, go back home and play with my components."

"Right on!" said Bagless. "The wind will be picking up in the dustbowl soon. We'll miss the fertility rites."

"Oh the mere thought of it!" said the captain. "Millions of balls of tumbleweed flying through the air, coming together in brief moments of ecstasy, exchanging components, and parting with such sweet sorrow!"

"Why captain! I never heard you wax so poetical before! It makes me crackle with static electricity."

"I do have some small talent, don't I, Bagless! Those fools in the Poetry Coliseum think they have a monopoly on fine language and bad manners!"

"You could beat any of those wimps with one hand tied behind your back and your mouth taped up with Velcro, captain!"

"Thank you, Bagless. I never knew you liked poetry."

"Not as such, captain. Shall I get out the Velcro and--"

"That will do, Bagless."

"Ahem!" said the guru, looking up from the sports section of the Globe & Mail. "If you gentlemen have no further business...."

"No, wait!" said the captain. "Um, psst, Bagless, tell him why we're here."

"We are aliens, sir," said Bagless. "We wish to blend in with the local populace so we can...um.... Half a moment; I know there's a reason; I have it written down somewhere...."

"Interesting," said the guru. "I wonder how your species survived."

"Trickery," said the captain. "We look harmless and polite; it lulls people into a false sense of security--they assume we won't bite them."

"Excellent!" said the guru. "You'll fit right in."

"We will?" said the captain. "I mean, isn't there something more?"

"Ah. I take it you wish to contribute to our cultural mosaic?"

"Yes, that's it!" said the captain. "You saw it right away. No wonder you're a guru. You're the king of gurus."

"Good heavens, no!" said the guru. "I'm just part of the team. We Canadians don't like to boast, you know. Now, what you need to help you blend in is a government grant."

"Um, we don't really need money, thank you. Ouch! Bagless! What in the name of Pootie...."

Bagless removed his foot from the captain's tootsies. "Boss, boss!" he said urgently. "Never turn down a government grant; you might offend someone. Besides, in this country, we'll stick out like sore thumbs if we don't have a grant."

"Good thinking, that man," said the guru. Then he handed out a sheaf of forms.

Bagless, unused to large telephone books, nearly dropped them.

"Take your time," said the guru. "When you come to the blank under 'purpose of grant', just print 'research on what it means to be a Canadian.'"

"Really?" said the captain. "Don't Canadians know?"

"It's one of the pillars of philosophical enquiry," said the guru. "Comparable to the question: how many beavers can dance on the head of a pin?"

"Not very many, surely," said Bagless.

"Unless the beavers are angelic," said the captain, "In which case, they would be infinitely compressible, because spiritual beings, as you know, are not subject to the laws of matter."

"So they don't need government grants?" said Bagless.

"In fact," said the guru, "the famous 'head of a pin' question actually proves the existence of angelic beavers. Pick up any pin,"--here he drew one from his toque and held it up for the others to see--"any pin at all, and you'll find masses of spiritualized beavers dancing on it. Masses of them!"

"Gosh," said the captain. "I never knew."

"Now, if these beavers were not, in fact, angels, but merely very small dwarf beavers from the world of matter, such a vast quantity of flesh and bone in such a miniscule space would result in a Big Bang."

"Just one?" said Bagless, smirking.

The guru chose to ignore this.

"You realize, gentlemen, what a Big Bang would lead to?"

"Headaches and fatigue," said Bagless.

"A new clock," said the captain. "Like the one that started the universe."

"Exactly," said the guru. "And this proves that beavers are not physical beings--if they were, we'd be knee-deep in clocks."

"Good grief!" said the captain.

"Precisely," said the guru. "Think how many pins there are scattered about the world like broken hockey sticks! And think how many beavers there must be, dancing on them!"

"Millions and millions," said the captain.

"Billions and billions," said the guru.

"So we'll be careful not to step on any pins," said Bagless. "What else do we need to help us blend in? We already have the toques. What about volunteer work?"

The guru eyed them closely.

"If you REALLY want to blend in, you could make a contribution to national culture."

"Gosh, I'd be happy to!" said the captain. "I have reams and reams of poetry--"

"Good," said the guru. "Keep it in your hope chest and you'll be just like millions of other Canadians. Every so often you hear of mysterious deaths at family gatherings, usually put down to bad potato salad, or sudden heart attacks. Actually it's frequently due to impromptu poetry readings, or guitar concerts, or in some cases, arguments over hockey."

"Very practical," said Bagless, warming up to Canadians.

"What we need," said the guru, "is more Canadian TV. We need exciting programs."

"Like what?" said Bagless. "What do Canadians find exciting?"

"American TV," said the guru.

"No problem!" said Bagless. "We'll collect all of the major vices, mix them up in a bizarre plot, and dump everything into one gigantic program."

"Possibly," said the guru, already bored.

"And we'll make everybody take off all of their clothes. Even the audience."

"Hmmm," said the guru.

"In the mud, while they're wrestling and telling each other's secrets."

"It might work," said the guru.

"We'll call it the Pliff Family."

"What about the love interest?" said the guru.

"Well, there's this girl who falls in love with a romantic bagpipe player," said the captain.

"The piper is a dashing, handsome Scot with a club foot, which makes him shy and brutal."

"Good, good," said the guru. "A perfect romantic lead."

"And he has a drinking problem," said Bagless.

"That's been done, surely."

"Okay, a haggis problem," said the captain.

"Perfect!" said Bagless. "He's addicted to haggis; it adds a soupcon of exotica."

"Wouldn't that be a bit of a problem?" said the guru. "I mean, he can't just whip into a corner haggis store and order a case, can he?"

"Why not?" said Bagless. "Haggis is available in every convenience store and in gas stations too, isn't it?"

"Still--"

"We're on a roll here," said Bagless. "What if he has a weird disease? If he doesn't get haggis he turns into...into...."

"An accountant?" said the guru.

"Possibly," said Bagless.

"An accountant with fangs," said the captain.

"Or a weather reporter," said Bagless.

"No, no!" said the captain. "The love interest--the GIRL is the weather reporter."

"Okay, so he's an accountant," said Bagless. "He's a nice boy most of the time, but if he doesn't get his daily haggis, he starts counting things."

"And the girl is trying to help him break his addiction," said the captain.

"But he keeps losing his haggis and changing into a wereaccountant," said Bagless.

"And the girl may seem to be a boring, nerdy weather person in a canoe, but she's really...."

"Weather Woman!" chorused Bagless and the captain.

"With superpowers," said the guru.

"She can make it rain," said Bagless.

"In very small areas, for a limited time only," said the guru.

"And hail," said the captain.

"Possibly," said the guru. "But no falling snakes or toads."

"And tornadoes."

The guru sucked in his cheeks. "I don't know about that...."

"Okay, okay; she can make dust devils," said Bagless.

"And the purpose of these special effects?" said the guru.

"To save Tockworld from...umm...."

"Condo Duck!" said Bagless. "A villainous, evil, piccolo-playing duck who wants to tear everything down and build condos."

"Perfect!" said the captain. "So Weather Woman catches Condo Duck in the act of building a condo--"

"While playing his piccolo," said Bagless.

"And she makes it rain on him."

"Or blows sand in his face with a dust devil," said Bagless.

"So where did she come from?" said the guru.

"A planet of meteorologists?" said the captain.

"Possibly," said Bagless. "Maybe it melted and wiped out her colleagues."

"They never listened to the warnings about globalization--" said the captain.

"Global warming, you mean, captain."

"That too."

"She was put into a rocket and sent to Tockworld because she heard it was full of compassionate ducks," said Bagless.

"What's her weakness?" said the captain. "Everyone with super powers has to have a weakness. It's in the Geneva Convention."

"Umm, something green, maybe," said Bagless.

"Gummi bears?" said the guru.

"Green Smarties?" said the captain.

"Green licorice," said Bagless.

"We can work on this," said the captain. "Her planet is the planet Toom. We can have flashbacks to her anxious parents, who melted."

"And a compassionate robot helped her get away," said Bagless. "Ribbit the Frogbot. He survived because he's amphibious."

"Later, she falls in love with Haggis McHero, but she can't let anything interfere with her secret war against Condo Duck."

"Sounds good to me," said the guru. "I'd like to see a pilot in say, two weeks?"

"That's doable," said Bagless.

"Consider it done," said the captain.

Thus it was, the two aliens made their way back down the beaver dam, or perhaps it was a beaver LODGE, and trekked over to Big Aesop's store to pick up cameras, editing equipment, software, and special caps featuring the name of their TV sitcom.

Which was to be the first of many unforeseen obstacles in their path.

"Umm, captain...." said Bagless. "What exactly IS the name of our sitcom?"

Be careful what you dream up, by the way. It might take on a life of its own.

While the two aliens were starting their new career, a girl weather reporter on the Planet Toom stepped into a phone booth and was changing into her Weather Woman costume, when she was abducted by aliens.

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

CHAPTER 133:PRODUCT PLACEMENTS

"So now," said Bagless, "Before we even start doing our job as guardian aliens, before we start watching over Allura to make sure the Manchurian Canard software kicks in, we have to go out and make a movie so we'll blend in with the Canadian public."

"We don't want to look different," said the captain. "The peasants would throw hockey pucks and flaming torches at us. Besides, we're making a sitcom, not a movie."

Bagless eyed him disrespectfully. "What?"

"A television program," said the captain. "Think in terms of a pilot for a series. The first of many lucrative offerings."

Bagless shrugged. "Whatever," he said.

It was depressing the way the captain absorbed jargon from decadent human TV! After all, humans had blown up their planet ages ago! Or perhaps this morning.

Anyway, human TV offered nothing but repeats. You can't make new programs when you're defunct.

On the other hand, maybe that had been the job qualification.....

"It's an important distinction," said the captain. "In TV, the program is shot through with commercials, like an infected haggis."

"So?" said Bagless. "There aren't any commercials in movies?"

"Of course there are! But we movie moguls pretend that there aren't any, because we're artistic."

"I'm glad we got THAT straightened out," said Bagless.

In movies," said the captain, "The entire story is one enormous commercial, with product placements in every nook and cranny. If a company has the cash, the producers will make sure their products are worked into the fabric of the story like glittering threads of artistic integrity in a carpet with neither warp nor woof."

"What if the company makes watches, but the movie is set in the Negev, during the famous quest for the Land of Milk and Honey, before watches evolved?" said Bagless.

"Easy," said the captain. "We explain in the script that it fell out of a Pickard Trilobite of the gods while the driver was busy rearranging the Red Sea for easy passage."

"Oh goody! And I suppose a Camel of the Negev picked up the watch and said, 'Hey, look at the time! We're forty years late!'"

"I love it!" said the captain. "We can use it in the witty dialog between the hero and some minor, bumbling official. You're getting the hang of this, Bagless."

Bagless glowed.

"So are we making a movie or a sitcom, captain?" he said. "What's it to be?"

"Call me Wiggy," said the captain. "We're artists now; we can use our names."

Bagless gaped at his captain in surprise.

The captain, aka Wiggy, nodded encouragingly. "Go ahead, Bagless. Say it!"

"Wiggy," said Bagless, and immediately ducked in case something horrible was about to happen.

But when he looked up again, the captain--Wiggy actually--was beaming.

"Very good, Bagless."

Bagless glowed again; then, unaccustomed to any emotion that was lighter than pitch, darkened again.

"About the sitcom...." he said.

"We'll call it a pilot, shall we?" said Bagless. "And we'll scatter product placements throughout, just as though it were a movie. Why should we be limited by restrictions invented by humans? We're aliens after all, and anyway, humans don't matter anymore. Once you've blown up your own planet, you lose your place in line."

Bagless thought about this for a moment.

"I know I shouldn't ask, captain," he said, "but--"

"Wiggy, Bagless. Call me Wiggy."

"Wiggy. I know I shouldn't ask, Captain Wiggy, but in line for what?"

"For answers, Bagless! Answers to the really important questions, like 'Who built the pyramids and what are they really for?' and 'What is the purpose of the mosquito?'"

"I knew it!" muttered Bagless.

"We must never lose our place in line, Bagless. If we do, the Zamboni drivers of the gods will sweep us away."

"Um, is our TV pilot still going to be about Weather Woman?" Bagless asked.

"Of course."

"But isn't she a duck?"

"Technically. But she calls herself Weather Woman, because Weather Duck would only appeal to people on Tockworld. She wants a broader audience."

"Cool," said Bagless in a small voice. "I'm so glad I asked."

"Anyway," said Wiggy, "We'll have a complete stranger give her the watch right at the beginning of the episode."

"Aha! You want to keep the audience guessing who dunnit--Weather Woman or the watch."

Wiggy stared at Bagless for a moment.

"Have you been into the dandruff shampoo again, Bagless?"

"Um...."

"The watch is important, Bagless. By picking it up and dusting it off, Weather Woman will show that she's not only beautiful and imposing, but she's kind to small creatures. This will establish her celebrity status right off the bat, so we won't have to waste time with needless mannerisms and little tell-tale gestures and things. And we'll get lots of money from the people who make the watch."

"I have a feeling we're going to need it," said Bagless.

"No part of the set is wasted," said the captain.

Bagless wasn't so sure.

"So now, on top of cameras and other movie-making stuff, we'll need lots of product placements," he said.

"We can start with the government," said Wiggy.

"Must we?" groaned Bagless. "I just spent the last three weeks looking for receipts for my tax return."

"We'll have to get the Canadian army in on this too," said Wiggy. "We'll need lots of military equipment. We'll have to show the beleaguered denizens of Tockworld fighting off terrifying aliens."

"What aliens!" said Bagless, scandalized. "We're the aliens, Wiggy! Besides, the evil Condo Duck is from Tockworld isn't he?"

"Not really. He pretends to be from Tockworld, but actually he's from some place where they really like condos."

"So the Canadian government tries to fend off alien condo developers with...um...Sea Kings?"

"Well, they do have a few submarines, but they leak."

"Submarines against flying saucers? This is in Clausewitz?"

Wiggy consulted his copy of the virtual script. "The aliens in this movie are very worried about getting scratches and dents on their flying saucers," he said. "So they avoid risky situations."

"Like submarines that might hit them on their way to the bottom of the sea."

"Negative waves!" said Wiggy. "Honestly, Bagless, I wonder how you ever managed to sprout. Condo Duck escapes the carnage and hides out in a StarShekels coffee shop, pretending to be an existentialist."

Bagless rolled his eyes. "So we get the Canadian government to pay for Sea Kings on the set?" he said.

"And the leaky submarines."

"They might not want anyone to know about the leaks, Wiggy."

"We can use duct tape."

"What about the CIA? Can we get them to do a product placement too?"

"BAM, you mean," said Wiggy. "The Bureau of Advanced Manipulation does all of that spy stuff now. The CIA was a human organization. It vanished when humans blew up their planet."

"I wouldn't be too sure," said Bagless darkly. "That sort of organization tends to sprout from stumps and scattered seeds wherever people gather in groups of more than two."

"You're thinking of the FBI, another human organization, also sadly wiped out when humans blew up their planet."

Bagless sighed. "Gloria's sick transit never starts on Mondays. Where do we start?"

"Big Aesop's Villainy shop," said Wiggy. "That's where everyone goes when they want to set up a conspiracy."

"Making movies is a conspiracy?"

"TV shows, Bagless."

"Whatever! This is a conspiracy? Who's running it?"

"A shadowy group."

"Of course."

"They think people have too many brain cells so they're trying to get rid of the excess in an environmentally friendly way."

"And we're part of this conspiracy?"

"A lot of TV people are. Cool, isn't it!"

"I thought we were supposed to be guardian aliens," said Bagless.

"That too," said Wiggy vaguely.

Thus it was, the two intrepid sitcom artisans found themselves in Big Aesop's.

Big Aesop's looked a lot like any other magical villainy shop you've ever seen--it was much bigger on the inside than it was on the outside, of course, and it was crammed with interesting things in display cases.

There was a terrifying growl as the two aliens clattered over the drawbridge.

Big Aesop's belly appeared, then a werewolf chewing on the hood of a Pickard Trilobite, then Big Aesop himself.

"I'm a villain, mind you," he said.

"Is that a werewolf?" said Bagless nervously.

"He's harmless; he only bites people who look but don't buy. Are you gentlemen planning on taking over the world by any chance?"

"Who us?" said Wiggy. "Gosh no."

"Do we look that stupid?" said Bagless, still eyeing the werewolf.

It had devoured the hood and was now chewing on a leather vest ornamented with so many rivets and studs it looked like a bulkhead torn out of a battleship.

"He does like these things," said Big Aesop affectionately. "Sometimes there's a soft, creamy treat inside, but not today."

"Um," said Bagless.

"This is a shop for villains, you know," said Big Aesop helpfully.

"We want to make a movie," said Bagless.

"Sitcom!" said Wiggy. "Get it right, Bagless."

Big Aesop winked at them. "Right on!" he said. "While everybody's watching your sitcom, you'll sneak out and take over the world. I like it!"

"Um, yes," said Bagless.

"Something like that," said Wiggy.

Big Aesop waved to a display case brimming over with the sort of tack that appeals to movie and TV people.

"You'll want caps with the name of your sitcom, of course," said Big Aesop. "First things first. You can't do anything without caps."

"See, I told you!" whispered Captain Wiggy. "Big Aesop knows everything there is to know about conspiracies."

"Sitcoms," said Bagless, with growing nervousness.

"What's it to be called?" said Big Aesop.

"Um, The Pliff Family," said Wiggy.

Big Aesop fell on the floor laughing.

"Hmm," said Wiggy. "You don't think it's a good title?"

"How about 'The Royal Commission Report on Aliens in Upper Canada?'" said Bagless.

"Beavers in Space?" said Wiggy.

"Who Stole the Cod?" said Bagless.

"No, no, no!" laughed Big Aesop. "You need something that hints at forbidden activities, like nude croquet, or canary swapping in the suburbs. You want to show happy families torn to pieces by fate and arguments over the remote."

"The Pliff Family it is," said Wiggy.

"We may need more characters," said Bagless.

Big Aesop sucked in his cheeks. "More characters means more actors, more sets, and more equipment," he said. "You'll have to arrange more product placements to cover the

costs."

"We should have a cute dog so we can show the shy, brutal hero petting it," said Bagless.

"I love it!" said Wiggy. "When Weather Woman sees Haggis MacHero petting the dog, she'll know right away, this is the duck for her."

"But where's the family part?" said Bagless. "I mean, Weather Woman's family has melted, and Haggis MacHero doesn't have a family because you can't be a lonely, shy, brutal romantic hero if your mom is out there making sandwiches for you and telling you to dress warmly, and in layers."

"No problem," said Big Aesop. "His family carelessly lost him when they were on vacation in Mississauga, checking out the deconstructionists, a tribe of nomads."

"Hey, you're good at this, Big Aesop."

"I know," he said modestly. "I'm actually working on my own movie. It's going to show what a nice guy I am inside my gruff, shopkeeper's exterior. It's called 'Big Aesop Saves Tockworld and Meets Lots of Beautiful Ducks with Big Webs'."

Meanwhile, deep within an alien flying saucer, the real Weather Woman came to her senses and found herself strapped to a reclining chair in a darkened room.

"Good evening," said a voice. "We're conducting a marketing survey...."

Haggis MacHero had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 134: WRITING FOR DUM DUMS

"So now we have our TV pilot," said Wiggy, "We're ready to garner some awards."

"Wait a minute," said Bagless. "What about actors? What about sets? What about locations? And where's the script?"

"I'm writing it as we speak," said Wiggy. "I'm already thinking up dialog. Perhaps I should mention the Manchurian Canard software. The only thing is, I keep wondering what it's supposed to do. Maybe we can use it to take over our own planet."

"Not very original," said Bagless. "The aliens from the Alien Planet do that all the time."

"Whatever for?" said Wiggy.

"Thrills and chills, I expect. Aliens have a low tolerance for boredom."

"Present company excepted, of course."

"Goes without saying, Wiggy."

"With us, it's strictly business."

"Of course."

"We're guardian aliens. Our mission, should it accept us, is to watch over Allura...."

"Luckily for us, she doesn't need much watching over."

"Um, where IS Allura, by the way?"

"In a pub," said Bagless, consulting a handy viewer. "I see her now; she's drinking a tankard of McBowel's Universal Solvent Scotch."

"Good. That gives us time to finish our TV pilot and take over the world."

"Oh how I love a conspiracy," said Big Aesop. "The shadowy figures, the plots and plans! The furtiveness! The lucrative clandestine barter for military equipment!"

"You do that, too?" said Bagless, impressed.

Big Aesop put a finger to his lips. "Mum's the word," he said. Then he opened a closet door and motioned to them to take a gander.

Wiggy and Bagless gasped in awe. The closet was bigger on the inside than on the outside, of course--what other kind is there!

Inside, neatly arranged on dozens of shelves, were racks and racks of brand new jet fighters, bombers, tanks, armored personnel carriers, submarines, and handy kitchen gadgets, all still in their protective wrapping.

Wiggy and Bagless were flabbergasted.

"Where did you get all of this stuff?" said Bagless. "Isn't it against the law to sell advanced military equipment? I mean, what if a gang of librarians got their hands on it?"

"It's only against the law to sell this stuff to minors and to enemies of the state," said Big Aesop. "I'm not an enemy because I pay all of my taxes in cash, and I help to fight the...um...just a minute please...."

There was an expectant silence while he consulted a sheaf of fax paper--"Commies, fascists, existentialists," he muttered. "Telemarketers, mimes...I know who the enemies are; it's on the tip of my tongue--"

"Armadillos," said Bagless helpfully.

"Yeah, here it is!" said Big Aesop. "Armadillos. I hate armadillos."

He thrust the sheaf of fax paper into an empty cigarette box and grinned innocently.

"And besides," he said, "The salesmen took out the firing pins, so nothing works."

"But..." said Bagless.

Big Aesop winked.

"It's okay; I bought extra firing pins from a company that makes knock-offs for the toy market. They're cheaper than the originals because they weren't requisitioned by the military."

"So we can buy weapons later, when we start our invasion," said Wiggy. "Good, good; I like the way you think, Big Aesop."

"You'll need an army too. A brigade of fired-up soldiers gives you a nice edge when the critics attack."

"You sell those too?"

"I act as agent on behalf of a number of extremely fit young consultants who will, for a fee, create lots of extra space for scenery."

"But this is amazing!" said Wiggy. "How come you have all of this neat stuff while the Canadian military gets Sea Kings and leaky submarines? Where did you get the loot to pay for it?"

"They were promotional items," said Big Aesop. "Salesmen gave them to me, to encourage later purchases."

"And what did the salesmen get?" said Bagless.

"Just some extra junk I had lying around. Villas. Swiss bank accounts with a bit of cash to prime the pump. Hockey sweaters."

He winked again, and the aliens wiggled their ears, which was their equivalent of a wink.

"As long as we understand each other," said Bagless, looking around for Wiggy.

Then he panicked. "Um, I wouldn't touch anything if I were you, Wiggy!" he squawked.

Wiggy, who was about to press the button on a missile launcher, froze.

"Just testing," he said. "The label says, 'Warning: Small parts. Defense Planners under six years of age should not be allowed to play with this missile.'"

His finger hovered over the button, but he thought better of it.

Everyone in Omaha, Nebraska, relaxed, wondering why a mysterious, psychic pall had settled over the city like a premonition of doom, and then vanished.

Big Aesop led his alien patsies out of the closet and steered them to the War Room.

"How about a drink to celebrate our new partnership?" he said, pouring out three flagons of McBowel's Hammer of the Gods Scotch.

Bagless sniffed at the green fumes and examined the label on the bottle.

"Warning: Not to be used externally," he read. "If Scotch comes into contact with skin, flush immediately with concentrated lye."

"Don't pay any attention to the label," said Big Aesop. "That's just to keep the sissies happy."

He held up a small glass. Tiny bolts of lightning hissed around it.

The aliens gulped down their medicine and vanished into the seventh dimension for a time. When they returned, they were fluorescent.

"Welcome back," said Big Aesop. "We have work to do."

He handed Wiggy a certified writer's fountain pen, a bottle of ink, and some paper.

Wiggy admired his new toys for a time; then sat at a battered old desk whose surface was marked with various blotches and stains.

"It belonged to a famous script writer," said Big Aesop. "After thirty years, his brains leaked out of his ears, but we managed to clean up most of it."

Wiggy laughed nervously, thinking this was merely a joke.

"Better start writing," said Big Aesop. "We need a script."

Thus it was, Wiggy sat down to write a script.

The others waited.

And waited....

And looked at their watches, and frowned at the clock, and sighed.

"Do you mind!" said Wiggy. "I can't do it when you're watching me!"

"Okay, okay," said Big Aesop. "Sorrreee!"

There was another long silence, then Wiggy threw down his new fountain pen.

"Listen, I don't see why we need this. I already wrote the important part--the description of what happens. The speaking parts are just filler. The actors make it all up and change everything anyway, so what difference does it make!"

Bagless and Big Aesop looked at each other. It was a look that studio execs and financial vice-presidents have perfected over the years.

"Just scribble something down to get it going, okay?" said Big Aesop. "You don't have to be Van Gogh."

"I thought he was a composer," said Bagless.

"Naw, he wrote novels in letters about some guy who was crazy about old boots."

"You want me to put that in the script?" said Wiggy hopefully.

"Let's stick with what we've got; I thought it was pretty good the way it was. Maybe you should add some giraffes, though. Audiences really like giraffes."

"I could put in a scene where they fall out of a Zeppelin and Weather Woman puts bandages on them."

"Hey, that's a keeper! It shows more of her warm, cuddly side."

"We still have to work in the clock and a camel," said Bagless.

"This is getting complicated," said Big Aesop. "Lemme check my copy of Writing for Dum Dums."

Big Aesop extracted a large, yellow book from behind his counter, next to the chain gun. Bagless read over his shoulder as he flipped through it.

"It says you have to get the hero and villain right up front," said Big Aesop. "Otherwise the audience will hit the remote."

"That's how Louis L'Amour did it," said Bagless.

"So I should put in a scene right up front, where the hero and the villain duke it out with six shooters?" said Wiggy.

"I think one shooter each would do," said Bagless. "Six is a bit excessive, even for humans."

"Allura isn't a human," said Wiggy. "She's a duck."

"Even so."

"So how do we start?" said Wiggy. "We want Weather Woman, and Haggis MacHero in the first scene--"

"And the clock," said Bagless.

"It's a watch!" said Wiggy. "Get it straight."

"Okay, okay," said Bagless. "A watch. And a Camel of the Negev."

"We want all of that stuff at the same time?" said Wiggy.

"It has to be fast, or the audience will go for the remote," said Big Aesop.

Wiggy sighed and twisted his head like a wet mop.

"So?" said Bagless.

"I'm thinking, I'm thinking!"

"Unaccustomed as we are," muttered Bagless.

"Do you have anymore of that special Scotch left?" said Wiggy.

"You should put something solid in your stomach before you flood your brain cells again," said Big Aesop. "Care for some haggis?"

"Okay, but make sure it's dead. My uncle was eaten by a haggis."

"Go on!" said Big Aesop. "Really?"

"It happened in a fancy French restaurant," said Wiggy shedding a tear.

"The French serve haggis?" said Big Aesop. "When did this happen?"

"It was a special order. My uncle was a colorful personality, like Yosemite Sam."

"People rushed to obey him, no doubt," said Bagless dryly.

"The chef came out and shot him," said Wiggy, shedding yet another tear. "It was a long time before I set foot in a French restaurant again, let me tell you! Hours and hours!"

"Anyway," said Bagless, peering at Wiggy's blank manuscript page. "Weather woman is abducted by aliens."

"That already happened," said Wiggy. "When we meet her, she's strapped into a chair in a flying saucer and a marketing team is about to force her to respond to a questionnaire."

"Good, good," said Big Aesop. "Violence. You'll get the preteen market."

"Just as everything looks blackest," said Wiggy, "a Russian-born scientist erupts from Jupiter, smashes into the flying saucer, and drops a lot of volatile hydrocarbons onto it. Weather woman plummets towards Tockworld. Meanwhile some gods who happen to be passing by in a Pickard Trilobite Chariot--"

"Aliens, actually," said Bagless.

"Whatever," said Wiggy irritably. "Anyway, they spot the plummeting Weather Woman and rush to her aid, but they use up most of their fuel on the way down and can do little more than slow her descent. Then they have to leave right away--in fact, they take off so fast, a watch falls out of the cargo door."

"Brilliant!" said Big Aesop. "You missed your calling, Wiggy. You should have been doing this all along."

Wiggy levitated for a moment, then he remembered his bank account.

"A Camel of the Negev picks up the watch," he said. "The camel says, 'Oh my gosh! We're late! We're late! We're forty years late!' Then Weather Woman drops out of the sky onto his head, knocking him unconscious."

"What about Condo Duck?" said Bagless.

"Condo Duck is surveying the Negev for condos. He already has the brochures, with lots of pictures of beautiful condos surrounded by lush tropical vegetation."

"In the Negev?" said Big Aesop. "I like it! It shows how unscrupulous and evil he is."

"This is all happening in the Fabulous Mists of Antiquity?" said Bagless.

"It's a magic watch," said Wiggy, growing weary of criticism. "Anyway, Condo Duck spots Weather Woman unconscious beside the camel. She's out cold, having been weakened by a stray bit of Toomite, which fell off the flying saucer."

"I see," said Big Aesop. "A bit of metal from her melted planet, which the aliens just happened to find while they were repairing their flying saucer on an asteroid."

"Condo Duck decides to steal the watch and enslave Weather Woman," said Wiggy. "Imagine, one person who can do the work of thousands! Talk about cheap labor!"

"Then Haggis MacHero shows up," said Bagless excitedly.

"Right," said Wiggy. "He was wandering lonely as a cloud in the Negev when a host of Philistines attacked him. They were all working for Condo Duck as security guards, of course. You see how everything ties together here!"

"This is real art!" said Big Aesop admiringly.

"And while MacHero is smiting Philistines, he spots Weather Woman."

"Wow!" said Bagless.

"It's love at first sight," said Wiggy. "This is where we pump up the sound track with

dozens of bagpipes playing 'How Much is That Doggie in the Window?'"

"Makes me come all over in goosebumps," said Bagless.

"You have those?" said Big Aesop, looking curiously at him.

"Under the hair," said Bagless. "Don't start up with the stereotypes, just because we're aliens. We can do anything ducks can do!"

"Anyway," said Wiggy, "MacHero and Condo Duck duke it out in an exciting battle with six shooters and F-18's. It's a draw, of course, because this is only the first scene and there's lots more to come. Condo Duck vanishes in a puff of soot and MacHero faints from loss of blood."

"That's when Weather Woman gets her act together!" said Big Aesop, thumping his chest. "She sucks all of the arrows out of MacHero's body, and tapes him up with duct tape."

"Arrows?" said Wiggy.

"Did they have duct tape in the Negev?" said Bagless."

"Who cares?" said Big Aesop. "That's why we have a research department."

"Then what?"

"The heroes wipe out all traces of Condo Duck's assault on the delicate ecology of the Negev."

"And the watch?"

"Weather Woman keeps it, but she doesn't know what it is. She hasn't realized it's the matrix that holds the Power of Durable Evil. Condo Duck grasped this immediately, of course."

"I thought the matrix was a big rubber duckie," said Wiggy.

"No, no, no!" said Big Aesop. "That's the beauty of the matrix. It appears in different guises to different people."

"Anyway," said Wiggy, "Condo Duck retreats to Toronto and his vast corporate empire, where he plots Weather Woman's destruction."

"And where does Weather Woman go?" said Bagless.

"She goes to Toronto too, disguised as a TV weather woman. There, with MacHero's help, she carries on her fight against the forces of evil."

"I love it!" said all three script writers.

"We still need dialog," said Bagless.

"This is an action movie," said Wiggy. "We don't need dialog; we need weapons."

"And those we have in sufficient quantities," said Big Aesop.

Bagless had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 135:SEA KING REPLACEMENTS

Meanwhile, deep within the bowels of the Acme Company, in darkest Toronto, Neville and his chums watched Arthur build a new carnival ride.

Digger muttered about corruption and corporate tentacles.

"Do you really think this is a good idea?" he said. "A school working with factories, teaching the children how to exploit each other?"

"They do that anyway," said Neville. "Work-study programs teach them how to profit by it."

"Anyway, it's not the whole school," said Merlin. "It's just Arthur and his chums. And it's all in a good cause."

"So you say," muttered Digger. "They're going to save the Underworld for Disser. How do we know it will stop there? Once Arthur and his knights get a taste of the seductive power of marketing, lobby groups, and impoverished politicians--"

"Have a little faith!" said Merlin.

"You need powerful weapons to combat the likes of Dr. Wacker," said Cohen. "Even the Toronto Random School is vulnerable."

There was a shocked silence.

"Do you really think so?" said Edwardian.

"Oh yes," said Cohen. "That's why I recommend chalk circles to everyone. Speak softly, carry a big chalk, and never step out of a protective circle."

"Magic chalk?" said Edwardian. "I could use some of that."

"Good grief!" said Neville. "What is young Arthur building now?"

They all turned to watch Arthur and his knights as they test flew their new ride.

Edwardian read the lettering on the side.

"'Sea King Replacement'," he said. "What's a Sea King?"

"It's a sort of helicopter," said Merlin. "You hoist it up to a certain elevation with a sky crane and drop it on the enemy."

"That doesn't look like a helicopter," said Edwardian. "It looks like a very smoky steam engine on skids."

"Don't be so negative," said Merlin testily. "Obviously the smoke from the stack turns the propeller. Haven't you seen those funny little chimes that turn around and around in the hot air rising from a candle?"

"They're burning McBowel's Inflammable Porridge," said Edwardian. "I can see the briquettes from here. What a waste!"

"Stop criticizing," said Merlin. "It's flying, isn't it!"

"In a wobbly fashion," said Edwardian.

"Have you ever watched a Sea King?" said Merlin. "This is an improvement; take my word for it!"

Everyone watched the replacement chopper wobble through its private little smoke screen.

At the same time, but in the recent past, Wiggy, Bagless and Big Aesop continued hatching their plot and working on their script.

"So now we have a script, we need actors," said Bagless.

"Big Aesop will persuade people to help us out," said Wiggy.

"Where do we get them?" said Bagless. "Actors don't grow on trees, you know."

"They work in restaurants," said Wiggy. "They're fatally attracted to low-wage jobs. It makes them feel penniless."

"How hard can it be!" said Big Aesop. "We let people know we're making a movie; we send out copies of our script to assorted waiters, waitresses, car hops and retail clerks, and voila!"

"Okay, but make sure we get light, romantic comedy types," said Bagless.

"Lucille Ball?" said Wiggy.

"I was thinking more along the lines of Bruce Willis and Arnold--"

"Those people are expensive!" said Bagless. "I mean, they'll want some of the profits."

Big Aesop sucked in his cheeks. "We can't have that. We need all of the profits. We'll have big expenses."

"Will we?" said Wiggy, growing worried.

"Well, for one thing, there's the Swiss bank accounts," said Big Aesop.

"They're expensive are they?" said Bagless.

"Not as such. But there's the hidden emotional cost of being separated from your cash by such vast distances."

"So we get cheaper actors?" said Bagless.

"Where?" said Wiggy.

"We don't need trendy Shakespearian thespians, you know," said Big Aesop. "There won't be much speaking. Just a lot of grunts and groans. It IS a romantic comedy, after all."

"Anybody can do that," said Wiggy.

"So, we hire a politician then?" said Bagless.

"She has to fit the suit," said Big Aesop. "I've only got one and I'm not paying a tailor to have it altered."

"How do you alter Spandex?" said Bagless.

"You carefully remove the trademark, you cut it with scissors, and you glue it back together with super glue," said Big Aesop. "Unfortunately, it voids the warranty. They no longer offer tech support after you've modified the code."

"That solves our problem," said Wiggy. "We go forth on a quest for a woman who fits the power suit. If she fits, she gets the part."

"Big Aesop hauled the suit out of its protective wrapping and spread it out on a table.

"The mask part has a certain beak-like quality," said Bagless.

"It does, doesn't it!"

"So we need a woman with a beak," said Wiggy.

"In other words, a duck," said Bagless.

"I told you she was a duck," said Wiggy. "We should call her Wonder Duck."

"You can always tape a beak on," said Big Aesop.

"Why not go to a real duck?" said Wiggy.

"Humans don't like foreign actors."

"We're not making this for humans; we're um...."

"Yes...."

"Anyway, lots of humans quack and have beaks. I've seen their political debates."

"Well, I don't know," said Bagless. "This is an airtight suit. What if she starts molting?"

"Listen, you think ducks can't be superheroes?" said Big Aesop.

Wiggy and Bagless looked at Big Aesop. Then they looked at his werewolf.

"Of course they can!" they chorused.

"Now that we've got that straightened out, we can start looking," said Big Aesop.

"How do you get ducks to try on the suit?" said Bagless.

There was a silence while the heroes pondered this unforeseen roadblock.

"They might think we're just trying to get a look at their bloomers."

"Do ducks have those things?"

Big Aesop swelled up and hissed.

"Of course they do," said Wiggy. "So what do we tell these females?"

"We could tell them that, while they were out shopping, aliens abducted them, and one of the aliens was really a disguised prince from the other Toronto--the one that belonged to the humans. Before they blew it up."

"Hmmm."

"When she returned to her own world, she left behind her magic power suit, which is really a princess suit on Earth."

"Before the humans blew it up," said Wiggy.

"The world, not suit," said Big Aesop. "Anyway, they danced away the night at an alien ball on the UFO. When the clock struck twelve, the flying saucer turned into a pumpkin and crashed in a crop circle. The prince was trapped under a mound of pumpkin goo."

"So the prince wants to find his true love," said Big Aesop. "He wants to make her into a famous celebrity actress so they can get married and spend their lives running away from the paparazzi, but he doesn't know where she is; all he has is the suit."

"So who gets to be the prince?" said Wiggy.

"Well, not one of YOU guys," said Big Aesop.

"You, I suppose," said Bagless.

"I don't see anyone else."

"Why do we always have to be the aliens?" said Wiggy.

"Look at it this way; you won't have to spend hours and hours in makeup."

"What about him?" said Bagless, eyeing the werewolf.

"Who? Oh, Brucie! He's my friend; he goes where I go. He makes sure I don't have to wait in lines at clubs."

"Okay, so you're the handsome prince," said Wiggy. "Don't you need a prince suit?"

Big Aesop pulled a Spandex Royal Prince suit out of his back pocket and donned it.

It might have gone hard for him, had he not learned all about stuffing meat into sausage casings from his friends in a powerful and shady sausage-making firm.

Thus it was the three heroes and one fearsome attack werewolf went out in search of an actress to flesh out the princess suit.

Their first stop was a construction site, where a Victorian railway station was being torn down to make way for an office slum.

Some of the females on the crew whistled at the aliens.

"Hey, love the hairdos, guys! Want us to shampoo you?"

"Beasts!" muttered Bagless.

Big Aesop went over to an enormous duck who was smashing things with a sledgehammer. He told her about the script and showed her the suit.

Her name, by the way, was Suzie Q.

Her muscles rippled in anticipation as she examined the suit; then she slapped Big Aesop on the back, very nearly killing him.

"I'll try it on, babe!" she said. "I'm feeling royal today."

She put down the sledgehammer and jabbed Big Aesop, rattling his teeth.

"You're not doing this just to get a look at my bloomers, are you?"

"No ma'am. Like I told you; we're on a quest for a royal princess with super powers."

"Well, that's all right then. I guess I can believe you. You look honest."

"That's me," said Big Aesop.

She looked down at Brucie, who was a very smart werewolf and knew better than to sink his teeth into a block of granite.

"Wait here," said Suzie Q.

She went behind a bulldozer to change. There was a lot of mysterious grunting and snapping and stretching, and then a string of oaths that melted a couple of girders in a nearby stack.

When she came out, she looked like a Sherman tank in a balloon.

"Here I am, sweetie," she said.

"Um, I don't think--" said Bagless.

"What's the matter?" said Suzie Q.

"Um, you're so strong and regal looking and everything, and this part calls for someone who prances about in a tutu, cooking and sewing, and batting her eyes at men who come to repair the furnace ducts."

Suzie Q. picked up two large girders. Her face darkened.

"I can sew," she said, and she twisted the two girders around each other.

"Um...." said Bagless.

Then the big construction worker went behind the bulldozer again and offered up another stream of grunts and curses.

Moments later, the Spandex suit whipped over the tractor and caught Big Aesop full across the chest.

"Is it stretched?" said Wiggy.

"No this is genuine Spandex--you can see the trademark right here."

"Ooh, kind of sticks out doesn't it?"

"It's a talisman. If you see any trademark lawyers coming, you hold it up over your head and they leave you alone."

There was a sudden rumbling noise, and the bulldozer advanced on them.

"Hey, she's attacking us with that bulldozer," said Wiggy.

Wiggy and Bagless fled the construction site unceremoniously. When they reached the sidewalk, however, they noticed that Big Aesop had managed to calm Suzie Q., and they were chatting.

In fact, they were making eyes at each other.

All at once, Suzie Q. swept Big Aesop up into her arms and their beaks clacked together in a passionate smooch.

"Wow!" said Wiggy. "We have to work that into the script somehow."

Big Aesop was grinning from ear to ear when he joined them.

"Now that's what I call a lady!" he said. "I'm taking her to the monster truck derby next week. Then we're going to watch a demolition crew tearing down the old fort where Toronto began."

"Gee, sounds like fun," said Bagless.

"You can't have her; she's mine!"

"That's okay; she's too much woman for me."

"Me too," said Wiggy.

"You two are wimps!" said Big Aesop. "Give me a real woman, a woman you can hold with both arms and a crane; not these skinny sticks that prance around in jogging shoes and tell you how many laps they did this morning."

Meanwhile, in a crop circle in the heart of the financial district, beneath the ruins of a smashed pumpkin, there was a groan.

A woman crept away, dressed only in her skivvies and a rag of a dress. Still in a daze, she managed to find her way back to her thankless job as a junior accountant at a major corporate accounting firm, where she grubbed around all day among filthy pizza-spotted receipts, cleaning up accounts, scrubbing columns of numbers, and cooking the books while her evil stepsisters pranced around with investment bankers and corporate executives.

And beneath the wreckage of yet another flying saucer, the real Weather Woman lay exhausted, entirely covered in a dusting of Toomite.

Condo duck watched and gloated.

Haggis McHero had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 136:EERIE WORK-STUDY TALES

Acme Corp., where Arthur and his chums had started the 'work' part of their work-study program, was not your average sweat shop.

For one thing, the owner, Phineas Godolfin, was a woodpecker--the first woodpecker on Tockworld to serve as CEO and absolute dictator of a major corporation.

For another thing, Phineas had no idea what any of the people who worked for him were actually doing.

This, of course, is nothing new--in many corporations, you don't get to be CEO by wasting a lot of time on the shop floor, learning about part A and part B, and about Joe Skflx, who operates the machine that maniacally fits one part into the other.

Phineas, however, had elevated the art of knowing nothing to a principle.

If you don't have a clue, you can't be blamed.

And finally, Acme Corp. was a magic place. It was bigger on the inside than it was on the outside, of course--what good is magic if you can't have a little fun with geometry! But it was strange in other, more subtle ways.

People built machines here according to their own ideas about how different sorts of gears, wheels, and frames should get along with each other.

To outsiders, these machines often looked like scrap yards on wheels, but to people in the know, they looked like INTELLIGENT scrap yards on wheels.

There's a difference.

Intelligent scrap yards are based on a famous operating system that only crashes when it's not in its original, unopened packaging.

Anyway, Arthur's first project, a replacement for Canada's decrepit Sea King helicopter, was an amazing feat, combining utter contempt for the laws of physics with sheer delight in hair-raising adventure.

At the first sight of it, Merlin and his chums rushed out of their place of concealment to study the beast.

It's not every day you get to see an automated near-death machine.

Roger, the unflappable principal of the Toronto Random School, hurried over in his battered old Pickard Trilobite.

Cohen, the art teacher, stood in a chalk circle on the hood, with his arms outstretched like a hood ornament.

The Sea King launched itself into the air with the grace and beauty of an elephant on a water bed.

Everyone oohed and aahed as it wobbled over the bosky grounds of the Acme Corporation, shedding parts like a train wreck.

All at once, it began making a peculiar, whanging noise, like a dishwasher grinding up a fine crystal goblet. Then it plummeted straight down into the welcoming embrace of a maple tree, crashing through branch after branch until it hit the turf below.

"No worries," yelled Arthur, and he clambered out with a big grin on his face.

"Good grief; he's dashed out his brains!" said Edwardian. "Look at that silly grin."

"That's not a grin; it's a smirk," said Merlin, who had some experience of adolescents, having turned a number of them into lawn ornaments.

Gracie gently removed a platypus from Arthur's hair, and it scooted away in search of its investment portfolio.

Phineas climbed up into the Sea King and rubbed his hands, gloating over chickens counted before they were hatched.

"Needs work, mind you," he said. "It should be Internet -enabled, so you can turn on your neighbor's TV in the middle of the night and open his garage door to raccoons."

Arthur made a note on his shirt sleeve with a wireless quill pen.

Phineas jumped out of the cockpit and clapped Arthur on the back.

"You have a bright future here," he said, "should you survive."

Arthur kneeled and Phineas put a gold star on his forehead.

"Arise, Sir Arthur. We don't have a benefits package, but you get fifty percent of sales, should anyone purchase any of your creations."

"Did you hear that?" said Edwardian. "The nerve of that woodpecker. Of course people will buy Arthur's works. If they don't, I shall spam them with my poetry."

"A fate worse than death," said Merlin, waving him to silence.

"Of course, if you can't sell anything, you'll starve to death," said Phineas. "We'll hang up your corpse on a pole in the yard as a warning to slackers."

He motioned to a few withered corpses decomposing in the breeze.

"That's a bit excessive, isn't it!" said Edwardian. "My old Auntie always said a good, sound thrashing accomplishes more than a dozen firing squads, and she ought to know. She was a student of the Franco-Prussian war."

Sweet Gas examined the corpses.

"I don't suppose you saved the intestines, did you?" he said.

"Sadly, no," said Phineas.

"I knew it," sighed Sweet Gas. "Most people never think about recycling when they slaughter their enemies and hang them up to dry. Too busy enjoying themselves, I suppose. It would never occur to them to make use of a simple plastic garbage bag...."

"Thrashing is for bleeding-heart Victorians," said Phineas. "If you want to compete in a dog-eat-dog world, you have to kill lots of people. It cuts down on pension contributions and it makes the trains run on time."

"That's why there aren't enough intestines to go around," said Sweet Gas. "People waste them."

"Those people never had any intestines," said Phineas. "They believed everything their brokers told them, and they gave the government extra money in case it wanted to go and look for missing cod."

"Foreigners are stealing it all in submarines," said Edwardian. "THEIR submarines don't leak."

"Anyway, death is an important tool that should be in every political leader's kit," said Phineas."

"Listen to the scoundrel!" muttered Digger. "Beneath the charming exterior of every capitalist exploiter lies the jawbone of an orc."

"Orcs?" said Cohen. "There aren't any orcs! The monsters in the closet ate them."

Merlin peered at the corpses for a time, his nose wrinkled in disdain. "Those aren't real," he said. "They're straw dummies with Granny Jones apples for heads."

"They're very big apples," said Chester.

"Probably genetically modified; this IS the Acme Corporation."

Meanwhile Arthur began thinking about version two of the Sea King replacement.

At the same time, but in a different book, Hank of Just Ur, and Kilroy the Indigenous, were comparing notes in the darkest heart of the Canaanite city of Bucket.

Kilroy, who had no idea the Supreme Being had planned so much pain and suffering for the Camels of the Negev, was boasting about his own torments.

"It hasn't exactly been a bed of roses here in Bucket, you know," he said. "Have you ever tried growing olive trees on a lot of rocks?"

"There are orchards here," said Hank. "I've seen them."

"Very small orchards," said Kilroy. "Most of the trees are fakes. We don't want people getting the idea we're just sitting around living off the fat of the land."

"Still, you might have tried to build a great nation."

"Listen, Hank, the minute you build anything around here, it gets taxed. That's why I live humbly and frugally."

With these words, he ushered Hank into a hovel the size of a telephone booth.

Once Hank made his way through the igloo-like entrance, however, he noticed that everything opened up into a vast space."

"I knew it!" said Brubaker, crowding in after them. "We're out there practicing our suffering, and these indigenous guys are just sitting around living off the haggis of the land."

"Shh," said Kilroy. "What NimHaHa doesn't know about, he can't tax. Besides, I don't want anybody to find out about this place. There's a rumor an army is going to sack Bucket."

"That's us!" said Brubaker. "We're going to throw our blisters at you."

Just then there was an earthquake.

Meanwhile, in another part of the asylum, Demo and Sally Popoff were still search of the Power of Durable Evil.

"Tell me again what we're looking for," said Demo. "I can't seem to focus when I'm around a beautiful woman."

"Oh you!" said Sally, tossing a rutabaga at him. "It's a matrix."

"Wonderful!" said Demo. "What does that tell me? It could be a bottle, it could be a garden trellis with rutabagas growing on it. It could be a rubber duckie!"

"Shh, something is following us."

"Who?" said Demo.

"I don't know; I saw a shadow."

"That's quite normal when you're in an underground vault lit only by the puny beams from your Captain Zap flashlights."

"It was a furtive shadow, and, anyway, there it is again," said Sally.

"Where?"

"It's gone now. You have to look faster."

"It was only a shadow, my dear. Let's smooch."

"Shh, somebody might hear you. There it is again."

"Where?"

"I wonder if it's a curator from the Museum of Strange Things."

"There aren't any curators here. They're all in the middens, looking for broken crockery."

"There's another one! Two shadows this time."

"Are you sure this is just a standard royal tomb? I haven't seen any grave goods or

skeletons."

"Doesn't mean a thing. They're probably all on display in Hammurabi's Museum. You know how thorough the curators are."

"What if the curators took the matrix by mistake?"

Demo and Sally stared at each other in wild surmise.

"No!"

"Unthinkable!"

The Power of Durable Evil might be in the heart of the Museum of Strange Things AT THIS VERY MOMENT!"

"Unthinkable."

"So don't think about it."

"Maybe a monster ate it."

"There aren't any monsters; this is real life, not a fairy tale."

"Fe, fi, fo, fum!" said a low voice.

"I beg your pardon," said Demo.

"What?" said Sally.

"Something made a noise," said Demo.

"Must be the floorboards groaning," said Sally.

"There aren't any floorboards. This is a burial chamber with a dirt floor."

"So the dirt groaned! It's pining for rutabagas."

"Maybe it's a wandering rutabaga."

"Fe fie fo fum."

"It was a little louder that time," said Demo.

"FE FI FO FUM!" said the mysterious beast.

Demo's feathers stood on end.

"Well that about wraps it up," he said. "There's nothing in this place. It's obviously a fake burial tomb put here to fool the curators. We should leave now."

Something enormous began slouching towards them, like W. B. Yeats.

"Quick, throw a rutabaga at it," said Demo.

Sally had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 137:PARTY BALLOONS

Demo peered into the dark interior of the fake tomb, trying to make out the shape of this new threat.

"Fe, fi, fo fum!" it boomed.

"Run away, run away!" Demo yelled.

"It sounds hungry," said Sally. "Maybe it wants my rutabagas."

"Did you bring rutabagas in HERE?" said Demo, amazed. "We're supposed to be tomb-raiding."

"A true artist never goes anywhere without art supplies," said Sally. "You never know when inspiration will strike."

"The only thing that's going to strike us now is the monster," said Demo. "I wish I was back at university, terrorizing undergraduates."

"FUM, FUM, FUM!" said the monster.

"It might be an art critic," said Sally. "But critics don't usually express themselves so clearly."

"That was clear?" said Demo.

"Of course it was! The poor thing is hungry."

"I'm sure it is! And guess what it wants to eat? I wondered why there were no curators here. Now I know. The monster ate them."

"That's exactly what critics do to artists."

"I'm not an artist. Will it leave me alone?"

"Don't be so modest, Demo. Everyone is an artist; it's all in how you think about things."

"You mean running away from a monster is artistic?"

"If you run in a special way, while thinking about art."

"I'm not thinking; I'm just running."

"No you aren't."

Demo looked down at his feet. They weren't moving.

"What is this?" he said. "Why aren't my feet moving?"

"Because there's nowhere to run, Demo."

"Sure there is! We can scramble up the ladder and rejoin the world of the insane. We can go back to Reality TV and Dating Contests and the stock market wars--"

"Not without a ladder."

"Huh?"

Demo looked at the wall upon which the ladder had been leaning.

The wall was still there, but the ladder had unaccountably vanished.

"Fe, fi, fo, fum!" said the monster.

There was a tremendous grunting noise, then the sound of something landing heavily on the dirt floor, a little closer to them.

"What was that noise?" squawked Demo.

"It hopped," said Sally.

"It did? The monster HOPPED? That's the worst kind of monster. We're doomed!"

"Darn it!" said Sally. "I'm not ready for the afterlife. I have too many ideas I want to try out. I was hoping to drop rutabagas from the top of the Toronto Stock Exchange."

"This is no time to work on your investment portfolio," said Demo, slumping against the wall in stark terror.

"Why not? What better time to think about stocks than when you're doomed?"

"I'M COMING TO GET YOU!" said the monster.

"Quickly!" said Demo. "Are there any universal truths we can extricate from this moment of crisis?"

"All's well that ends well?"

Suddenly, out of the gloomy shadows, a form emerged.

Demo and Sally clutched each other nervously.

"That looks like my old elementary school grammar teacher," whispered Demo.

"Well it looks like the captain of my old high school cheer leading team," said Sally. "I wondered how she turned out."

"FOOD!" boomed the monster. "NOW!"

"Good grief," said Sally.

"Gorm," said Demo.

"At least we'll be together in its stomach. We can hold hands until the very end."

"Maybe we can fight it," said Demo.

"How? This thing is bigger than both of us."

"We'll attack it with self-esteem."

"I don't know," said Sally. "I'm not big on self-improvement."

"Neither am I," said Demo, trying not to breathe amid the dense miasma of the monster's foul breath.

"I think it's bad manners to suffocate people before you eat them," said Sally.

"Try to relax," said Demo. "Whistle a happy tune and think pleasant thoughts."

"FUM," said the monster, hopping closer.

"I'm having trouble thinking pleasant thoughts," said Sally.

"It's easy," said Demo nervously. "Just imagine yourself relaxing in a quiet room."

"Okay," said Sally. "I'm relaxing in my room. Now what?"

"Good, good. Now a delicious feeling of peace and tranquility comes over you."

"Oh, that feels so good!" said a deep voice.

"Who said that?" squawked Demo

"Your old grammar teacher?" said Sally.

"Great Caesar's Ghost!" said Demo. "It's smiling! The monster is smiling!"

"Hooray!" said Sally. "Your technique is working."

"It's not supposed to work on the monster," said Demo. "It's supposed to work on US."

"Why don't we try something completely different?"

"Okay, how about some advice on getting rid of negative thoughts?"

"Easy," said Demo in a quavering voice. "A good way to get rid of negative thoughts and images is to imagine them trapped in balloons on strings. Let them float up into the air, then cut the strings."

"Sounds weird to me," said Sally. "But I'll give it a try."

"Good! Now, imagine yourself wielding powerful scissors, like Super Balloon Man, and cutting the strings one by one as you watch your troubles float away."

There was a delicious silence; then a muffled voice said: "Hey!"

"What?" said another muffled voice.

"We're not the ones who are supposed to float away. The bad thoughts are supposed to float away."

"Something's wrong."

"There's the monster! I can see it clearly."

"That's not a monster; it's a big frog."

"It's laughing at us."

"Naturally it is; we gave it self-esteem by trapping ourselves in balloons and floating away."

"You laugh at people when you have self-esteem?"

"Well, not in a nasty way."

"That's a nasty laugh if I ever heard one."

"Frogs aren't nasty; they're ecological."

"This makes you pleasant?"

"Well, not to flies and mosquitoes."

"Do something! We're floating away."

"I can't!" said Demo. "We're doomed."

"Again? I'm getting tired of this."

Suddenly the monster frog's tongue shot out.

Meanwhile, in the bowels of the Acme Corporation, Neville and the gang were haunted by a mournful diesel air horn.

"That blatting horn is driving me mad!" said Neville.

"Edwardian, are you cheating on your air horn?" said Digger.

"No!" snapped Edwardian.

"That wasn't like Edwardian at all," said Gracie. "He doesn't go in for monosyllabic replies."

"He should make a habit of it," muttered Chester. "Some of us prefer our poetry in short bursts."

"The petulancy is in character," said Digger.

"I notice he hasn't stop fondling the replacement Sea King," said Neville.

"She has a name," said Edwardian. "Her name is Little Jeanie."

Little Jeanie purred and hissed as Edwardian stroked her smooth flanks.

"Are all poets inconstant?" said Digger. "First he cheats on his tram--"

"In Tewksbury, in the rain," said Chester.

"Then he cheats on his air horn."

"It's deafening," said Neville. "We have to put it out of its misery before I go mad!"

"I had no idea Edwardian poets were so mechanically inclined," said Gracie. "I thought they were passionate about straw boaters."

"There was a dark side to the Edwardian era," said Digger.

"What?" said Neville. "Leather bloomers? Parasols with razor blades in the edges?"

"Have you ever read Wind in the Willows?" said Digger.

"You can't mean Toad of Toad Hall?" said Sweet Gas. "I always admired him.

"That capitalist piglet!" said Digger.

"He was a toad," said Neville. "You can't be a piglet if you're amphibious."

"But you CAN be a wastrel and a capitalist parasite," said Digger. "Think of the motor cars, the caravan, the boats, the mansion! Oh say it isn't so! Oh I weep for lost innocence."

"He was just a harmless rentier," said Neville. "Actually he was unwittingly working for an evil villain who was part of a conspiracy to hasten the development of machines, thereby replacing workers."

"Toad?" gasped Gracie.

"Working for an evil villain?" said Digger.

"Take away his bowel," said Sweet Gas. "Bowels are wasted on people who practice villainy."

"Who was this evil villain?" said Chester.

"Who IS he, you mean," said Neville. "His name is Mr. Clack. He's a machine."

"You can't be serious!" said Gracie.

"I am in deadly earnest, my dear," said Neville. "Mr. Clack has been working for generations, slowly and patiently, to make us all utterly dependent on safe and reliable machines."

"Ha, ha, ha!" said Digger. "Not very effective, is he! Does he work for Macrohard Angst, by any chance?"

"Nevertheless," said Neville, "Despite obvious problems with tech support, Mr. Clack is drawing ever nearer to his ultimate goal."

"I don't like machines," said Sweet Gas. "They're not organic."

"Mr. Clack has an acolyte," said Neville. "It is in fact the infamous toad that the fictional Toad of Toad Hall was modeled on. A toad by the name of the Toad Prince."

"Oh, that's rich, that is!" said Digger. "We're all going to be taken in by a sinister toad weaving its web of deceit like an amphibious spider. Tell me another one!"

"On the contrary, my dear Digger," said Neville. "A toad is a perfect acolyte, because no one is surprised when it eats flies."

"Great Scott!" said Chester. "We're doomed."

"Soon, people all over Tockworld will be in thrall to machinery, just like Edwardian. Look at his face! See the encroaching insanity."

"Dearie, dearie me," said Gracie. "How can we pry him away from that Sea King Replacement?"

"Yes; pry him away before we all go insane from that jilted air horn," said Digger.

"We shall have to summon one of his aunties," said Neville.

"Which one?" said Digger. "The pot smoker, the leather-and-lace fanatic, or the war monger?"

"All of them," said Neville.

"Isn't that a bit risky?" said Digger. "They might attack each other."

"We have no choice," said Neville. "Only the fearsome power of a Victorian auntie can reach Edwardian now."

Digger had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 138:RECHARGEABLE THINGS

Merlin readied himself for the business of summoning Edwardian's Victorian aunties. This involved eating a lot of chocolate in an attempt to achieved an altered state of consciousness.

The others grew impatient.

"I don't see why we need a Edwardian's Victorian aunties," said Neville. "We have a perfectly good wizard. Why don't we take his box of chocolates away and make him do some real work for a change?"

There was a watery snickering sound from somewhere in the background.

"Hark, the Lady of the Lake!" said Sweet Gas.

Merlin quickly made the box of chocolates vanish into the folds of his robe.

"Her again!" he muttered. "I thought she went back to her swamp."

Something wet flew out of the nothing at all and swatted him across the beard.

"A wet towel," said Neville. "It says, Atlantis Resorts, Bahamas. I wonder what she was doing there."

"Gambling," muttered Digger darkly. "An upper class vice; it's how they get rid of excess money so the workers won't spot their loot and get envious."

"Anyway," said Neville, "I still don't see why we need Edwardian's aunties. Surely Merlin can beat this Mr. Clack into the ground and take away his magic."

"He may be a villain, but he doesn't have any magic," said Merlin indignantly. "He's a thing. An object."

"You mean he's a machine," said Neville.

"Shh, don't tell Edwardian," said Chester. "He's very sensitive about machines."

"If he's a machine, what's he doing calling himself a HE," said Sweet Gas. "What if he's a SHE?"

"This matters?" said Chester.

"It does to Edwardian," said Neville. "He pays lip service to the values of a bygone era."

"That's just an excuse for unbridled capitalism," said Digger.

"But he's a poet!" said Neville. "Poets can't be capitalists--they don't have any money."

"They can get grants," said Digger.

"Capitalism involves the amassing of wealth for its own sake," said Neville. "I hardly think a grant to write poetry qualifies."

"A grant is a form of bribery," said Digger. "To make the poet go away and commit poetry somewhere else."

"How very unsporting!" said Neville.

"Bribery is an important component of every capitalist system. Give me money or I'll withhold my goods from you."

"In Edwardian's case, this would mean withholding his poetry from people who refuse to pay."

"Of course."

"But if you threaten to do exactly what people WANT you to do in the first place, why should they stand in your way by giving you money?"

"Because people LIKE throwing away their money," said Digger. "They've been conditioned to spend by advertising executives. If you don't spend money, you're antisocial."

"So Edwardian advertises?" said Neville.

"Of course. He puts banner ads on trams in Tewksbury."

"The horror!" said Chester.

"Anyway," said Neville, "Machines are neither one thing nor the other. They're gender-free."

"Shh! Don't tell Edwardian," said Chester. "He'll be disappointed."

"So will the machine," muttered Digger.

But it was too late. Edwardian had heard.

"What a ghastly thing to say!" he squawked. "How would you like it if someone called you gender-free?"

"Well, it's better than being bowel-free, surely!" said Sweet Gas. "At least it has a bowel."

"Machines don't have bowels," said Merlin. "And what has having a bowel got to do with gender?"

"Anyway," said Neville, "What I meant to say was--"

"Machines can do it as easily as ducks," sniffed Edwardian.

Everyone stared at Edwardian.

"Do what?" said Neville suspiciously.

"Whatever it takes," said Edwardian.

"This is fascinating," said Chester. "You mean, even without the traditional equipment, they can do THAT?"

"Yes," Edwardian said tersely. "That."

Then he blushed.

"But, with what do they do it, dear Edwardian?" said Neville.

"Oh you!" said Gracie, patting him on the tractor tire.

"Yes, tell us!" smirked Chester.

"Do you think I'd tell YOU!" said Edwardian.

"He doesn't know," whispered Digger.

"Thank the gods for that!" said Neville.

"What if he's right?" said Merlin. "What if they really do go at it like smooch-maddened ducks?"

"Surely that would lead to rather large questions of perception and motivation," said Neville.

"I wonder if the males argue over females and bash each other with their horns," said Chester.

"Well, speaking as a troll, I think a bowel would be much more impressive," said Sweet Gas. "You can do without THAT, but you can't do without a bowel."

"I don't think taking out your bowel and waving it about would be very practical," said Neville.

"Who exactly can do without THAT?" said Digger. "I certainly can't!"

Everyone stared at Digger.

"We Welsh miners have a richly deserved reputation for fecundity," he said. "We've also read lots and lots of Dylan Thomas's poetry."

"I wonder if they use some sort of attachment," said Merlin.

"You mean a thing you bolt on?" said Sweet Gas, growing interested.

"Or clamp on, or plug in," said Merlin.

"But surely, in the case of a machine, the act of plugging in an attachment is in itself the source of the pleasure," said Neville. "Especially if you have to reboot to become aware of your new appendage."

"Not everyone has to reboot their operating system just to find out they've got a thing," said Digger.

"That's true," said Merlin. "With the newer firewire ports, you can just plug it in and keep on trucking."

"Or mining," said Digger.

"So, if your thing drops off while you're doing THAT, you just stick it back on again, your system auto detects it, and you can start using it at once," said Neville.

"You could also plug in a new one if you got tired of the old one for any reason," said Merlin.

"Size being the usual excuse," said Gracie. "It's a wonder you males have the time to think about anything else at all."

Neville blushed and hid his face.

"You'd have to load software drivers for it, if it was new," said Merlin.

"That's true," said Chester. "Imagine if you were merrily plucking the old harp strings and suddenly your thing froze--"

"Plucking the old harp strings?" said Digger, fascinated.

"A system lockup at that particular moment would be very embarrassing," said Neville.

"I can just see it!" said Digger. "Erm, Excuse me, my dear, while I check the connection."

Something seems to have absconded."

"So you quickly check the connection," said Neville. "It's probably a USB port if it works loose in a moment of need."

"It doesn't matter," said Merlin. "You take it out and you plug it back in again."

"And of course, nothing happens," said Neville. "No joy. You might as well be neuter, like one of Edwardian's machines."

"Meanwhile, the party of the second part is growing restless," said Digger.

"Fidgeting," said Merlin.

"Why Merlin!" said Gracie. "I thought wizards were ethereal and untainted by lusts of the heart."

"I speak theoretically," said Merlin, "Based on a deep and abiding interest in the conflicted ways of humans and ducks."

"Based on a truly gargantuan collection of spicy DVD's," said Digger.

"Anyway, the party of the second part is fretting over the sudden cessation of plucking," said Merlin testily.

"The absence of the thing," said Digger.

"This is why you should always carry a spare, in case one breaks down," said Merlin.

"Preferably one of the newer ones that doesn't need a power bar because it sucks juice straight from the USB port," said Neville.

"Not if it's wireless, surely!" said Merlin.

"Okay, so it's got a rechargeable battery, which you thoughtfully charge the night before the deed, as a precautionary measure."

"Oh great!" said Digger. "So, while the party of the second part is fidgeting and fretting, you offer a sickly grin and say: 'half a moment, dear!' as you grope around in your briefcase until you find a spare."

"Which you hastily remove from its protective wrapping," said Chester.

"Not if it's bubble wrap," said Neville. "You're liable to cut yourself to pieces on sharp bits of plastic if you're in a hurry."

"Okay, so you trek out to the garage and grope around in the darkness for the garden shears," said Chester.

"Probably stuck in a hedge somewhere," said Merlin.

"Whatever. Anyway, an hour later, you trek back with the shears, destroy the bubble wrap, and --"

"Oooh, be careful!" said Digger. "That could be painful if you cut in the wrong place and nick the thing."

"How could it be painful if it's not attached?" said Merlin.

"It's wireless, remember!" said Neville. "And presumably the battery has been charged."

"Rarely," said Merlin. "A charged battery in a new item is often a sign it has been tried out by someone and then returned."

"Great Scott!" said Digger. "Who would knowingly purchase a used thing? An appendage that some other harpist has been plucking with?"

"Possibly," said Neville.

But you don't know where it's been!"

"You can insist on the manufacturer's seal."

"Which is often just a bit of tape or shrink wrap. Big box stores can easily repackage these devices."

Dear me!" There was a collective murmur of squeamishness.

"Anyway, you're forgetting something else," said Chester. "What about the bit on the end...the um, cat door as it were."

"Cat flap?" said Neville.

"Oh, THAT," said Gracie.

"Yes, the overhang," said Neville, blushing again.

"What about it?" said Merlin.

"Well, is it there, or not there?" said Chester. "It makes a difference, you know."

"I should imagine it's optional," said Sweet Gas. "You could remove it fairly easily."

"It's NEVER easy," said Digger.

"But it could be removed, to make it suitable for any Camels of the Negev who wanted to try it out."

"Not just them," said Neville.

"I imagine these things come in different sizes and colors," said Chester.

"You could buy an assortment," said Neville.

"Yes, different colors for different moods," said Chester.

"You wouldn't want to change too often, though," said Merlin. "People might start thinking you were flighty."

"How would they know?"

"The party of the second part would know."

"Different colors could come in handy," said Chester. "You could disguise yourself in case you wanted to pluck some other harp."

"Are you trying to tell me she wouldn't recognize you because you had a thing of a different color?" said Neville.

"Some people focus rather narrowly," said Chester.

"True. Some of us, for instance, focus on beaks," said Digger.

"That was uncalled for," said Chester.

"Anyway," said Neville, "We've removed the bubble wrap."

"And the thing is not charged," said Merlin.

"The battery, you mean," said Chester.

"So you have to plug in the power bar."

"Which means you have to say 'half a moment' again, while you find an outlet," said Digger.

"And an extension cord," said Neville.

"And a surge protector," said Merlin. "You wouldn't want a bolt of lightning striking the mains, blowing up the power bar and shorting out the thing."

"Goodness!" said Sweet Gas.

"But of course, the thing doesn't have a simple plug; it has a big brick of a power bar that takes up at least three outlets on the surge protector."

"Well you could unplug something else."

"The centrifuge," said Digger.

Everyone turned to stare at Digger.

"What on earth are you doing with a centrifuge in the bedroom?" said Neville.

"Different strokes for different folks," said Digger. "It's quite a big one."

"Fascinating," said Merlin. "And this is popular with the party of the second part, is it?"

"They always ask for it."

"Anyway," said Neville, "What happens if you get tangled in the extension cord while you're sorting out your things?"

"Good grief!" said Digger. "How many things do you want?"

"It's called 'multitasking'," said Merlin. "It involves a short attention span and a low tolerance for boredom."

Neville became aware of Gracie's fascinated gaze and coughed into his sleeve.

"I speak theoretically," he said. "Based on my reading of Plotinus."

"This has been quite an epic," said Chester. "The party of the second part must be reading a book by now."

"Monk on the Sublime," I should think," said Neville. "It cultivates your garden."

"DeSade, more likely," said Digger.

"Ooh," said Chester. "What goes on in YOUR mind?"

"It's a simple reaction to the frustrations of dealing with the exploiting classes."

"Anyway," said Neville, "You plug in the power bar, you plug in your colorful thing--"

"And your operating system freezes," said Merlin.

"Time to reboot," said Digger maliciously.

"Can't," said Chester. "System lockup."

"So you call tech support," said Sweet Gas.

"What precisely would you tell the tech-support orc when asked to describe the problem?" said Neville.

"Maybe you can solve it yourself by downloading new drivers," said Merlin.

"So you cut power to the system," said Neville. "You unplug the thing, reboot, and uninstall the old driver."

"You know how slow that is!" said Merlin. "You have to go through a file check because you shut down improperly."

"Meanwhile, the party of the second part is now doing her tax returns to while away the time."

"At last you finish rebooting," said Merlin. "A light flashes at the end of the thing."

"Wow!" said Digger. "Getting flamboyant, aren't we!"

"It is a bit excessive," said Gracie.

"It's only digital," said Merlin. "Green for idle, red for activity."

"Wait a minute," said Neville. "We're assuming there's only one kind of attachment--the thing. But what if there's another kind, for the party of the second part?"

"Which is quite often the party of the first part," said Chester.

"Depending on who came into the relationship with the greatest number of dominance genes."

"Another kind of attachment?" said Sweet Gas, puzzled. "You mean like innies and outies."

"That's belly buttons," said Gracie.

"This is getting interesting," said Sweet Gas. There might be a hot-pluggable bowel, too."

"Where would you plug it in?" said Neville.

"A surgeon would have to make a hole for it," said Merlin.

"A hard rock miner, you mean," said Digger. "I might be able to help you with that."

"Would you?" said Sweet Gas.

"Anything for a fellow worker."

"A troll is a worker?" said Neville.

"You think rolling down cliffs and smashing things is a leisure activity?" said Sweet Gas.

"Anyway, about the other kind of attachment," said Gracie. "Please go on."

"It would be the same thing, really," said Merlin. "Only different."

"One hopes so," said Gracie.

"More inward."

"You really have been into the DVD's!" said Neville.

"In both cases, the thing would plug into a socket," said Merlin. "But the outwardly visible morphology would manifest different aspects of the eternal form."

"This is getting embarrassing," said Chester. "I've warned all of you about soft porn."

"So theoretically your entire identity would depend on what sort of attachment you plugged in?" said Neville.

"Clothes make the man," said Merlin.

"Or woman," said Gracie.

"But you would definitely need different software drivers," said Neville."

"Macrohard Angst comes with all sorts of drivers," said Merlin.

"Or you could go open source," said Neville. "But you'd have to log in as root."

"I should think that would be rather a lot to remember during THAT," said Digger.

"Okay, so you pick an appendage, plug it in, power it up, and depending on which one you choose, your operating system makes the appropriate adjustments, and you have at it," said Neville.

"Yes," said Merlin.

"Sounds good to me!" said Chester. "What does it take to become a machine?"

"It's quite simple," said Merlin. "Upload your personality into the machine of your choice."

"A handy kitchen gadget," said Chester.

"Or a forklift truck," said Neville.

"Why hasn't someone told Edwardian about this?" said Digger.

"Wait a minute!" said Chester. "Isn't that what Mr. Clack wants! Everyone becomes a machine!"

There was a silence.

"If HE wants it, there must be a downside," said Sweet Gas.

"Of course," said Neville.

"Maybe a firewall would keep him out," said Chester.

"Against Mr. Clack, there is no effective firewall," said Merlin. "He can hack his way into anything."

"Like Edwardian," said Neville. "With his poetry."

"Is that what happened to Edwardian? Clack got to him?"

"It's possible," said Merlin. "It may have been his first move."

"What if Mr. Clack is really the Power of Durable Evil?"

"And Edwardian is now wirelessly connected?"

Everyone had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 139: BIGGER IS BETTER?

Demo and Sally had a pair of very nice party balloons, but they weren't having much fun. Not that balloons are much fun to begin with--they don't really do anything; they just bob around on the end of a string until the neighborhood bully pops them.

Most children learn this after a short time, and trade in their balloons for video games, which are a bit more interactive and allow them to destroy the world without actually getting any dust and ashes on their fingers.

It's even harder to have fun with a balloon when you're stuck inside it while a monster attacks you; especially when the monster is a magic frog.

Demo watched the frog's tongue shoot out of its gaping maw like a spring-loaded telemarketer.

There was a deafening noise, then darkness and silence.

At first Demo thought he was dead. He looked around in the eerie darkness for Death and his ice cream truck.

Death, as you know, shows up in a little white van and offers you a choice of flavors before handing you over to the other officials of the afterlife.

It's one of the many benefits of passing on.

Some people are offended by this, of course; they refuse to move on unless they get the traditional icon--the one with the scythe blade and the bones.

Anyway, Demo was still looking over his shoulder when the lights came back on and he saw the monster floating up into the air like a frog-shaped helium balloon.

"He missed," said Sally.

Demo wasn't so sure. He checked carefully to make sure he was still toggled out in his special tomb-raiding outfit. Some people mistakenly think that as long as you have your clothes on, you can't be in the afterlife, because if you WERE in the afterlife, you'd be sporting the standard issue white sheet.

Ha, ha.

People who depart for the Underworld take leave of this world in whatever they were

wearing at the time of their demise. So make sure you always have clean underwear when you venture out onto the sand traps of life.

"Relax," said Sally. "You're still alive."

"Possibly," said Demo. "But alive in a different way."

"Well, you're a bit older," said the frog. "Does that count as different?"

"Who asked YOU?" said Demo indignantly.

"There's no need to be rude. I'm a magic frog, mind you!"

"I knew it!" muttered Demo.

"The name is Rorbit. I know who you are because I hear voices that tell me everything."

"Oh great; a homicidal psychopathic magic frog!" said Demo.

"How do you do," said Sally.

"Pleased to meet you, Sally. You don't mind if I destroy you, do you? It's nothing personal, but I've been ordered to do this by a mysterious voice."

"Leave her alone or I'll pop your air bag," said Demo.

"Relax, Demo!" said Sally. "He can't hurt me; I've got plenty of rutabagas."

Demo gnashed his teeth.

"Sometimes you have to go with the flow," said Sally. "There's nothing we can do; we're trapped in these party balloons. Let's wait and see what happens."

"The willow bends with the wind," said Rorbit.

"Oh great!" muttered Demo. "A Zen homicidal psychopathic magic frog!"

Demo tried to relax but the balloon got in his way.

The thing about party balloons is, unless you're the one holding the string, you simply can't control them; they drift with the wind.

It's a little like life.

"At least we're out of the tomb, basking in sunshine," said Sally. "We can see things."

Demo wasn't so sure this was a change for the better. He'd begun to notice disturbing signs of a breakdown in the natural order of things.

For instance, what was an Orient Express passenger car doing, floating a little distance away, at a slight angle to the ground?

And why exactly was Polydoor duking it out with a two-headed octopus on the roof of the passenger car, while Custer's Last Stand, the ubiquitous raven, egged him on?

Further away, a ziggurat floated upside down, with its temple aimed squarely at the fake tomb below, while a dozen or so priests casually went on with their fertility rites, watched over by a sheep.

Sheep, as you know, don't mind being upside down. Anything is better than a sacrificial altar!

Higher up, a platypus and a llama danced a stately gavotte.

"You're being awfully quiet, Demo," said Sally. "Is something bothering you?"

"I was thinking about Hannah Arendt," he said. "I'm beginning to see her point about the banality of evil."

"She was **WRONG!**" said Rorbit. "Evil is vivid and powerful. Take me, for instance, a villain among villains."

"Shouldn't boast if I were you," said Sally. "It always invokes a doom."

"You may be evil on the outside, but inside, you're a shabby little bureaucrat," said Demo. "You probably got passed over for promotion because you hang around in swamps with the telemarketers and spammers."

"You'll have plenty of opportunity to check out my insides after I eat you."

"You aren't even real. You're just a bit of undigested beef!"

"I see froggy too, but I didn't have beef for lunch," said Sally. "I had chocolate-covered squid."

"That explains everything," said Demo sourly.

"Of course I'm real," said Rorbit. "I've read Aristophanes."

"What did he know? He never imagined stock options and derivatives."

"You're still mad at your broker for misplacing your retirement fund, aren't you!" said Sally. "You should let it go."

"If evil is so banal, what about the Power of Durable evil?" said Rorbit.

"I rest my case," said Demo. "Look how it manifests itself! A rubber duckie! I ask you!"

"Only to some people," said Sally. "Others see it as an armadillo. You above all should know how malleable evil is!"

Demo didn't reply because a trailer park had floated between them, drifting slowly eastwards. An RV passed so close to him, he could see a woman inside watching an episode of 'Disposable Husbands' on a little TV set.

"The landscape is getting weirder and weirder," he said.

"Maybe Rorbit really did eat us," said Sally. "Maybe this is the afterlife."

Demo was horrified. "You mean we get separate balloons for all eternity? No smooching?"

"Oh you! We'll find a way."

Demo eyed Sally suspiciously. Why was she so blase about this? Didn't she care? Was she secretly lusting for froggy boy?

He watched Polydoor throw a flaming porridge briquette at the octopus.

"I'm a magic octopus, mind you," it said.

"No you're not," said Polydoor. "You're banal."

"Freddy to you, humpy!" said the octopus, casually shooting a jet of ink at Demo's balloon.

Fortunately it was washable blue and a passing garden sprinkler soon dissipated it.

"Oh my gosh!" said Demo. "That's Freddy Manichean Heresy!"

"Really?" said Rorbit. "Famous, is he?"

"So evil isn't banal after all!" said Sally, gloating. "It's only banal when it isn't attacking YOU."

"Is this a lover's spat?" said Rorbit. "If you're tired of Mister Banality, I'm available."

"Thank you, but no thanks."

"Don't close your mind. An artist should be open to new experiences."

"Are you making a play for my girlfriend, froggy?" said Demo in a dangerous voice.

"Some princes are amphibians, you know!"

"I find you strangely attractive, but I'm loyal to Demo," said Sally. "He's my one and only."

Demo grew warm and toasty inside.

"I love you too," he said.

"Spare me," said Rorbit. Then a jet of ink drenched him.

"This is getting dangerous," said Sally. "How do we fight off a monster like Freddy?"

"We need a weapon," said Demo

"A spell would do the trick," said Rorbit.

"Um, dress warmly and in layers?" said Sally.

"You can't throw a homily at a monster," said Rorbit.

"You can if you write it down on a scrap of paper and stick it into a fortune cookie," said Sally.

"What kind of fortune is that?" said Rorbit. "Dress warmly and in layers."

"Or you could wrap it around a rock," said Demo.

Just then, an enormous cabbage butterfly began flapping its wings. A black cloud appeared, replete with thunder and lightning, and a gust of wind flipped The Orient Express car upside down.

Freddy and the octopus continued their battle as if nothing had happened.

"We've lost our probability constant," said Demo. "I hope these balloons don't pop. Do balloons attract lightning?"

"Only if you rub them and make static," said Sally.

"What's that squeaking noise?" said Demo, alarmed.

"Somebody's rubbing them."

"Who? I don't see anyone."
"Shh," said Rorbit. "Evil is all around us."
"It's okay," said Demo. "I've got an armadillo."
"And I've got a magic rutabaga," said Sally.
"It won't do you any good," said Rorbit. "Somebody unlocked the morphic database. We could start mutating."
"Been there, done that," said Demo.
"Really?" said Sally.
"Haven't you noticed? I've grown."
"Hmmm."
"Two whole inches," said Demo.
There was a silence filled with heat and light.
"Um, it started when somebody spammed me with one of those messages about making it grow longer."
"Making WHAT grow longer?" said Rorbit.
"Yes, do tell," said Sally.
"You were that desperate?" said Rorbit.
"Women require it," said Demo. "It's right there in black and white on the application form."
"Application for what?" said Sally.
"A pill?" said Rorbit.
"It came in a re-gifted box of chocolates, without the chocolates," said Demo. "There was just tissue paper and a war surplus fortune cookie. The message inside was blank."
"You actually sent away for something that would make some part of your anatomy grow an extra two inches?" said Rorbit.
"I was doing some research of my own," said Demo.
"To find out what it's like having two extra inches?" said Rorbit.
"It worked, but now I get spammed by every con artist on Tockworld. I'm even getting spam from the Alien Planet. I got one the other day that said: You haven't lived until you've been abducted by aliens! Special rates. Half price for significant others. Get a free 'Mars Attacks' hairdo."
"You turned them down, of course?" said Sally.
"Of course."
"So why is that enormous flying saucer with a happy face on the bottom beaming us up?"
Rorbit had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 140:ALIEN COWS

One minute Demo was trapped in a balloon over an inverted ziggurat; the next, he was trapped in a balloon in a flying saucer.
There was a deafening 'pop', then the balloon vanished and he tumbled down onto a water bed.
Demo looked around with interest.
There was a picture of an armadillo on the wall. Psychedelic lights flashed all around, hurting his eyes.
A video showed a lot of frenzied humans jumping around and yelling something about peace.
"Peace, order and good government?" said Demo.
"Not THAT funny farm, silly," laughed Sally. "The other one! Woodstock. It would have been a lot better with rutabagas."

Demo was put out. This was not his idea of how an alien abduction should go. For one thing, there was no buzzing, humming, sinister electronics display.

"First time?" said the monster frog.

"I've been saving myself for a really good one," said Demo matter of factly.

"That's what they all say."

"I suppose you've been abducted lots of times."

"Countless. It gets old after awhile."

"Well I have an extra two inches. Beat that!"

"So you say."

Suddenly a rude voice said, "Greetings. My name is Gastro. I'll be your alien abductor today. Please make yourself at home while I extract your vital organs for analysis. Don't worry about your pet."

Demo looked around frantically but all he could see was a lava lamp on a night table.

"That's right," it said. "I'm the one who's a lamp. I was an inspiration to untold numbers of humans on the planet Earth, before they blew it up. I'm not usually this colorful, but this is a special occasion."

Demo, to cover his embarrassment, said, "That's not our pet, by the way. That's a monster."

"What a thing to say about a member of your family! And who have we here?"

"Polydoor," said Polydoor, stepping down from the Orient Express passenger car. "The famous acolyte."

"I see. And have we been a good acolyte?"

"Possibly. I've been busy combating evil and saving Tockworld from a fate worse than death."

"Isn't it fun!" said Sally.

"Good, good!" said the alien. "I can see we're all going to have a wonderful time. Now for the good part."

There was a silence while the lava lamp grew arms and consulted a big, yellow book with black stripes.

Demo couldn't believe the title: Alien Abduction for Dum Dums.

"You haven't done this before?" he said.

"Relax!" said Gastro. "How hard can it be?"

Demo was growing worried.

"Don't waste your time on me," he said. "You're too late; I've already mutated. I've grown an extra two inches."

"That's not a mutation; it's just a growth spurt," said Gastro. "It's caused by spam."

"No it isn't," said Demo. "Growth spurts are like warts--they're all over. I grew in just one place."

"It's your word against everyone else's," said Gastro. "Did you keep a record?"

Demo motioned to Sally. "I have a witness."

Everyone stared at Sally for a moment.

"I don't pay attention to things like that," she said. "I'm only interested in you for your etchings."

"But it's part of the job description--" said Demo.

"Have you really mutated?" said Gastro.

"Oh yes; I'm quite different now."

"Rats! This was supposed to be my first abduction. I'm not allowed to experiment on mutants."

All at once Gastro started to vibrate. Then she turned a rich brown color, with irregular white spots.

"Mooooo!" she said.

"Is something wrong?" said Demo.

"Look what you've done to her!" screeched another voice. "She was so anxious to

make a success of her first abduction, and now you've spoiled everything!"

"I'm sorry," said Demo. "If I'd known she was going to abduct me, I'd have kept myself pure."

"Oh I suppose it's not your fault. It's the Hippopotamus of Fate again. She sits up there in her rocking chair endlessly knitting that wretched sock of doom, and meanwhile the rest of us suffer abominably. Curse you, Hippopotamus of Fate! And Curse your wretched sock of doom! Who wants it anyway?"

"Shh, shhh!" said everyone else urgently.

"Moooooooooooo!" said Gastro.

"Relax," said the other voice. "She's not the Supreme Being; what can she do to us? She's just an old busybody sticking her nose into everybody's business."

There was a loud 'POOF!' and a big green cloud appeared.

When the cloud had cleared away, Demo saw that Gastro had turned into a big, brown cow.

"Does this mean our abduction's off?" he said.

"We could milk her," said Polydoor.

"Drat!" said the other alien. "Got any alfalfa? I can't help right now because I'm in another dimension. You can call me D'If, by the way. We're all in this together."

"Why a cow?" said Demo.

"Because that's what we evolved from."

"You're kidding."

"We changed when we came down from the trees."

"Cows don't live in trees."

"These cows did. They ate the leaves of the tumtum tree."

"Even so--"

"Think about it, my ducky friend. Where do you find the leaves of the tumtum tree?"

"On tumtum trees, I suppose."

"Indeed. And do these tumtum trees often toss their leaves down to the ground as a favor to leaf-eating cows?"

"Now that you mention it--"

"It was our DNA that did us in, you know. Changing just like that, on a whim, without even considering the side effects, like starvation. By the time our primitive cow ancestors found out there weren't any tumtum leaves on the ground, it was too late; they couldn't get back up again because they'd already evolved."

"But there must have been some evolutionary benefit," said Demo. "Otherwise you'd have all been wiped out."

"Of course there was a benefit!" said D'If. "We didn't have to use our hands to hold onto branches anymore so we built primitive flint tools and flying saucers, and started abducting humans and ducks. We noticed right away how you people treat cows--"

"Some of my best friends are cows," said Demo uneasily.

"Cows?" said Polydoor. "Salt of Tockworld! You can't go wrong with cows."

"Heck, cows run our government," said Demo. "Go into any major committee meeting or board meeting and you'll hear them all mooing."

"Anyway, you'll have to abduct yourselves," said D'If, and he made his way out of a closet to greet them.

He was a lava lamp, of course, but a subdued green and blue one, with just a touch of yellow, some crimson, a dab of purple, and a blotch of orange.

He flashed a bit of turquoise at the frog.

"What's a big frog like you doing with these ducks?" he said.

"I was going to eat them," said the frog.

"They don't look edible. Why don't you come and live with me?"

"Actually I'm evil; I'm thinking of joining Freddy Manichean Heresy. I'm from the tenebrous side."

"Oh well; I suppose it was worth a try. Help me get Flossy down to Tockworld. She needs treatment."

"The name's Gastro," mooed the cow.

"But she's mutated," said Demo. "She's no longer a lava lamp."

"We can fix that," said D'If. "We can break down the morphological extension and put her into flux. It's a question of false recovered memories."

"Who's going to take care of all of that?"

"We'll take her to Philip Napoleon, the famous shrink. He's good at recovering identities. If he can't find one, he'll just make one up. When he's finished installing it, he'll set a password so it can't be changed again."

Thus it was, the new friends built a crate, packed Gastro into it, and transported down to Toronto.

Unfortunately, they had to go through customs.

The inspector eyed the crate.

"What's in the crate?" he said.

"A rubber inflatable cow," said Demo.

"Destination?"

"Philip Napoleon," said D'If. "It's for scientific research. He wants to find out if rubber cows float."

"You don't have any weapons of mass destruction in there do you?"

"No sir. We haven't been anywhere near a bagpipe factory."

"Forbidden literature?"

"We don't read; we play video games."

"Haggis?"

"The lions ate it."

"How much do you want for the cow?"

"It's not for sale."

"You haven't got another one, have you?"

"I'm afraid not. We could possibly bring you a real one."

"Real cows aren't the same. All they do is ruminate."

"What's wrong with that?" said Demo. "Some of my best friends are ruminants."

"I like a bit of conversation. I had a really wonderful sheep but she ran off with the man who came to clean our furnace ducts. I thought a cow might be more faithful."

"She must have had her reasons," said Sally. "Did you take her for granted?"

"I was very kind and considerate. She left me a note; she said my idea of a good time was to stand around in airports and search people's luggage. We had this game; she'd pretend to be a traveler smuggling in haggis, and I'd search her."

"Ooh; sounds good to me," said Polydoor. "I'll have to try it with Babette when I get home."

Everyone stared at Polydoor for a time.

The customs officer, meanwhile, had taken an interest in the monster frog.

"Which gender are you?" he asked.

"I've had an operation; I'm amphibious."

"Do you think a broken-hearted customs officer and a giant frog can find happiness together."

"Search me."

"I'd love to."

A light shone from the frog.

"Some people have taste, he said.

"I don't suppose you know any lady frogs."

"I can set you up with a friend."

The customs inspector was so happy, he wept into a suitcase.

"Moo, moo, moo!" said Gastro.

The frog monster hopped closer and handed the customs officer a lace handkerchief. "There, there," he said. "I'll set you up."

"Oh you're so kind," said the customs officer. "I've always wanted a friend like you."

"I'm evil, mind you."

"How exciting! Do you really think a customs duck and an evil frog can live happily together."

"A giant Zen evil magic frog. But she won't be as evil as I am. She'll probably hate action movies."

"I don't mind. I'm very sensitive, you know."

The frog winked. "Never know until you try."

Thus it was, they walked off into the sunset in search of a female frog to repair the customs inspector's broken heart.

"Hey what about us?" yelled Demo.

"You're cleared," said the inspector. "Go forth and multiply."

A line of relieved haggis smugglers began extracting their ill-gotten gains from various places of concealment.

There was haggis in bagpipes, haggis in piccolos, haggis in bottles of Carter's Little Liver Pills.

Demo was stupefied; he'd never imagined so many ways of smuggling haggis.

One intrepid crook had strapped two enormous haggises to his chest and there were a lot of disappointed males when the deception was revealed.

In all of the excitement, Gastro grew nervous and kicked her way out of the crate.

"Oh oh!" said Demo. "How do we get her to Philip Napoleon now!"

"She seems to have grown larger," said Sally.

"Can you walk, my dear?" said D'If.

Gastro made no reply, just gazed at him with a look of bovine melancholy.

"She's traumatized," said D'If.

"Why don't we blow her up?" said Freddy. "I just happen to have a canister of helium."

"She'll float away," said D'If.

"No she won't," said Sally. "I'll tear my slip into strips and make a rope."

"Can I help?" said Demo lasciviously.

"You have a slip?" said D'If. "Is that like a thong?"

Freddy, meanwhile, applied himself to the task at hand, and in a trice, Gastro swelled up like a Zeppelin and floated into the air, tugging gently at Sally's shredded slip.

"Is this really going to work?" said D'If.

"We'll be okay as long as she doesn't belch," said Demo.

"Or blow it out the other end," said Freddy.

"It's okay; I've got an umbrella," said D'If.

"I get to hold onto the balloon," said Freddy.

"No, I do," said D'If. She's MY significant other."

"But she bloated up on MY helium," said Freddy.

"You can take turns," said Sally. "D'If can go first because he's emotionally upset."

D'If smirked and grabbed the slip rope.

"Look at him!" said Freddy. "He's gloating."

"No I'm not; I'm defying the essential meaninglessness of existence by revealing inner mystery and warmth, like Mona Lisa."

Polydoor clapped his hands over his ears.

"I don't have to listen to this; I'm not an academic."

The little group hired a moving van and made their way to Philip Napoleon's clinic.

They unloaded Gastro under the big before-and-after picture of a lunatic.

Then, of course, they discovered they couldn't get the cow through the front door.

"What do we do now?" said Sally.

"Deflate her," said Demo.

"How? There's no bung to pull out."
"I'm not going there," said Polydoor. "I just do the bloating part."
"We have to find a way of making her expel excess gas," said D'If.
"Through which end?" said Sally.
"Preferably through the front door."
"We could tickler her," said Demo.
"What if she explodes?" said D'If.
"That only happens with hydrogen," said Freddy.
"Look, look, see, see!" yelled D'If. "She's getting bigger. Something's wrong."
"Tie her to a mast before she floats away," said Demo.
D'If grabbed the rope and tied it to a flagpole outside the clinic.
Gastro floated up until the slip rope was taut, then turned gently in the wind.
Just then, the flying saucer dropped out of the sky and crashed into a crop circle next door to a beauty parlor.
D'If had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 141:ALIEN MAKEOVERS

When D'If saw his precious flying saucer crash, he grew frantic.
Forgetting Gastro's plight, he ran across the street to the crop circle WITHOUT looking both ways to make sure there were no cars coming.

Luckily for him, there wasn't much traffic that day; everyone was watching the soccer riots.

The crop circle was just fine. The flying saucer, however, was a write-off.

D'If was so upset, he turned psychedelic.

"Just look at it!" he screamed. "My nice new flying saucer is completely ruined! It took me weeks to save up for it."

"Do you have insurance?" said Demo.

D'If fumbled in his sporran for the contract. It was a faxed document, with an exploded view of the flying saucer. All of the parts that weren't covered by the policy were shaded in warning grey. The parts that WERE covered were merely smudged.

Unfortunately, almost every part was shaded.

There was much clucking of tongues and rolling of eyes as everyone squeezed in for a look at the contract.

"It says it's void if I put in a claim," said D'If. "Is that normal?"

"Where did you get this policy?" said Demo.

"Shifty Pete's Breathe-Easy Insurance Co. There was a traveling sales duck handing out free calendars with scantily dressed lava lamps on every page. He said Shifty's was having a special on flying saucer insurance that month but I'd have to act fast, because the policies were selling out quickly."

"Look it's spontaneously combusting!" said Sally.

D'If frantically blew on the contract, but it was too late; the cheap fax paper went up like a fuse, leaving only a few blackened flakes wafting away in the breeze.

D'If was on the point of having a complete mental breakdown when a voice said, "Are you an alien?"

It was a parking enforcement officer, complete with a wheel-locking device and a roll of parking tickets.

"Of course I'm an alien!" screamed D'If. "It says so on my driver's license." He fumbled in his sporran again and produced a plastic card with a picture of a lava lamp and an extension cord. "See--that's me. I get the extension cord because I'm licensed for long-distance flying. And there, under the heading 'RACE', you can see I've checked off 'Alien'."

The parking enforcement nodded.

"I only ask because it's so hard to tell these days."

"That's okay," said D'If. "We all have our problems."

"It's more than the job's worth, let me tell you," said the parking enforcement officer. "The other day, I went up to a creature that looked like a bowl of radishes and asked him very politely if he was an alien. It turned out he was a she, and I thought she was going to kill me. Said she was as good a Tockworlder as I was; born and raised in downtown Toronto. Just because she had a full-body makeover was no reason to insult her."

"I wouldn't have your job for all the hot lava lamps in the world!" said D'If. "People can be so rude."

"Tell me about it. Anyway, is that your flying saucer, sir or madam?"

D'If looked at the parking enforcement officer. Then he looked at his roll of tickets.

"Does it look like a flying saucer?" he said.

"Well--it's a bit dented and burnt."

"That's because it isn't a flying saucer; it's a sculpture."

"Really?"

"If you don't believe me, ask Sally here. She's an artist."

"I am," said Sally. "It says so on my ID card, under 'Gender'. Besides, I dump rutabagas on people and take pictures of the mess. That's a sure sign of an artist."

"Really? I've always wanted to meet a real artist."

"Well now you have."

"I'm a bit of an artist myself, you know."

Sally immediately turned herself into a mute, unseeing, withdrawn totem pole, but it was too late.

"I do oil on black velvet," said the enforcement officer. "I just happen to have some samples with me. Would you care to see?"

"Um," said Sally as the parking enforcement officer waved his black-velvet art in her face.

It was the usual sentimental fluff a rank amateur produces--parking enforcement officers with big eyes and cute smiles etc. There was a parking enforcement officer helping a dragon lady across the street, another one showing some children how to write up tickets, and an officer smiling benevolently as he ticketed a FedEx truck.

"Interesting," said Sally.

"I knew you'd like them. Do you know any agents? Can you get me into a gallery?"

Sally thought for a moment, wrote some names and numbers on a slip of paper and handed it to him.

He bowed and kissed her hand, but his gratitude didn't stop him thinking carefully about whether or not he should make out a parking ticket for the soi-disant work of art.

"I'll let you go this time," he said. "Illegally parked sculptures are a grey area in the law. But I'd advise you to get it out of that crop circle before a flying saucer lands on it."

"I will sir," said D'If. "Thank you."

The parking enforcement officer smiled and rode off into the sunset on his roll of parking tickets, conscious of another good deed done.

Now that D'If was alone with his wrecked saucer again, his color blotches started trembling.

Just then, the owner of the beauty parlor ran out and put a hand on his shoulder.

"There, there, D'Iffie," he said. "I saw the whole thing while I was doing Mrs. Kaxton. Don't let it get you down; you have friends everywhere."

"Doing Mrs. Kaxton?" said Sally.

"Gluing her hair back on--what there is left of it, poor thing. She was one of the last to escape the calamity on Earth; it upset her so much, she traded in her hair for a biographical dictionary. I'm Cosmo, by the way. I own Cosmo's Beauty Salon."

They all introduced themselves. D'If rallied for a moment, but his eyes were drawn

inexorably back to his wrecked flying saucer and he let out a sob.

"There, there, D'Iffie," said Cosmo. "Please don't cry; it makes me think of cute little puppies waiting for someone to adopt them. I'll give you a nice new hairstyle. How's that?"

"Wow!" said Sally. "What a nice offer. Doesn't that make you feel better, D'If."

D'If sniffed. "Thank you," he said, "but I don't have any hair. I'm an alien."

"Now, now! Let's not resort to stereotypes; some aliens do have hair you know."

"Well I don't. At least, not that I know about."

"That is never an insurmountable problem. If you have it, we'll find it. If you don't, we'll conjure up a nice arrangement for you."

Thus it was, everyone trooped over to Cosmo's beauty salon.

Demo looked around with interest; he'd heard quite a lot about beauty parlors but he'd never actually been inside one.

"What are those cone things?" he said.

"Particle accelerators," said Cosmo. "We like to send your hair into the fifth dimension before we work on it. Gives it a nice glow."

"What happens if you can't find any hair?" said D'If.

"Then we send your scalp into the fifth dimension; it always comes back with a nice fluorescence."

"Oh go on, D'Iffie" said Sally. "Get a nice new hairdo and when you come out I'll take a picture of you in a heap of rutabagas."

"But, I feel so useless now! Without a flying saucer I have no job description."

"You don't need your flying saucer; you can get a job here in Tockworld as a lava lamp."

"Or a talk-radio rage-maker," said Demo.

Thus it was Cosmo led D'If to a chair.

Several beautiful ducks converged on him and sang cheerful songs full of hope for the future.

A troll occupying the next three seats winked at him.

"Oh I like you, sweetie; what are you having done to yourself? I just had myself sandblasted and now they're plucking my lichen."

D'If relaxed. He had been working so hard for so long to make sure Gastro had a pleasant first-abduction experience, he was worn-out.

He glowed quietly while Cosmo set to work.

"So how about those Blue Jays?" said Cosmo. "You don't short out in water do you, by the way?"

"Only if it's wet."

"Just then, Allura walked in, trailing a long line of admirers.

Diderot, her special hairdresser, seated her next to D'If.

Allura glanced idly at D'If, thinking he was some new kind of hair dryer. Then she froze as a shock of pure pleasure went through her.

Everyone fell silent. A talk-radio rage-maker yelled an old Elvis Presley number. Allura was tingling all over. She couldn't take her eyes off D'If.

D'If, contrariwise, couldn't take his eyes off Allura.

Allura rose as if in a dream and took his hand.

D'If gasped and turned so many shades of red, everyone was dazzled.

"Do you believe in love at first sight?" said Allura.

"Only with you," said D'If in a gruff voice.

A chorus of celestial beings hovered translucently in the middle distance, glowing like a Canadian Tire sign.

For a single moment in time everyone felt hopeful and magnanimous.

Cosmo turned to his acolyte, Janegore, and motioned to the little kitchen in back where the staff were wont to cook their humble meals.

"Break out the haggis, Janegore," he said. "The good one with the icing sugar. And Some McBowel's Celestial Scotch. This is a special occasion."

D'If and Allura embraced.

Everyone sighed dreamily.

Was this to be the end of war, famine, plague, bullies, telemarketers and spammers?

Meanwhile, Gavin McRust, a notorious scrap dealer, towed the flying saucer to his junkyard.

Jason, his hired troll, eyed it speculatively for a moment, selected a number three sledge hammer, and began bashing away at it.

Bashing away at flying saucers is not a good idea, by the way, even when they're bunged up, smashed, and burnt to a crisp.

It's like opening a box of chocolates. You never know which one is going to bite back.

Neither McRust, nor Jason could see the scorched and dented bottom part of the flying saucer, where a big smile had mysteriously turned into an evil grin.

At the same time, Cosmo stood in front of D'If with a mirror to show him what new magic he had accomplished.

D'If was speechless. For the first time in his life he had hair! And it wasn't just ordinary hair; it was thick, green hair swept up in a tight stalk and branching out like a palm tree.

Everyone oohed and ahhed.

"A lava lamp with green hair!" said Demo. "I knew it! Existentialism works!"

"I love it," said Allura. "It makes me feel nostalgic for a different personality."

D'If embraced Cosmo.

"Maestro!" he said. "I want you to be my personal manager and take over my life for me. I've made a mess out of it."

Cosmo thought about this for a moment or two.

"Well, I have Wednesdays and Mondays free," he said. "I suppose we could work something out."

There was much rejoicing after that.

Everyone trooped out of the salon in a festive mood and gathered in front of Philip Napoleon's clinic to see how he was making out with Gastro, the cow.

Well, actually, to see how he was DOING with the cow.

In fact, Gastro was still attached to a mast, bumping gently against it in the breeze.

Josephine, realizing that this was one patient who'd never fit through the door, had organized an outdoor therapy session, set up bleachers, and was selling tickets, hot dogs and porridge-on-a-stick to a crowd of onlookers.

"Soon I'll be able to buy a new computer," she said. "Then I'll lease it back to Philip."

Gastro mooded.

Philip aimed his megaphone at her and yelled, "How long have you hated milk?"

Demo and Sally held hands. He hadn't felt so young and romantic in years.

The flying saucer, meanwhile, had unaccountably turned into a big rubber duckie.

Jason had a bad feeling about this.....

CHAPTER 142:BATH TIME

McRust and his troll of all trades, Jason, contemplated the big rubber duckie that had once been a clapped-out flying saucer.

It was about the size of a Pickard Trilobite half-ton pickup truck--the popular Farmer Bob model, complete with a model of the Maryland and Pennsylvania Railway in the glove compartment.

Most of the dents and burnt-out areas that had marred the beauty of the flying saucer were gone now, though two scorch marks remained on either side of the duckie's beak.

These signified evil.

"Aww, ain't dat cute!" said Jason. "Look at the itty bitty duckie, boss! Is itty bitty duckie lost in da big bad scrappie wappie yard? Hmmm?"

McRust took a careful step back from Jason. When trolls started talking like two-year-olds, it usually signified a mid-life crisis.

There was always the possibility, of course, that Jason wasn't really having a midlife crisis--he'd simply gone mad.

Madness in a troll is a seismic event, best enjoyed from the surface of another planet if possible.

Jason dropped his sledge hammer and squatted down by the rubber duckie.

McRust could see he was itching to stroke its soft rubber flanks, but the big troll hesitated, afraid his new friend would bite him.

"Does itty bitty duckie go 'squeakie, squeakie, squeakie' in the tubbie wubbie?" he said.

McRust carefully arranged a neutral expression on his face before intervening.

"You'd have to take a bath to find out the answer to that one," he said. "You've never taken a bath in your life."

"Dere's always a first time, boss."

Oh, oh! thought McRust, and he eyed his employee nervously. Obviously Jason had it bad. The last time a real live troll had taken a bath, the only other sentient beings around had been floating on the dark waters in an ark.

And the troll hadn't been given a choice about his bath; it had taken him ages to find a mountain that rose above the flood waters.

He still had a dent in his side from his collision with a big boat that had been chockfull of animals and a quarrelsome family.

Anyway, madness or a midlife crisis in a troll were fearsome things, but they were known quantities, and McRust could deal with.

A troll falling in love with a rubber duckie, however, was a whole new category of funhouse mischief.

Still, McRust had to be nice to the troll because his daughter, Flake, was crazy about him.

McRust had learned a long time ago it was best to give Flake whatever she wanted.

He glanced at his office shack and saw her gazing through the cracked front window at Jason.

She was supposed to be keeping the books. Not that he paid her for it, but there were other expenses. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't convince her that a bowl of McBowel's All-day Porridge was all the food she needed.

And then there was the little matter of her wardrobe!

McRust simply couldn't believe how much motorcycle boots, chains, and leather vests cost. And what about those tiny leather patches that young females had the nerve to call skirts! Shouldn't the cost of an outfit bear some relation to the amount of material involved?

In the fashion world, there WAS a relationship actually, but the fools had got it inverted.

No wonder young girls had so much trouble saving money!

Then there was her makeup!

When McRust found out how much gold he'd have to part with for a lot of teeny tiny tubes of beak gloss and eye shadow, and for a bit of stinky chemical in a perfume bottle, it curdled his noodle and made him think about going into the cosmetics business.

How hard could it be? Get a bunch of flowers, squash them, boil them, pour the mess into tiny bottles that he could make out of melted down auto glass, and rake in the cash.

Hence the lab in the back of his office shack, and the glass factory he'd made himself from a bunch of old Orient Express boxcars fused together.

Unfortunately, Jason wasn't as good at constructing cosmetics as he was at demolishing bits of scrap.

Anyway, Flake was a complete mystery to McRust.

She was a real Goth with her black magic and her leather, and her tattoo of a butterfly net made out of motorcycle chains.

But she wouldn't go to sleep at night without her teddy bear.

And she didn't have the right form factor to convey menace and dangerous edginess. She was too skinny; her bones stuck out in all the wrong places.

She didn't look dangerous in her Goth kit; she looked like a semaphore in a train station.

And yet, her tricks were working because Jason was in love with her.

McRust could tell Jason was in love because the big troll was so bashful around her. There was a crack in the concrete floor where he'd scuffed it with his enormous feet. And the broken office chairs were further testimony to her power over him--Jason always felt weak in the knee boulders when he was near her and had to sit down.

And he made sculptures for her by compressing bits of cars and machines in odd ways, squeezing them in his fists until they twisted and bent into grotesque shapes.

There were tortured bits of metal all over McRust's office.

He supposed it was a window into Jason's soul, but he wasn't sure he liked the view.

Not for the first time he wondered what it would be like to have a troll for a son-in-law.

Not that Jason would be a burden; even as a son-in-law, he wouldn't need wages.

But Flake kept trying to get him to dress up in expensive leather. He'd already torn holes in three sets of black sweaters and three pairs of black pants, so he'd had to settle for dipping burlap in black house paint and wearing it like a sort of toga.

He found the burlap itchy of course, which made him squirm and fidget, and that was dangerous.

On the other hand, McRust wouldn't have to fork out for a house for the newly weds, should they decide to tie the knot. Jason had made his own house out of a couple of old lake freighters he'd dragged onshore.

And the wedding could turn out to be useful.

McRust's accountant, Pharaoh Richard Fingers, had told him he could deduct the cost of the wedding if he used it for business purposes. He could invite his customers and work a few deals on the side.

He'd offer home-made Scotch of course--it was resting now in a big oil drum in his office. The drum looked a little lumpy where the scotch had tried to punch its way out into the open, but it had settled down nicely now and wasn't gurgling anymore.

This was always a good sign when you're making scotch.

He'd have to buy some haggis, but he'd made a deal to trade some old war surplus MIRVs for a quantity of haggis that had gone just a little past its expiry date.

The missiles weren't even his; they belonged to some government somewhere and were supposed to be handed over to a gangster from Mississauga, but the gangster had offended Jason by giving him the finger from the cab of his delivery truck as he drove in to pick up his new toys.

The gangster was now part of an art nouveau collage in the Museum of Strange Things.

As a public service, McRust had taken in the homeless missiles and painted them a nice shade of pink so no one would think they were dangerous.

Anyway, what did a gangster want with missiles?

His story about gluing them all together, making a huge rocket, and wandering about in outer space looking for Elvis had seemed a bit fishy.

So a wedding was in the works; there was no denying young love. Flake was ready and the troll was willing.

I should be a happy duck, thought McRust.

But McRust never allowed himself to be happy; it was too dangerous, it provoked a doom.

People who don't have as much money as they think they should have are never truly happy anyway; someone might come and steal their treasure while they're out getting more.

But, all things considered, he could afford to be generous and offer the rubber duckie to Jason as a token of his good will.

Besides, McRust didn't trust it. Anything that could change its topology at the drop of a hat was sure to upset his clients. Besides, he was curious now. He wanted to know if Jason's itty bitty wubber duckie squeaked in the tubbie.

He also wanted to know where exactly the troll planned on taking his first bath.

Jason led him to an old vat rescued from a petrochemical firm that had mysteriously gone out of business.

Dere it is, boss," said Jason. "Da mudder of all bath tubs."

This drew Flake out of the office; young lovers are always fascinated when they discover some new mystery in the object of their desire.

"You're going to take a bath?" she squawked. "In real water?"

"Wid my wubber duckie. Ain't she cute!"

Flake wrinkled her nose. "It sucks! Paint it black!"

Jason grinned at her and went behind an Orient Express box car to change into his swimming costume.

His swimming trunks were black burlap, of course.

Then he yelled, "SUNNY DAYS!" and plunged into the vat.

There was a loud bonk.

And a plaintive cry: "Hey, my new bath tub doesn't work, boss."

"You're supposed to fill it with water, dummy," said Flake.

"Isn't she smart, boss!" yelled Jason. "I really love her!"

Flake made a face to show that she was tough and cynical, but inwardly she glowed.

Then she fetched a high pressure fire hose and sent a powerful jet of water into the vat.

In not time at all, Jason found himself floating with his new pal in the middle of a lot of turbid water.

Well, not floating actually. Rocks have a lot of trouble floating. But he pretended.

"How much is that doggie in the window?" he boomed, because even trolls like to sing in the bathtub.

The rubber duckie screamed.

Evil, even the Power of Durable Evil, doesn't like to be washed.

The troll squeezed it affectionately, and it fell silent.

Meanwhile, in the Fabulous Mists of Antiquity, the matrix waxed wrathful.

The rubber duckie was little more than a spectral version of itself, a temporary image floating in a vat with a troll.

Still, it didn't like being washed.

No one likes to be forced to take baths.

The matrix locked onto the troll and ruminated on a ghastly revenge.

Flake had a bad feeling about this...

CHAPTER 143:ALIEN TRAFFIC JAMS

The aliens were restless. For one thing, there were too many of them drifting around Tockworld, and air traffic control was having a devil of a time keeping them from bashing into each other.

Several had already crashed into crop circles. Others were squabbling over who had the right to abduct which victims.

Others, like Wiggy and Bagless, weren't having much fun.

Actually, Wiggy and Bagless were still engaged in their fruitless quest for Weather Woman.

There were plenty of females eager to try out for the role, but so far, not one of them managed to fit into the trademarked Spandex suit.

"Maybe we should broaden our search category," said Wiggy.

"Considering it already includes anyone on Tockworld who'd like to try out for the part, I

don't see much room to maneuver," said Bagless.

"We could inflate our way to success," said Big Aesop.

"You mean ask the Treasury Board to print more money?" said Wiggy. "I don't see how that would help us."

"Money ALWAYS helps," said Big Aesop, and Brucie growled his assent. "But I was thinking we could make a deal with an Eliminate outfit. The publicity would draw in lots more candidates."

Wiggy and Bagless were silent for a moment; then they whispered among themselves.

"This is getting out of hand," said Wiggy. "We're supposed to be trying to blend in so no one notices us. Now he wants us to go on TV in front of millions! How is that fitting in?"

"Hey, it's what people on this planet do!" said Big Aesop. "They go on TV and make fools out of themselves. You'll be one of the guys. Well, TWO of the guys."

Wiggy and Bagless considered.

"The whole point is to blend in so we can track Allura without being spotted," said Wiggy.

"But if we go on TV we'll meet lots of babes," said Bagless.

"And what exactly will we do with them, Bagless?" said Wiggy. "We're aliens."

"Well, ummm--"

"I can help you with that, if it's a problem," said Big Aesop.

The air turned blue with intense concentration. There was a certain amount of irritable rustling.

Meanwhile, yet another gang of aliens blundered through a time door and got lost over a desert.

"We're not in Toronto anymore, Dorothy!" said Arby, their leader.

"Where exactly are we?" said Zoning Laws, his acolyte.

But Arby didn't answer right away; he'd spotted something in the viewer.

"Look, look; see, see!" he said. "There's a city overlooking a sheep!"

"Really!" said Zoning Laws in a dry voice. "Well then, we'd better have a look, sir."

The aliens descended through a cloud bank, narrowly missing a platypus, and peered down at a lot of camels.

"Those are the famous Camels of the Negev," said Zoning Laws, growing interested. "They're supposed to be building a great nation."

"They don't look very busy to me," said Arby.

"That's because they're having an argument."

The flying saucer drifted right over the city of Bucket.

Then Zoning Laws adjusted the set and piped the audio feed through their sound system.

Just then, an earthquake destroyed Bucket, collapsing all of its buildings, destroying its big wall and knocking over its sheep.

The Camels of the Negev, accustomed as they were to famines, plagues, wars and other disasters, recovered quickly and looked around in the dust and ashes.

Everyone else, including NimHaHa, and Kilroy, lay in stunned disbelief, wondering at the fickleness of fate.

"Psst, Hank!" whispered Thunderbags. "Now's our chance."

"For what?" said Hank.

"The city fell apart. Obviously the Supreme Being did it to help us with our great mission. So what we do now is we take over, install you on the throne, and proclaim a theocracy."

"Oh great!" said Brubaker. "Just when we find a place where we can rest for awhile and maybe take in a little entertainment while the skin grows back on our feet, it falls apart. And then the priests want to take over the ruins and make us all toil for the sweat of our brows!"

Hank glanced around at the various ruins.

"This is a mess," he said.

"Granted, it's a bit of a handyman's special," said Thunderbags. "But we can fix it up."

Besides, you told us SB wants us to build a great nation."

Hank sighed. It was true enough; the Supreme Being really did want the camels to build a great nation. But it would have been so much easier simply to buy real estate and move in.

"Okay," he said. "We'll start rebuilding at once. The first thing we should do is straighten out the sheep."

Thunderbags rubbed his hands and gloated. "All right, lissen up everybody," he said. "We're going to need mud bricks. Lots and lots of mud bricks. But first, we'll have a nice reading from the Words, and I'll offer some stirring commentary to make us all feel better."

There was a lot of muttering, but Thunderbags ignored it, climbing up onto a mound of bricks to make himself heard.

"Ahem," he said.

And then the aliens abducted him.

At the same time, but in a different century, Neville and his chums were growing nervous.

"So according to your theory," said Digger, "Mr. Clack will turn us all into machines unless we do something quickly."

"Edwardian is the key," said Merlin. "Mr. Clack can do nothing without him."

"But we've already lost Edwardian," said Neville. "He's gone over to the machines."

"Only in matters of the flesh," said Chester.

"Ha! You call a wireless THING a matter of the flesh!" said Digger.

"Stop your bickering!" said Merlin. "This is Mr. Clack's evil influence. We're already arguing among ourselves. Next thing you know, we'll be duking it out on Elimidate to see who gets the, umm...."

"How long have you been watching Elimidate, Merlin?" said Gracie.

"I haven't been watching it," Merlin said crabbily "I've been STUDYING it. For my research."

"That's a new one," said Digger. "It used to be, 'But Mom, I just read it for the ARTICLES! I didn't even see those pictures!'"

"I'm afraid we have no choice," said Merlin crabbily. "We'll have to summon Edwardian's aunts."

"How many aunts has Edwardian got anyway?" said Digger. "There should be a limit."

"He has an inexhaustible supply," said Neville. "One for each moral dilemma."

"That's just like a capitalist, aunt-hoarding poet!" muttered Digger. "Never a thought for the rest of us, who might enjoy having an aunt or two to brighten up an otherwise dreary existence fighting off monopolists and plutocrats!"

"I hardly think an aunt dressed up in leather and motorcycle boots is deeply interested in subtle moral dilemmas," said Chester.

"Maybe she's doing research," said Neville.

"Reading the articles," said Merlin.

"Well if she doesn't have any morals, what does she need a bowel for?" said Sweet Gas. "She should pass it on to those of us who lead pure and virtuous lives."

Everyone looked at Sweet Gas for awhile.

Sweet Gas turned igneous. "What are you looking at me for!" he said. "I have feelings too, you know! I'd be very good to a bowel if I had one. I wouldn't overload it with sugary breakfast cereals and gobs of indigestible porridge!"

"Children, children; we need to put an end to this," said Neville. "Some of us are cracking under the stress."

"Some of us want to get back to the revolution," said Digger. "Can't you work up a collective spell, Merlin?" said Chester. "Summon them all at once?"

"That could be dangerous," said Merlin. "We don't know if they'd get along. They might start bashing each other."

"Don't be ridiculous!" said Neville. "They're Victorian, aren't they! Play up, play up, play the game! Or are they Edwardian?"

"Well it depends which calendar you use," said Merlin.

"I use the same one everybody else uses," said Neville. "It's got little squares for the days, and each month there's a new picture of a scantily, um, of a famous academic."

"Oh, so!" said Merlin. "Pure and virtuous are we! Read the articles, do we?"

"I never said I was Charlton Noblebrow."

"Who's the babe this month?" said Digger, smirking.

"Gloria Glam, Chancellor of the University of Strange Thoughts," said Neville frostily. "She's holding the official university platypus, and she's wearing her spam-blocker hat."

"Anyway, we have to FIND Edwardian's aunts before we can summon them," said Merlin. "It's a line-of-sight spell."

"So how do we find them?" said Neville.

"We'll need bait," said Merlin, looking at Edwardian.

There was a silence while everyone contemplated the hapless Edwardian.

Meanwhile, in another part of the madhouse, Allura was confused.

There were two personalities fighting for dominance in her mind. One of them was the Manchurian Canard, the sinister product of forces unknown to her.

The other one was confused and lonely.

The lonely personality looked down at D'If and saw a handsome prince who could take her away to a confectionary castle where they would smooch ever after, and take long walks in the evening light.

The Manchurian Canard looked down at D'If and saw a lava lamp with a palm tree growing out of its top.

Allura fought a brave battle against the bitter influence of the Manchurian duck, but she paid a heavy price for her resistance.

Soon her infatuation began to ebb.

I never liked lava lamps anyway, she thought. They're just a fad.

For his part, D'If was having second thoughts about Allura. Now that he had a palm tree growing out of his top, he felt special. In fact, he felt like a star.

And Allura was not someone a star would go out with.

He turned to Cosmo, his new personal manager.

"I'm thinking of doing a movie," he said.

"I'm way ahead of you, baby," said Cosmo. "I've got a script, a director, a producer, gullible investors, and a lot of desperate actors."

D'If was pleased. Subtly, his hand slipped away from Allura's. It didn't go back again.

Oh fickle, fickle is the love that trickles out of the stony hearts of post-modern creatures!

Meanwhile, Philip was beginning to enjoy giving outdoor therapy.

The crowd was growing, nicely filling the portable bleachers. Josephine was doing a good business selling various unusual substances. Every so often she'd take a break to attack the office computer with a sledge hammer, just in case another Macrohard Angst logo appeared on the cracked screen.

Philip yelled into his megaphone: "How do you feel about your sibling rivalries?"

Gastro bumped gently against her mooring mast.

"They hate me," she said. "They joined a commune and now they only give soy milk."

The crowd cheered.

Two temporary employees erected an enormous digital sign that said:

Match today. Philip Napoleon vs the Inflatable Cow From Outer Space, aka Gastrono.
Philip 0, Gastro 1.

The crowd had begun taking bets.

Philip looked at the score and ground his beak.

"How long have you been an alien?" he said.

An announcer, huddled tensely over his microphone and commenced his patter: "Point for Philip Napoleon! The advantage is moving rapidly back and forth in this deadly game of Who's Got the Analyst? The question on the back of everybody's tonsil is--will Philip bring in

a ringer, or will he cheat again?"

Philip bowed to the cheering crowd.

Gastro turned gently in the wind.

"I've always wanted to be an alien," she said. "Most people on my planet are."

"Do you feel you were an outsider before you became an alien?"

"I'm sorry; I can't hear you."

Philip tried again, but no sound issued from his megaphone. The crowd grew restive and began lighting flaming torches.

Josephine climbed up onto the dais and checked the megaphone.

"It failed to load a vital system file," she said. "I'll defrag it and reboot."

Then she bashed it a good one with her sledgehammer.

Philip tried again, but no joy.

"Relax," said a passing tech support guy, and he rigged up an Internet-enabled milking machine with a wireless connection.

Philip spoke into a microphone attached to one of the milking cups.

"Is that better?" he said.

"MOOOO!" said Gastro.

Philip gave a little squawk and covered his ears. "I can hear you just fine," he said.

"There's no need to bellow."

"As long as I'm in therapy, do you mind if I give people rides?" said Gastro.

"Multitasking," said Josephine. "Good idea. We could use the extra income."

Josephine erected a ticket booth, cash register, credit card machine and hired a troll to keep order.

A passing elf did up a nice sign that said, Take a ride on Tockworld's only Zeppelin Cow. Then he built a balloon basket, attached a small motor, and rigged steering ropes.

Soon a line formed. Everyone wanted a ride on the Zeppelin cow.

Allura, having nothing better to do, took the controls.

"Feed her McBowel's Inflammable Porridge when you want to go up," said the industrious elf. "Restate your profits when you want to go down."

Thus it was, a cheering party of thrill-seekers raised their arms high over their heads as Gastro chewed her porridge and rose higher into the air.

Then she passed a prodigious amount of gas.

"Run away, run away; we're doomed!" yelled the crowd.

"There's no need to panic," said Allura. "That was a feature. We're drifting down to a nice soft landing now."

But there was, in fact, reason to panic if you happened to be seated in the 747 approaching from the East. It was flying very close to the ground because the pilot was having a midlife crisis.

"Is this a cow I see before me?" he said.

"We're going to smash into it!" yelled a flight attendant. "Turn to starboard!"

"Why not port?" said the pilot. "I hardly ever turn to port anymore."

The gob of porridge shot straight up through the fuselage and ripped through a toilet just as a passenger was about to take his rightful place on the throne.

The passenger stormed out in a fury.

"That was the fifth time I've been assaulted by flying gobs of porridge in an airline toilet," he yelled. "I've had it! I've been constipated for a year now!"

"You can't sue us for that, sir," said the flight attendant.

Meanwhile, Gastro floated down to the ground.

"How long have you been lactose intolerant?" said Philip.

"Every since my dad ran off with an armadillo," said Gastro.

There was a burst of wild cheering. Josephine motioned everyone to silence with a cattle prod.

"An armadillo?" said Philip. "That explains everything."

"Mine's bigger than hers," said Demo, and he showed everyone his armadillo.

"Oh you!" said Sally. "Girls don't care how big a man's armadillo is. That's just an urban myth!"

Just then, Freddy Manichean Heresy hacked into the remains of Philip's computer and discovered his patient records.

Josephine had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 144:THUNDERBAGS'S TEMPTATION

Thunderbags had never been abducted by aliens before; he had no idea what to expect.

In fact, when he saw the alien he was a little disappointed--he'd been hoping for an electrifying communion with the Supreme Being, involving fire, thunder and lightning, and a few simple commands that would help him get over a pesky writer's block so he could prepare next week's sermon.

Or at the very least, he wanted a powerful demon who would torment him with all sorts of visions in a spectacular test of his fidelity to SB.

When you're an experienced priest, the shepherd of a flock as difficult and querulous as the Camels of the Negev, the impossible becomes routine, and you look forward to a new challenge now and again.

But the creature gazing balefully at him from its odd looking throne was about as sinister as a rutabaga. In fact, it was a sort of gigantic thistle.

"How do you do, Cecil," it said. "My name is Gordo. I'm an alien from the planet GearTop. I hope you enjoy your abduction; I've gone to a lot of trouble to make it a pleasant experience."

Thunderbags was silent for a moment, giving himself time to get over his shock.

None of the camels knew his middle name--it was a closely guarded secret. If it ever got out, he'd lose so much face, he'd never be able to terrify another flock.

Who would tremble in fear before a priest named Cecil?

Not for the first time he cursed his father's carelessness. What kind of fool would name his son after a mysterious stranger he'd found grubbing around in the midden, looking for artifacts.

"I don't use Cecil," he said. "My friends call me Thunderbags. It's less formal."

"Good. You can call me Gordo."

Thunderbags peered around suspiciously. This was definitely a new experience, but he wasn't sure what category it fitted into.

Obviously there was nothing immortal here; he felt none of the fear that, according to the famous Rudolf Otto, characterized a chat session with the notorious mysterium tremendum.

It was more like a vague discontent that could go either way.

Anyway, Thunderbags wasn't given to fear. You don't spend years and years wandering in the desert at the behest of the Supreme Being without developing a thick skin and an immunity to nasty surprises.

After all, life is a test. If you pass, you die.

The good guys get to hang out with the cartoonists on fleecy clouds, wisecracking about the poor, struggling wretches below.

The bad guys get all the press.

"I'm so glad you got my invitation," said Gordo.

Thunderbags decided to give the numinous one last chance to show up. He squinted hopefully at the thistle, wondering if you had to look at it in a special way to decipher the fearsome being behind the ridiculous outward form.

But the more he squinted, the more it remained the same.

Surely he deserved more than a child's fantasy!

"Are you a messenger from the Supreme Being?" he said.

"SB?" said Gordo. "Great Zippity; I'm just an alien!"

"You're not one of the major demons--Spammer, Telemarketer, Spin Doctor?"

"Hopping hormones, no!"

The alien shuddered, which involved quite a lot of rustling of leaves.

"Filthy things, spammer demons!" he said. "They make you think you're much too small to please the ladies, and when they've got you writhing in torment and humiliation, they sell you pills to make you larger."

"They do?" said Thunderbags.

"Oh yes." Gordo leaned closer and whispered. "I tried some once, you know. A vial of Long Toms."

"Really? You have a... part of your anatomy that can grow larger?"

"Of course," Gordo said proudly. "Mine is retractable, you know."

"Did the pills work? I always wondered."

"Sadly, no. It didn't get any bigger; it merely hallucinated."

"You had visions?" said Thunderbags enviously. "You went mad?"

"Not me. My thing."

Thunderbags was speechless for a second.

"Really? THAT hallucinated? Can such things be?"

"They do have a mind of their own, Cecil."

Thunderbags was so amazed, he hardly even noticed the improper use of his middle name.

"But--" he said.

"You never know when they're going to interrupt your train of thought," said Gordo. "You might be enjoying yourself with some math homework, for instance, when all of a sudden, out of the blue, your thing forces you to eyeball a hot bundle of thistles."

Thunderbags nodded.

"There's truth in what you say," he said. "If you relax your vigilance even for a moment, your thing takes possession of you and sweeps away all thought, all virtue, all restraint."

"Tell me about it!" said Gordo. "It always happens at inconvenient times, too."

Thunderbags nodded. "It happened to me once, a long time ago, while I was giving a sermon on the dangers of backsliding."

"An excellent topic, Cecil," said Gordo. "I hope it wasn't too upsetting."

"Oh it was, Gordo!" said Thunderbags, warming to his new chum. "It was a terrible experience. And to think, I was in peak form that day."

"The horror!" said Gordo.

"We had just been flash-roasted by a volcano, you see. I was explaining to the camels that SB was punishing us with fire and ash because we were drifting away, spending too much time watching the fertility rites at the ziggurat."

"Shocking!" said Gordo. "I've always said that fertility should be practiced only in the privacy of your own flying saucer, in darkness, under the blankets."

"I couldn't agree more," said Thunderbags. "I told the camels--the devil loves display and artifice and if you go wanking about in a fertility rite, you'll stick out like a lightning rod."

"Oh my gosh! You don't mean it!"

"Yes!" said Thunderbags. "Like an iron bar sticking out of a copper pot filled with water, just waiting for a passing thunder cloud."

"Oooh. Pain!"

"I had my congregation spellbound."

"I'll bet."

"Every male was fidgeting with anxiety. They were all waiting eagerly for my next words."

"And then?"

"The devil chose that moment, that precise moment, to tempt me."

"Oh no!"

"Yes! In that very moment, I spotted --my THING, that is, spotted a particularly exuberant female camel and fixated on her humps."

"Great Dibblewinkers!"

"Precisely! I waxed wrathful, of course. 'Thing !' I said--inwardly, of course--'I am a shepherd to my people, second only to Hank. Do not try to lead me astray.'"

"This worked?"

"The more I resisted the more rebellious it grew, filling my mind with fiery imaginings. Soon I was aware of nothing but those two great protuberances. The words of my sermon blew aimlessly about the corridors of my mind like chaff in a polling booth. The congregation faded. I was alone with my treacherous thing and the fever-image of humps of doom on a storm-tossed sea of lust. Great bolts of lightning hissed down like desire incarnate. Oh it was terrible!"

"You succumbed?" said Gordo eagerly.

"I did not, Gordo, though it was a close-fought battle. Those humps burned like pitch in my brain. It was agony. I summoned every fiber of moral strength left to me. I read the famous chapter in Samuelson on goods and services in the modern economy. I recited the principle exports of Lagash."

"Gosh."

"And still the humps of doom burned like the sun in my mind, blinding me. Never have I yearned so mightily, never have I been so desperate. I tell you, Gordo, the Devil has powers we can only imagine."

"And then?" said Gordo impatiently.

"And then, my friend, with my last ounce of strength, I finished my sermon. 'We have been given a task,' I told my people. 'We are only mortals; we must do the best we can, for without SB we shall perish; we shall drown in the inchoate waters of our own minds.'"

"Inchoate," said Gordo. "They understood this?"

"I invited them to embrace one another," said Thunderbags ignoring Gordo's attempt at literary criticism. "All eyes were on me. They knew something unusual had happened. It was a break in the routine--the great Thunderbags was struggling. Even Hank was silent and thoughtful. Everyone could see that their beloved Thunderbags was in torment."

"Beloved?"

"Well, respected. As soon as I could get away, I walked out into the desert and wandered, lonely as a cloud, waiting for the torment to cease. I was possessed by lust; I could see humps everywhere--in every hillock, in every hollow, in every cactus...."

"Oooh, that would smart!"

"Never had I felt so far away from SB, so alone. I knew that I must soon find a way to thwart the demon or drown in lakes of blood. There was only one thing for it; I'd have to gouge a new channel through my fragile mortal clay to irrigate my desiccated being with good and constructive desire for a camel of virtue."

"Gosh, all by yourself, or did you let out contracts?"

"A vision came to me. I saw Mona Lipwick, the camel I'd been meeting for study sessions in the Tent of Virtue. I admired her; in fact, I LIKED her. She understood the problems I faced, the loneliness of the shepherd who watches over his flock and roots out evil. I wanted to marry her, but I was too shy to ask her. Besides, I had no idea how many sheep her dad would demand in payment."

"YOU--shy!" snorted Gordo. "The great Thunderbags!"

Thunderbags looked modestly down at his feet. "She was so powerful!" he said. "She was Sari's best friend. Those two were the real force behind the throne, you know. In fact, they still are. They're the ones who keep the community functioning. Hank leads us and I explain to the flock about SB and the Ten Thousand Food Rules, but Mona and Sari make sure there's an infrastructure and food on the table and the young ones are educated and

the families don't kill each other."

"Good people to know," said Gordo.

"Indeed. Anyway, I stood in the shadow of Mona's tent, my mind ablaze. She took one look at me and knew immediately what the problem was."

"She assuaged your thirst?"

Thunderbags shook his head. "She dumped an amphora of freezing cold water over me, drenching me from head to foot."

"This cured you?"

"No. The water merely evaporated in a cloud of steam. When Mona saw this, she put her hands on her hips and said to me: 'If we are to live together in matrimony, I want you to stop wandering off into the desert and having visions.'"

"And then?"

"She sent me away to prepare for the wedding. I departed, still burning with desire, and did the things that were expected of me. Mona and Sari took care of the rest. For the allocated time I burned and flamed in agony, but at least it was all in a good cause; I had forgotten the humps of doom; now it was only Mona."

"And then?"

"The appointed time came. Somehow I got through the ceremonies, and then of course, I discovered that even mortals have their pleasures."

Gordo waited for more, but none was forthcoming. Hiding his disappointment, he said, "And the moral is?"

"The moral is: Our appendages have minds of their own, but we are greater than the sum of our parts."

Gordo was ecstatic.

"I'm so impressed! I want to join your tribe and learn how to suffer. Do you take aliens?"

"Of course. Anyone may join."

"I can hardly wait! Is there an initiation?"

"Not as such. You have to learn the Ten Thousand Food Rules. Oh, and there is one other little thing."

"A little thing?"

"The unkindest cut of all, some call it."

"Cut?" Gordo looked around nervously for hidden knives. "I've heard about that..umm....."

"We should never let material things direct our thoughts," said Thunderbags.

Several of Gordo's leaf-like appendages dropped protectively down. "You're not taking that!" he said. "I need it."

"It's only a little thing--just the flap."

"Speak for yourself. Mine is quite large. And I need every inch I can get. The ladies say it doesn't matter, but...."

"You can put little toques on it," said Thunderbags. "And you can put banner ads on the toques."

"Who would notice?"

"Security people, with their scanner machines."

"I don't think so," said Gordo.

"This is part of the contract, Gordo. We don't solicit recruits. People have to really WANT to join."

"I need to think about this."

Thus it was, Thunderbags found himself unceremoniously dumped into the ruins of Bucket.

He made his way to his tent, his mind strangely inflamed.

Tents, by the way, were largely unaffected by the earthquake that had wrecked Bucket, because they were virtuous dwellings.

There is another theory, of course. The camels having experienced various forms of

catastrophe, had learned how to construct their tents so that they swayed like willows when the ground shook.

"Mona?" said Thunderbags.

Mona waved irritably to him. She was in the middle of an argument with a politician who wanted to cut the school budget.

"Over here," she said. "What do you want?"

Thunderbags cleared everyone out of the tent and closed the flap.

"What are you doing?" said Mona. "I wasn't finished yelling at him."

Thunderbags turned to her and she saw the look in his eyes.

"Oho!" she said in a different tone of voice.

Some stories have happy endings.

The alien watched enviously for a time, then logged onto an Intergalactic dating service.

While he was looking for his credit card, another alien abducted him.

Hank had a bad feeling about this...

CHAPTER 145:SHIFTY PETE'S UFO REPAIRS

Big Aesop had worked up a new TV show; it was called 'Date My Suit', and it featured a weekly assortment of females competing to see who could fit into a trademarked Spandex Weather Woman suit.

Big Aesop, a kindly chap who only sold arms to countries that really needed them, had agreed to cheer up any flagging contestants by smooching with them.

Ratings were good, but his backers, Wiggy and Bagless, were beginning to fret.

"I'm getting homesick," said Wiggy. "These people have far too many television channels for their own good. And the things they watch!"

"Tell me about it, boss," said Bagless. "Did you see 'Catch and Release'--the one where there's a contest to see how many times you can cheat on your spouse before you get served with divorce papers?"

"And the one about the leper colony," said Wiggy. "Don't forget that."

Bagless rolled his eyes. "Was that a fashion show or an ad for something?"

"And the radio talk shows," said Wiggy.

"Oh yeah--did you hear the one where the callers describe what they they'd like to do to people they hate?"

"And they hate so many people, Bagless! This is no place for aliens!"

"You said it, boss! I don't even want us to blend in anymore; We might not be able to blend OUT again."

"I was ready to go along with Big Aesop up to a certain point, but this new show of his is going too far."

"Luring innocent females into a Spandex suit is a bit much," said Bagless.

"Whatever. Anyway, I really don't like the idea of dating complete strangers, especially on TV. What if they're only in it for the Spandex Weather Woman suit? What if they don't care about US?"

"People are so selfish these days," said Bagless dryly.

"I'm getting a funny feeling about Big Aesop," said Wiggy.

"I've had a funny feeling ever since we got out of the flying saucer," said Bagless. "I mean, we're aliens, for Pete's sake! Why wasn't there a welcoming committee when we showed up? And why didn't we get any of those nice, flowery Hawaiian wreathes that people on TV always get?"

"There were no crowds because we were in stealth mode," said Wiggy. "Our job is to blend in; remember?"

"If we're in stealth mode, we shouldn't be paying some extortionist parking lot attendant for extra spaces just to park our flying saucer."

"He only saw us because he was specially trained to spot aliens," said Wiggy. "Don't you remember the video on UFO's he was watching?"

"The fake one?"

"We can't be sure it was a fake," said Wiggy. "I heard the aliens from the Alien Planet talking about this place. Anyway, I think Big Aesop is using US. He's enjoying the quest for Weather Woman too much."

"It's a good thing ONE of us is," grumbled Bagless. "After you've seen one female struggling in and out of that ridiculous costume, you've seen them all."

"Yes, yes. Anyway, Big Aesop makes me nervous. For one thing, he's too big. No one should be allowed to get that large and still have a brain."

"You lost me there. He has a brain?"

"And the werewolf is a bit of a problem."

"I was thinking of dumping about sixteen tons of silver on its head."

"All in all, I've decided it's time for a change in plans," said Wiggy. "Instead of trying to fit in, we should just take off and then come back, but this time more impressively. We should scare these people and then go and abduct Allura."

"What? Again?" said Bagless. "Isn't that a bit excessive?"

"This time, we'll brainwash her instead of just installing the Manchurian Canard personality and waiting for it to execute."

"You can't brainwash a person if you don't know what it's for!" said Bagless. "We have no idea what's in the Manchurian Canard personality. We don't know what it's supposed to do."

"We'll make something up," said Wiggy. "How hard can it be?"

"Such as?" said Bagless nervously. He knew what 'how hard can it be?' meant; he'd been an acolyte for a long time.

"We'll persuade her to steal patented DNA from research institutions and we'll use it to make a fifty-foot spammer," said Wiggy. "That'll distract everyone while we accomplish our mission."

"And you think she'll go along with this? You know how aggressive she is!"

"Hmm. Yes. We might suffer some casualties."

"Casualties can be important when there are only two of you," Bagless said.

"Hmm."

"I vote we drop the whole thing, go back home, and procreate. You can't go wrong with procreation. It makes us happy and it makes more of us."

"We need to think about this," said Wiggy.

Before he could switch applications, however, the studio lights went up, and lots of people with clipboards began milling about, looking significant.

Big Aesop grinned into the cameras from a hot tub. On either side of him were a number of smiling females. Teleprompts showed them the amounts they were winning, in Euros and in Gazabian Rundlebongs.

"I still don't get what the hot tub is for," said Wiggy.

"Preliminary round," said Big Aesop. "It saves time."

"Are you sure this makes sense?" said Bagless.

"Clean bodies, clean minds," said Big Aesop. Then he began smooching with the candidates.

Wiggy was disgusted. "That does it; we're leaving," he said.

Big Aesop didn't even notice them stalking out of the moral abyss.

"So we're through trying to fit in, are we?" said Bagless hopefully. "What about Allura?"

"We'll try something else," said Wiggy. "Anyway, why wouldn't aliens fit in here? Everyone else does! All you have to do is pay taxes and you're in like flint."

They took a cab back to their flying saucer and rushed inside.

Wiggy jabbed the starter button, impatient to get away from this madhouse.

There was a whine, and then an ominous beeping sound.

"Oh, oh," said Bagless. "We're in trouble now."

"What kind of trouble?" said Wiggy suspiciously. "Didn't you take it in for a tune-up last week?"

"Of course," said Bagless, showing him a bill from Detroit Auto Body and Flying Saucer Repairs.

"Ten thousand rutabagas for an oil change, new filter, a sixty-point check, wheel balancing, and a special new chamois for cleaning the windows?" said Wiggy. "This is outrageous!"

"They sell prescription drugs too," said Bagless. "They have to cover the cost of research and development."

"Hmm. Was this outfit in the list of approved repair shops?"

"Right at the top, captain; near the Acme Corporation. It even has a web log."

"Everyone has a blog, Bagless."

"But this is a good one. All of the mechanics contribute interesting comments on what they deduce about the owners from the condition of their vehicles and the junk they find under the seats. Universal Studios optioned it last year."

"Hmm."

"There's even an entry about us; they think we do strange things with vegetables."

Wiggy was scandalized. "I've never met any vegetables and I certainly don't intend to start up with them at my time of life."

He tried the starter button again. This time the engine caught, and they lifted off, taking the upper levels of the garage with them.

As they were passing through the upper atmosphere, however, the clunking sound returned.

"Did you hear that, Bagless?"

"It's okay; it's just warming up."

"No it isn't; it's turning into a zombie."

This was followed by a high-pitched keening noise and yet more clunking.

Wiggy panicked and reversed course, homing in on the nearest repair shop, which happened to be Shifty Pete's Marina, on Lake Muskosaurus.

Shifty Pete, a paunchy chap in an orange jacket, eyed the rich foreigners as they climbed down from their steed.

"Do you repair flying saucers?" said Wiggy.

Shifty Pete cocked a thumb at a squat, oil-smirched duck who looked a bit like a fire hydrant with a beak and feathers.

"My acolyte, Cracked Block, does the fixing," he said.

The feathered fire hydrant shifted a sledge hammer from one hand to the other and grinned at them.

"We'll have it ready in a jiffy," said Shifty Pete. "There's coffee and McBowel's Recent Scotch in the office, or you can take a stroll on the dock and rent a canoe. All of our canoes are old and placid, just right for novices."

"There aren't any beavers in them, are there?" said Bagless suspiciously.

"We'll load 'em up with whatever suits you," said Shifty Pete. "Paddles are extra, by the way."

"You've worked on flying saucers before, have you?" said Wiggy.

Cracked Block grinned.

"How hard can it be?" said Shifty Pete. "I figure it's gotta be like a yacht. There's a hull and a big motor; the rest is just special effects."

Wiggy was getting nervous, but he agreed to let Cracked Block have a crack at it.

Shifty Pete wiped a couple of chipped Blue Jays mugs on a bit of rag sticking out of his shirt pocket, and poured coffee for his new clients.

"That'll be five dollars a cup," he said. "It's a special blend."

Bagless eyed the pipe that led from the coffee pot to a drain pipe below a hoist and

declined the offer.

Wiggy, who was less observant, took a sip and had a near-death experience.

Then he watched as Cracked Block drove their flying saucer onto a hoist and raised it up.

"Why is your acolyte hammering our flying saucer with a sledge hammer?" he demanded

"Probably one of the bolts is stuck," said Shifty Pete. "It happens."

"And that drill?"

"It aerates the hull. You don't want an explosion from trapped gas, do you?"

Wiggy was about to complain about something else when Shifty Pete patted him on the head with a grease-stained hand.

"Listen, this might take a few days. Why don't you fellas go into town and have some fun. That way you'll be nice and relaxed when you get my bill."

There was nothing for it but to comply.

The nearest town, of course, was Bracebridge, where the gods retire when their worshippers stop believing in them and cut back on sacrifices.

The local cinema was having a special, three-day Godzilla festival, featuring all of the golden oldies.

Bagless had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 146:ALIEN LOVE SONGS

The Godzilla festival was jammed.

Retired gods and goddesses had poured in from cottages all around Lake Muskosaurus.

The immortals, as you know, have a lot of time on their hands--cottage country has been declared a smite-free zone by the Ontario government, and the Geneva Convention bars mischievous calamity-making by any retired god or goddess, no matter what the provocation.

The local mortals are quite capable of creating havoc on their own, using nothing but beer, rock music, and barbecues.

Anyway, when you're a bored god or goddess with no outlet for your natural destructive qualities, and you're fed up with horseshoes, canoeing, pottery tours and toga parties, a Godzilla festival can be very appealing.

The theatre was jammed and noisy.

Wiggy and Bagless eventually found seats near the front, just behind Odin, Thor, Elvis Presley and Cardinal Richelieu.

It wasn't a very pleasant experience. The immortals are a talkative crew, and bold indeed is the chap willing to ask for 'a little quiet, please'.

Geneva Convention or not, there were a number of charred seats in the theatre, marking spots where someone not in the know had tapped a god on the shoulder and asked him to put a sock in it.

The Underworld was doing a booming business that day; the gods tend to take things literally.

And there was a small crater at the back, where someone's cell phone had gone off right behind Vulcan. It's never wise to startle Vulcan when he's using one of his thunderbolts to heat up a cold cup of coffee.

Anyway, there was quite a lot of chatter, which only increased when the first movie began.

"Look, is that Perry Mason?" someone yelled.

"Can such things be?" someone else yelled.

"Oh look at Godzilla, Venus! Isn't he cute! I wonder if all of his appendages are

proportionately large."

"Don't be silly, Aphrodite; he's just a fictional creature with no basis in reality."

"So? Isn't everyone?"

The constant chatter made Wiggy grind his teeth, but he knew better than to complain about the immortals. The moment you landed on a planet, you came under the influence of local theologians, and had to be careful not to offend any resident gods and goddesses.

You only need to be smited once to learn proper manners.

Wiggy fretted and muttered to himself and had nearly decided to leave when two of the local female mortals showed up. One sat beside him and one crossed over to sit beside Bagless.

The female on Wiggy's side eyed him with great interest, then settled down to watch the movie and whisper to the other one.

Wiggy shyly ignored her, but out of the corner of his eye he noticed that she had a fine head of red feathers, and a good-sized yellow bill.

He felt an odd stirring in various fronds and tendrils, but he put it down to home sickness.

During the scariest part of the movie, when it looked like Godzilla was going to die, Wiggy felt a hand clutch at his arm and squeeze.

"Sorry," said the female. "I was so scared! My name is Bella, by the way. That's Donna over there."

This time Wiggy looked right at her and his heart went pit-a-pat. Various elements of his corporeal frame thrummed and twanged.

"Would you like some Durum wheat?" she said.

"No thank you."

"Licorice?" She held out a dozen licorice sticks wrapped in plain brown paper.

Wiggy hesitated, suddenly remembering the old injunction against eating native food on strange planets, but what the heck! In for a penny, in for a Gazabian rigamix!

So he plucked out a green licorice stick and shoved the entire thing down his gullet.

Donna, the female on Bagless's side, offered Bagless a selection from her own bag of licorice sticks and he plucked out a bright red one.

Almost at once, a strange sensation came over the two licorice eaters.

"Hmm, I feel strangely invigorated," said Wiggy. "My roots and fronds are stiffening in a peculiar way."

"May I see the list of ingredients, please," said Bagless.

Bella passed him the plain paper wrapper and he plucked out another licorice stick.

Stamped on one end in a microscopic font was a list of ingredients.

Fortunately, Bagless had brought along his field microscope, and was able to decipher the text.

"Hmm," he said. "Organic licorice from Turkey. Organic nitrates from McBowel's Dubious Chemicals, Inc. Organic food coloring. Viagra. What's Viagra?"

"Umm," said Bella.

"The humans invented it," said Donna. "It's a kind of Geritol, I think. It's supposed to make you feel youthful."

Some people never get it through their heads; a pill that works one way on a human organism may work quite another way on an alien system.

Such is the power of old Earth TV advertising, everyone wants to try things made by humans, even if there's no conceivable need.

Wiggy began to change his outward form like something out of Ovid, only in reverse. The plant-like form factor he had been inhabiting, for these many years, dissolved, giving way to his inner beast, which was a sort of goat-like platypus.

Bella gazed in admiration. This was better than anything she'd imagined!

"You never know what you're going to get when you open a box of substances," she said. "I wonder if it will make him bigger, like it says in the spam?"

Bagless turned into yet another platypus with a vaguely goat-like air.

"Boss, I never knew," he said. "This is so exciting!"

"There's something noble about a platypus," said Donna. "They're so sleek and vigorous. I'm filled with impure thoughts."

Wiggy felt rebellious and powerful.

"Let's go and do something unlawful," he said. "Talk loudly in a library, or ride around in a Pickard Trilobite without seatbelts."

The women were so shocked, they rediscovered their lost youth.

"Let's go and get our flying saucer, park somewhere and smooch," said Bagless in a wicked tone of voice.

"Groovy, baby!" said Wiggy.

"Right on," giggled Bella.

Thus it was, they hurried back to Shifty Pete's in a fever of anticipation and lusty imaginings.

Unfortunately, the two aliens soon discovered that their flying saucer had been completely reconditioned and rebuilt, and was now a canoe.

Wiggy was too shocked to speak. If Bella hadn't been holding onto one of his horns, he'd have fainted.

"Look what you did to our flying saucer!" wailed Bagless.

Shifty Pete knew he was in trouble. He winked grotesquely and rubbed his hands together.

"It's got a nice smiley on the bow," he said. "Cracked Block painted it on with a spray gun."

"What happened to the engine?"

Shifty Pete spread his hands. "We tried to fix it, but it was pretty well shot. The pistons had all turned inside out. And someone stole all of your valves. I set up the canoe with a rebuilt steam engine from an old Stanley Steamer. It's kind of heavy but I tied a hot air balloon to the stern to keep everything buoyant. You'll be okay as long as you keep sending hot air into the balloon."

"Hmm." said Bagless.

"Look at it this way," said Shifty Pete. "You won't need flying saucer fuel anymore; you can burn wood or coal, which is a lot cheaper. The only thing is, if you burn coal, you have to pretend it's a barbecue or the air police will get you for polluting the environment."

Wiggy shook his head. "A canoe with an outboard steam engine!"

"It's a big canoe," said Shifty Pete.

"I hate canoes," said Wiggy.

"It's dented," said Bagless.

"All the best canoes are dented," said Shifty Pete. "It shows how authentic they are; a dented canoe is not some nouveau riche plastic imitation. Besides, Cracked Block had to do some hammering to make everything fit."

"What did you do with our flying saucer motor?" said Bagless.

"We downsized it, fixed it, and glued it onto that jet ski over there."

"What jet ski?"

Wiggy turned and saw a moveable geyser zooming across the channel in back of the marina. It cut a swathe through the mosquito-infested water lilies on the other side, then it hit the trees and disintegrated with a terrific bang.

When the mist cleared, he could see a jet ski caught upside down in the branches of a big poplar. A screaming tourist was oscillating wildly in safety strap dangling from the seat.

Then a dense cloud of mosquitoes formed around him, mercifully screening his agonies from the watchers across the channel.

"Oh, THAT jet ski," said Wiggy.

"I warned him not to open up the throttle," said Shifty Pete. "He signed a document absolving me of all responsibility for property damage and incidental death or

dismemberment if he opened the throttle past notch two."

Shifty Pete produced a racing form with the appropriate waiver penciled in on the margins.

There was a signature scrawled across the bottom.

Wiggy eyed his new canoe.

"This thing doesn't climb trees like a jet ski does it?" he said.

"Steam engines can't do warp speed," said Shifty Pete. "It cracks their boilers."

"Good," said Wiggy.

"You might want to keep an eye on the pressure gauge. The boiler will explode if you let the pressure get too high."

Wiggy eyed the pressure gauge and spotted the red line. He had always been an anxious type, but until now he'd never had an outlet for his anxiety--something he could get to grips with and really worry intensely about.

Shifty Pete had just solved his problem. Now he was a complete neurotic.

"And you might want to watch the water level," said Shifty Pete. "Boilers like a lot of water. If they don't have enough, they blow up."

"This blowing up business is quite forceful, is it?" said Bagless nervously.

"It's another way of getting into orbit," said Shifty Pete.

"Hmm."

Wiggy was growing more and more excited. Now he had two things he could focus on. At the same time, the Viagra had gained traction in his system and certain neglected portions of his anatomy were pressing their own claims.

Besides, Bella and Donna were looking forward to some smooching and passion.

Thus it was they puffed slowly away from the dock, the steam engine thumping and vibrating like a worn-out Gazabian sprunktooter, and the hot-air balloon tugging at its ropes, keeping the canoe at a reasonable level in the water.

Wiggy manned the tiller and eyed the gauges while Bella fed him peeled grapes, one by one, and hummed the melody from an old Earth tune--something about a flying purple people eater.

Bagless helped Wiggy eye the gauges and made sure the throttle didn't slip up a notch, while Donna fed him haggis from a McBowel's tin and hummed another old Earth tune--something about seven little girls sitting in the back seat with Fred.

They chugged down the channel, away from the lake, looking for a secluded spot.

There aren't many secluded spots around Lake Muskosaurus, but they found one eventually and drifted inshore, under the shade of a deceased pine tree.

Then they tied up the canoe and went for a walk among the trees.

It wasn't long before Wiggy found himself alone with Bella, and got ready to smooch.

Unfortunately, smooching with a creature who happens to belong to another species can be difficult. What exactly do you kiss, for example?

Or, is kissing on your sweetie's home planet a form of insult?

"Hmm," said Wiggy. "I think one of us will have to reconfigure some hardware so we match."

"I think so," said Bella, growing hotter by the minute.

"Your form factor or mine?"

"Whatever."

"I'll try yours, shall I?"

"Please hurry. I'm so eager to commit osculation with you, I could just die!"

Aha! So kissing wasn't considered an insult on Tockworld. But how to become a genuine duck?

Wiggy consulted the data base on his Palm Pilot. It was actually a Gazabian Ding Thinger, but he had purchased one that looked like an Earth-type Palm Pilot.

He quickly found the pertinent information, attached a lead to his head, extended the antenna, and pressed 'download'.

Within moments he had changed into a mallard drake.

The feathers tickled at first, but he soon got used to that.

"Cool," said Bella hotly.

Wiggy grabbed her and tried smooching with her but their beaks clacked together. He wasn't quite up to speed on the coordinates of his various new appendages yet, but Bella helped him out and soon enough they were going at it like Fred Astaire and the Bride of Frankenstein.

He never suspected that Bella and Donna were in fact spies recruited by BAM, the Bureau of Advanced Manipulation, to find out what the Manchurian Canard was, and how they could make one of their own.

Vlod had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 147:ARCHIBALD CANFACT

Just when Wiggy had reached the Fifth State of Umptillion, as described in chapter three of Smooching for Dum Dums, the famous handbook written by a team of experienced forensic accountants and electrical engineers, Bella extracted herself, fanned herself briskly for a moment, and smiled coyly.

"Wheewww!" she said. "You are something else!"

Wiggy said nothing; he was too busy coping with a mysterious pressure building up inside his new form factor.

"Let's try a bit of small talk before we have at it again," said Bella, offering him a frozen daiquiri.

" ,," said Wiggy through his clenched beak.

"I'm really fascinated by this Manchurian Canard business. It must be exciting, working with something like that, huh?"

"I can't really talk about it," said Wiggy.

"Come on; you can tell me!" said Bella, stroking his beak. "I'm just an innocent little creature --what harm can I do? What exactly IS the Manchurian Canard, anyway?"

"It's a kind of plum," said Wiggy.

"It is? A plum? What's so special about a plum? Does it eat Tokyo?"

"It comes from Toronto."

"That's why they call it the Manchurian Canard?"

"It was named after Dr. Plum Canard, the human who invented it."

"Never heard of him."

"He's a mad scientist. He used to work for a big food company, developing artificial vegetables that taste like chocolate. He invented the Manchurian Canard while he was plotting revenge after his boss reprimanded him for mixing web counters into the carrot stew. That's all I know, except that he's planning on taking over Tockworld and using all of its inhabitants as rats in a giant maze."

"Sounds groovy. He's worse than Mr. Clack, isn't he!"

"Possibly."

"Worse than Dr. Wacker?"

"It depends."

"Worse than the Power of Durable Evil?"

"Oh that old thing! People make so much fuss about evil, but it doesn't really hurt anyone, does it?. Evil doesn't kill; PEOPLE kill."

"Still," said Bella, "I'd like to try some of this Manchurian Canard."

Meanwhile, in another part of the madhouse, Philip Napoleon was intrigued.

Never before had he encountered a patient with so many potential neuroses and such a vast amount of wealth. Of course it was denominated in Circuit City dollars, the monetary standard adhered to by many aliens, but still, money is money.

There was more at stake, however.

Now he was no longer working in the privacy of his own clinic, surrounded by gleaming machinery and watched over by his glorious friend, the other Napoleon, the one who had been the REAL victor at Waterloo, no matter what the biased media curs said.

What did those wretched artists and writers know anyway? They were all liars! They hadn't been at Waterloo; they'd been at home, eating bangers 'n' mash, a notorious hallucinogenic.

Napoleon was alive!

Philip knew for a fact that Napoleon and Elvis shared many a happy hour in the Conway Club, a special club for famous people in a mysterious hidden valley, in Tibet, Las Vegas.

Philip had learned about the club from Al Capone, who had spent much of his mysterious absence there.

You could trust Al! He'd renounced his life of crime and was spending his days helping old people across the streets of Toronto.

Anyway, back to mundane matters! Philip was simply going to have to deal with the alien Zeppelin cow, whether he wanted to or not.

But he was having a spot of trouble; he didn't really like working in front of a large crowd, and now the mysterious and exotic Allura had moved right up onto the stage to watch him.

He tried to concentrate on the cow, but the slit in Allura's dress bothered him.

What was it for?

Did she want him to look at her ankle? And if so, WHY? Was it a trick ankle loaded with napalm? Or did it have something to do with smooching?

In smooching, as in life, one thing leads to another.

Frustrated by this conundrum, he decided to devote all of his attention to the problem he knew and understood, not the problem that evaded all mortal understanding and provoked tidal waves of grief and despair.

"Cows are female aren't they?" he muttered.

"Possibly," said Allura.

"Especially if they give milk."

"That has a certain logic."

"And yet Gastro is a masculine name."

"You can never tell with aliens," said Allura. "They have a casual attitude to gender; it comes from having such a wide selection of peripherals. It's different when you only have two genders."

"Aha," said Philip. "I hadn't considered this. It doesn't say anything about peripherals and multi-gendering in the Handbook of Alien Form Factors."

"It depends on the alien. Some change attachments, some just have accidents, and others are ROTTERS AND SWINE!"

"That would be tedious on a date," said Philip. "I mean, the accident part."

"Possibly. It does stimulate conversation."

"This is getting complicated. I think it's time for me to try out my new invention."

He motioned to Allura to follow and together they went into his lab.

There among the odd machines and the upended pickle barrel was a large crate.

"Behold, my Napoleon Box, he said.

"It looks like an old Ikea Box," said Allura. "It says, 'Shelf Unit. Some Assembly Required'."

"I assembled the shelf, then I had this empty box. That's when I got the idea for the Napoleon Box."

Allura looked over at a rickety shelf leaning precariously against a wall.

"You assembled it yourself, did you?" she said.

"It was a difficult task, but I managed," said Philip, beaming.

"The shelves slope in different directions."

"That's because it reflects the true nature of psychic reality."

"I think you just messed up," said Allura. "You got the brackets all mixed up."

"Reality is a matter of conditioning and perception," said Philip. "Boring, conventional people like their shelves to follow strict rules, like Stalinists. Creative artists see things differently."

"Very artistic, as long as you don't put anything on the shelf."

"That's not what shelves are for," said Philip. "They're Jungian archetypes."

Allura was impressed. "You must be the only person on Tockworld who can mess up an Ikea shelf," she said.

"I warned him to let me do it," said Josephine darkly. "Everything about him is wobbly and soft."

"Did I make a mistake, Josephine? Will there be punishment?"

"Not now. I have to smash the computer again; it's seeking out hackers on the Internet and begging them to violate it."

"Isn't there a patch?" said Philip.

"The patch makes it speak in tongues."

Josephine selected a new sledgehammer from matched set behind Philip's pickle barrel.

Philip, meanwhile, pushed his Napoleon Box out the door and onto the platform.

Then he summoned Gastro and applied a fibrous mesh to her head.

"A hair net?" said Allura. "You're going to give her a perm?"

"It's a wireless net of sensors," said Philip.

"So you can see what she's thinking about?"

"Alfalfa, I suspect, but you never know with cows."

Then he opened a flap and motioned to Gastro to step inside.

"The Napoleon Box will discover your inner YOU and alter your form factor accordingly," he said. "Try not to think too intensely about hay."

"How does it work?" said Allura.

"There's an armadillo inside, or possibly not. It depends on what you're thinking when you enter. That influences the transformation."

"I see," said Allura.

Unfortunately, there was a glitch. Gastro was too big for the box.

"Deflate her a bit, please, someone," said Philip.

D'If, who had been plotting his rise to international celebrity, kindly took time out from his career path to open a valve.

Allura ignored him with withering contempt.

"Oh that feels better!" said Gastro. "Would somebody milk me, please?"

"I don't suppose you have a milking machine," said Allura.

Josephine handed Philip his new, Internet-enabled milking machine and megaphone.

He examined it for a moment, wondering which end was which, and what all of the odd looking suction cups were for, then he attached it.

"Moo, MOO!" said Gastro, and a stream of synthetic milk jetted out of a ruptured tube.

"What's this?" said Philip.

"Alien milk," said D'If. "We don't have much call for the organic stuff."

"Look, it's puddling," said Allura. "It's forming letters."

D'If, who had been having second thoughts about the way he had treated Allura, gave her a sharp look.

Had he made a smart choice, casting off an exotic creature like Allura and giving himself over to the single-minded pursuit of a career as a celebrity?

Couldn't he have both?

Allura continued ignoring him and read the words she found puddled on the floor.

"Help, I've been abducted by aliens."

"Good grief!" said D'If.

"That can't be right," said Josephine.

Philip, meanwhile, had locked the flap on the Napoleon Box and plugged in an extension cord.

There was a peculiar noise.

"Something punched the end of the box," said Josephine. "Did you give her a sledge hammer?"

"You know how it is with cows and alfalfa," said Philip. "They make methane. It's what cows do when they're not mooing or dispensing milk."

"I'm not opening that," said D'If.

"Don't light any matches anyone," said Allura.

Philip checked the viewfinder, an old magic lantern that slid back and forth over the surface. When he peered inside he discovered an image of himself struggling to build a shelf and cursing at the brackets.

"How did that get in there?" he demanded.

Josephine smirked. "I posted digital images of you to the web. It gives your patients something to laugh at."

Philip picked up one of the suction cups from the electric milking device and spoke into it.

"How are you feeling, Gastro?"

"MOO!"

"Good, I'm glad! I'm now going to upload pictures of various objects. When you see something you might like to be, press 'enter'."

Everyone stood back as he attached leads from an old Lionel model railroad transformer and a souped-up Game Troll.

Then he began uploading images into the Internet-enabled milking machine attached through a wireless mesh to Gastro's scalp.

"There's an armadillo in here," said Gastro.

"It protects you from vampires and monsters," said Philip. "It doesn't work against trolls, though."

Gastro suddenly pressed 'enter'.

"What did you select?" said Philip. Everyone pressed eagerly around, anxious to see what had impressed Gastro so much.

"It's a beaver," said D'If, impressed.

"A female beaver," said Josephine. "The best kind."

"Where's Gastro?" said Allura.

"The Napoleon Box has changed her into a beaver," said Philip. "A beaver is what she wanted to be, and a beaver is what she has become."

"We'll have to give her a new name," said Allura.

"Something feminine," said D'If.

"How about Prudence?" said Josephine.

"Sounds good to me," said Philip, who never argued with Josephine.

"I like it," said Prudence, aka Gastro. "Get me out please."

"Do you have a fallback plan in case of too much methane?" said D'If.

"I have some gas masks," said Philip.

Before he could issue them, however, there was a sudden, very loud "EH?", and a canoe shot across the floor towards the Napoleon Box.

Inside, paddling furiously, was a male beaver.

"Good grief; who's that?" said D'If.

"Great Scott, it's Archibald Canfact, the Canadian guru beaver," said Philip. "What's he doing here?"

"I am calling you hoo hoo hoo!" sang Canfact.

"I am hearing you hoo hoo hoo!" sang Prudence.

"I've missed you terribly, my darling," said Canfact. "Why didn't you tell me you were really a beaver? I've waited so long for you to extend yourself in space and time so that I

could enjoy your physical presence as well as your idealized form!"

"Oh I love it when you talk dirty, Canfact."

"We Canadians are good at erotic talk, my dear."

"I can't wait to smooch with you."

Canfact leaped out of his canoe, puffed out his chest and smote the box with an Eddy Bauer hockey stick.

Prudence leaped out in a wave of fragrant methane and sulfur dioxide. Everyone stepped back to give the lovers room.

"My love."

"My love."

"This is tacky," said Philip.

Then the sweethearts got into the canoe and paddled away to the Canadian Rockies where they set up housekeeping in a log cabin and lived happily ever after singing love songs among the pines and helping old people cross the streets in Banff.

One day, however, their idyll was rudely interrupted when a Sea King fell on their cabin, demolishing it.

Fortunately, the crew were unhurt, having abandoned ship before it took off--knowing from long experience what would inevitably happen once it managed to get airborne.

And Canfact and Prudence were away at the time visiting a delegation of First Nations People who had grown weary of their love songs and threatened death by torture unless the couple took a vow of silence.

Prudence was so upset, she mutated back into a cow and returned to Philip Napoleon's office for grief counseling.

Meanwhile, Philip, who had been declared a victor in the preliminary round of analysis, was getting ready to face the next challenge.

D'If was preparing for his career as a fashion statement and intellectual actor--the only one in Hollywood sporting a palm tree on top of his head.

And Thunderbags and Hank were still trying to figure out what a nation was, when as luck would have it, an encyclopedia salesman knocked on Hank's tent flap.

Polydoor had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 148:A SHRINK IN EVERY BOX

There are a million stories in Naked Tockworld, and this is one of them.

On a dark and stormy afternoon, when the sun shone brightly in an azure sky and treacherous media people falsely proclaimed Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, Philip Napoleon exulted.

"The Napoleon Box works!" he said. "It really works!"

"Did you actually run that thing on Gastro before you knew it would work?" said Allura, scandalized. "You didn't test it on rats first?"

"Gastro is an alien," sniffed Philip. "If the box hadn't worked, she could have abducted it."

"Still, it's not very ethical is it?"

"She was desperate for love," said Philip. "Internet dating services won't register Holsteins cows."

"Love is overrated anyway," said Allura.

Philip eyed her amorously. Actually he eyed the slit in her dress amorously. She had a lovely ankle. But his obsession with the slit had grown stronger. Was it a secret code? Did it hold information about who really built the pyramids and what they're for?

"Are you looking at my ankle?" said Allura.

Philip blushed. He could see Josephine's shadow on the wall. Was that a dagger in her

hand?

"I'm devoted to Josephine," he said. "She makes my life complete."

"Ha!" snorted Josephine. "Get to work, you philandering shrink! Start analyzing people."

"Yes, Josephine," Philip said meekly. "Actually, I'm making plans to manufacture my new pharmaceutical product on a large scale."

"The Napoleon Box?" said Allura. "That's not pharmaceutical, is it?"

"Technically, not as such, but the protocols are similar, and there's more money in selling to the drugstore crowd than there is in selling to a gang of shrinks. Too many shrinks want free samples."

"Good thinking," said Josephine, and Philip beamed.

"Will there be punishment?" he asked.

"Not now. I have to set up a defense perimeter with long-range missiles in case someone wants to sneak in, reverse engineer the Napoleon Box, and build a cheap, generic copy."

"Stop the rotters at all costs!" said Philip. "I have to recover research and development costs."

"Yes, the shelf unit must have been quite expensive," said Allura, smirking.

"It's a tax write-off," said Josephine. "He had to buy the shelf unit to get the box."

"Don't you have to run some more tests before you start manufacturing?" said Allura.

"Details," said Josephine. "We'll round up some more victims for the Beta version and make up some data to satisfy the inspectors from FODO, the Food And Drug Orcs."

Philip wrinkled his nose. "It's a bit of a pain," he said. "According to the Geneva Convention, we aren't supposed to start testing on sentient beings until we've terrorized a number of lab rats. But lab rats are expensive, so I'll have to disguise my victims as white rats before sticking them into the box."

"You expect people to go along with this?" said Allura.

"You'd be surprised," said Philip. "I'll tell my patients it will make the box feel better. You don't want to offend a device that has temporary control of your form factor, believe me!"

"It'll never work," said Allura. "People aren't that gullible!"

"There's one born every minute," said Philip.

As it turned out, this proved to be an understatement.

Later that afternoon, he announced the discovery of a new mental illness that made people feel depressed and inadequate in a special and distinguished way.

Ten minutes later, he announced an experimental treatment for the new mental illness.

Fortunately, Josephine had the presence of mind to hire security guards and experts in traffic flow; otherwise the crowd would have smashed down the door.

Allura was fascinated. This is better than love, she told herself. It's raw power; it's--exploiting people, actually.

Then a great sadness came over her. True, she was a werewolf, and she did tear her enemies to pieces from time to time, when the moon was full and the stock market was down, but she wasn't evil.

She was just confused; she didn't really know who she was, deep down inside.

And she wanted someone to love.

Philip's experimental treatment was a great success; the Napoleon Box turned everyone into lab rats, without a single glitch.

The rats were all very grateful because they hadn't liked themselves as depressed and inadequate canards. As rats, however, they fit right in. No more worries about the size of various body parts, and about what to say on a date, etc.

Rats don't bother with those things; they just do what they do.

"We're almost ready for the Big Top," said Philip gloating. "The next big problem is how to entice the general population?"

Josephine tossed him a copy of Vance Packard's THE HIDDEN PERSUADERS.

"It's all about us," she said. "Steal some ideas."

Philip quickly scanned the book, focusing only on the essential ideas--the ones that would help him grow wealthy enough to impress Josephine.

He soon realized there was no point trying to sell the Napoleon Box as a device that promoted mental hygiene and was good for you.

Nobody wanted to brush their brains every day.

What people really wanted was to be cool and interesting.

Actually they wanted to smooch a lot with strangers, but everyone knew cool and interesting was intimately bound up with smooching.

Why else wear hideously uncomfortable leather briefs and chain mail?

So Philip hired a lot of scantily clad models, including some improperly attired aliens, and Allura photographed them cavorting in wicked circumstances.

Then Philip worked up a catchy slogan for his ad campaign:

I dreamt we were almost naked in my Napoleon Box.

"I like it!" said Allura. "It fills me with a terrible resolve."

Philip eyed her anxiously, wondering what a terrible resolve was, and if it had anything to do with Admiral Yamamoto.

Then he hired an alien from the Alien Planet to write the manual, because there was less chance of anyone understanding it and blaming him if things went wrong.

A lawyer helped him with the qualifiers, drawing up an important list of things that customers were forbidden to complain about:

Some assembly required; contents may not match picture on box.

Limited tech support available on website, if up. No tech support in cases of inappropriate customer behavior.

Check first before calling tech support to make sure the mistake isn't a feature.

Sometimes the operating system crashes during transformation, and files get corrupted. In this case, have your significant other defrag and restore your identity with the built-in Smiley tools.

Occasionally files are so badly corrupted the Smiley Tools will be forced to rebuild your identity, using odd bits and pieces from other sources to fill in the gaps.

No worries.

The Napoleon Box is warranted until first use, or after seven minutes. First use voids warranty.

Philip read the qualifiers and saw that they were good. Now he was ready to begin the next phase of his money-making project. But first, he gloated for a time, rubbing his hands and cackling.

Allura was shocked. Was Philip Napoleon really so callous? Or had he fallen under the influence of some evil villain, hitherto unknown to the superheroes of Tockworld?

Maybe she'd have to put aside her own troubles and get to the bottom of this new conundrum.

Meanwhile, in another part of the forest, Polydoor was growing weary of his burden. He climbed unhappily into an Orient Express passenger car and settled into a compartment opposite Graham Greene and Peter Lorre.

"Why tho thad, chump?" said a hoarse voice.

It was Custer's Last Stand.

"I'm fed up," said Polydoor. "I miss Babette. I'm getting tired of fighting Freddy Manichean Heresy. No matter what I do, he persists. In different formats, mind you, but always instantly recognizable because of his good and evil heads.

"What do you expect? He ith the man with two brainth. Too bad they aren't thynchronithed."

"Maybe he got the extra head because he read too much theology," said Polydoor. "He needs a pop valve to let out a bit of doctrine whenever things heat up too much."

"It'll never happen."

"It doesn't matter," said Polydoor. "I'm fed up with religious wars. I want a time-out. I

want everybody to just get along for awhile."

So saying, Polydoor borrowed a slip from a passing female, tore it into strips, and put up a makeshift white flag.

The female hadn't actually been wearing the slip, by the way; she'd purchased it in the duty free section of the bar car, while shopping for her relatives back home.

In fact, technically she didn't qualify as a female because she was an alien from the planet Gazabia, where people can have as many genders as they like.

Old-money Gazabians have no need of genders; they procreate by filling water balloons with corn syrup and passing them around at charity balls.

Anyway, the dispirited Polydoor eventually found Freddy Manichean Heresy in the bar car, downing a McBowel's Honking Scotch.

The two adversaries eyed each other blearily.

Technically there were three heads involved in this eyeballing session, but only two of them were adversaries. Freddy's good head actually liked Polydoor, and wished him a happy and fruitful life with Babette and her children.

Unfortunately, the good and the just count for very little in this vale of tears.

Polydoor had no idea what he was going to do next. He'd have to act quickly, though; some of the other patrons were growing interested in the ragged bit of slip he'd tied to his Pax stick.

Then Freddy broke the ice.

"You want to parley?" he said, disappointed. "That's not very mythical."

"I'm calling a time out," said Polydoor. "I'm entitled to three."

"Says who?"

"It's in the Geneva Convention. Look it up."

Freddy laughed cruelly. "I crossed my fingers when I signed it," he said.

"If that's how you want to play it, I'll start a new religion and steal your congregation."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Freddy. "I can just picture it! Polydoor's new religion--join the acolyte's club and eat dead flies! There's no life like it!"

"Laugh while you can," said Polydoor. "Unlike YOUR cheap excuse for a religion, mine will be full of relatives. There'll be no room for good and evil because everybody will get a free box of excuses for bad behavior. And you, Freddy, will become obsolete; a relic of the Fabulous Mists of Antiquity."

"You wish!" said Freddy. "For your information, people LIKE good and evil. It gives them something to kill for."

"They do that anyway," said Polydoor. "Good and evil are just bumper sticker slogans they stick on their killing machines."

"You poor sap! Do you really believe people want to muddy their brains thinking about complicated moral dilemmas when they can just grab a weapon and start shooting?"

"I'll call it Reality TV," said Polydoor, ignoring Freddy. "I'll take collections from advertisers."

"Ha, ha, ha! You can't escape good and evil in Reality TV, Polydoor. The good are the winners. Everybody likes a winner."

"If the good are the winners," said Polydoor innocently, "then the evil are the losers. So the evil aren't coequal with the good; they're inferior. And that means there's no room for someone like you. You're false doctrine."

Freddy glared at him.

"You tricked me, you rotter."

"Do you still want to go on with this battle?"

"I'll win, you know," said Freddy. "There's something glamorous and dramatic about two equal forces battling for control of the universe. All YOU can offer is a bunch of relatives arguing around a picnic table about who was supposed to bring the potato salad."

"I have science on my side," said Polydoor.

"And I have the important emotions--rage, loathing, envy, lust and nostalgia. Emotion

trumps science any day!"

"Those are indiscriminate and can attach themselves to anything," said Polydoor.

"Ha!" snorted Freddy, turning back to his drink.

There was a brief quarrel as his two heads argued about whose turn it was to sup from the glass. The bartender, however, fearing for his establishment, quickly fetched a new tankard of Scotch.

Polydoor bridled for a moment, but despair won out. Freddy was probably right--people enjoyed a bit of good and evil; it gave them a chance to anathemize friends and relatives they didn't like very much.

"Told you tho!" said Custer. "It'll come to war again. It hath to come to war; I'm hungry."

"Maybe not," said Polydoor. "Maybe I'm attacking Freddy from the wrong angle. Instead of tackling him head on, I should find out who his acolyte is and bash HIM."

"He doethn't have an acolyte; he doethn't need one."

"Of course he does, Custer. Everyone needs an acolyte! It's just a question of finding out who Freddy's is."

"He ith probably hiding in the pyramidth, if he exith."

"It shouldn't be too hard to find him. I'll ask my chums at the Acolytes' Club."

"They won't help."

"If they won't help, then I won't pay my bar bill."

Thus it was, Polydoor left the Orient Express at Union Station in Toronto, and made his way to the Acolytes' Club.

Before he could put his plan into action, however, he stopped at a convenience store to buy some dead flies in a box and bumped into Bagless.

Polydoor immediately recognized another acolyte beneath the hairy exterior and gave him the secret acolyte's sign.

Bagless looked at him in shock and awe for a moment, then he grinned.

"Bro!" he said.

"Bro!" said Polydoor.

Custer had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 149:THE WEALTHY GURU

Polydoor was very pleased to meet another acolyte. It didn't bother him at all that Bagless was an alien. Some things transcend mere nationality and tribalism.

Rutabagas, for instance.

Arm in arm, the two acolytes left the convenience store, talking of their troubles.

"An acolyte's life is no picnic," said Polydoor, weeping.

"You said it, bro!" said Bagless. "Sometimes it just isn't worth getting up in the morning and robbing body parts from graves."

"Or fighting ill-conceived personifications of good and evil, like Freddy."

"My children don't understand me," said Bagless.

"My wife cheated on me with another male, then killed him and ate him," said Polydoor.

Bagless was silent for a moment, frantically searching his memory banks to make sure he hadn't had any affairs with spiders recently.

He had a richly deserved reputation for Don Juanism, and a poor memory for names and faces.

When his search came up with 'no documents found that match your criteria' he breathed a sigh of relief. At least he hadn't cuckolded good old Polydoor!

"Look at this way," he said to Polydoor. "It could have been you! Do you think you'd like being a ghost for the rest of your life?"

"I'd rather be a ghost than a laughing stock," said Polydoor. "At least it would eliminate

the need for tummy tucks, plastic surgery, and diets."

Bagless looked at him in shock.

"You, an acolyte, go on diets!"

"I eat low-fat flies. And I make sure my haggis is organic, without any persimmon or rutabagas in the topping."

"But WHY? You're an acolyte, for Pete's sake! It's your job to look grotesque."

"Yes, but I also try to look distinguished. Some day I may have children of my own, and I'll want them to respect me."

"Children are over-rated in my opinion," said Bagless. "You lavish care and love on them, and as soon as they turn into teen-agers, they bite you."

"Really?" said Polydoor. "How many children have you got?"

Bagless thought about this with furrowed brow for a moment, troubled by his congenital difficulty with arithmetic.

"Lots," he said finally. "Well, technically they're not MY children. They were given to me by females who felt they had too many of their own and wanted to share their bounty."

"Nice of them."

"I thought so too. I would, however, have enjoyed participating in the initial fertility rites."

"Well, you can't have everything."

"I suppose that's true. Still, I would like to try the fertility rites some time, if I can find a willing partner."

"It's so hard to get a date, these days!" said Polydoor.

"Tell me about it!" said Bagless. "I tried Gazabian Internet Dating, but they said they were shutting down on my planet, because all of the females of my species were taking a year off to look for Elvis Presley."

"Surely a different species--"

"Celebrity trumps looks every time. If you're talented and famous, everyone wants a piece of you."

"I guess you're just out of luck," said Polydoor.

"I could always wear a wig."

"And a white jacket with fringes," said Polydoor.

Bagless considered this.

"Maybe I should skip the Elvis routine and just wait for next year's fertility rites," he said.

"What a life! We get no respect, and our girlfriends abuse us,

"Great minds think alike," said Polydoor. "Come and join me at the Acolytes' Club. We'll talk more of these matters over a nice stirrup cup and a pork chop."

"Sounds good to me. Will they let me in?"

"Of course they will! You're an acolyte, aren't you!"

"There's no life like it!"

"What doesn't make you stronger, kills you!" said Polydoor.

Thus it was, the two miserable wretches soon found themselves commiserating with each other in the Acolyte's Club.

Bagless immediately fell in love with the place. He especially liked the soothing panorama of old acolytes nodding off in wing chairs, beneath the obituary pages of the Globe & Mail.

"This is wonderful," said Bagless.

Polydoor handed him a large, rubbery thing with Velcro strips along the edges.

"It's an inflatable hump," he said. "Part of the dress code. I borrowed it from the waiter."

Bagless pulled the rip cord and, when the hump had inflated to full size, reached around and attached it to his back.

"How do I look?" he said.

"Like a well-dressed acolyte."

"So I'm in?"

"Not quite. There's an initiation rite."

At these words, Bagless shrank back a few paces.

"This doesn't involve cutting any important bits, does it?" he said.

There was a sudden clamor as various legs and appendages were protectively crossed throughout the room.

"You're thinking of a different tribe," said Polydoor. "This is much simpler; you have to collect body parts from a grave and build a monster."

"Easy as pie," said Bagless, relieved.

"It has to be a serviceable monster, mind you! None of these great, rambling Hollywood beasts that fall down the minute some Earthling points a cheap laser toy at them."

"How about a fifty-foot Spam artist?"

"Derivative, but acceptable. If you run into any trouble, you can purchase a kit, but you still have to animate it when you finish gluing it together."

Bagless was puzzled for a moment. Where to get parts?

Then he bethought himself of the hockey wars he had witnessed on Earth TV, and he made a quick trip to Maple Leaf Gardens, home of the majestic Toronto Maple Leafs.

Unfortunately, the Zamboni drivers had cleared away most of the limbs and appendages left over from the last game, but Bagless did manage to grab a few items and haul them away in a sack.

It was the work of a moment to stitch them together. The acolytes had quite a good sewing machine at their club, and an excellent supply of colorful thread.

Soon a crowd had gathered to watch Bagless work.

"Good grief!" said Clyde Dallyrag, the club's treasurer. "What is that thing?"

"King Kong?" someone ventured.

"Godzilla?"

In fact, it was neither of these; it was a fifty-foot platypus.

When Bagless had finished, everyone gazed in awe at the beast.

"Hmmm," said Polydoor. "It hasn't been animated yet, has it?"

Bagless pointed to the standard issue Griggs and Bratton re-animator wired to the platypus's scalp.

He was in the act of attaching yet another wire to a lightning rod affixed to the ceiling, when Polydoor stopped him.

"You pass," he said. "We don't want that thing coming to life and rampaging through the kitchens, eating our haggis."

Bagless shrugged. It was no hair off his nose, but he was a little frustrated. It was like building a doomsday bomb, along with a clever little firing mechanism that fit nicely in the palm of your hand.

You wanted to press the 'Enter' button.

Anyone would.

Nevertheless, Bagless turned away from his creation and followed Polydoor to the bar, where they ordered two glasses of McBowel's Difficult Scotch.

The fifty-foot platypus waited in a corner.

On the one hand, it wasn't exactly animate; on the other hand, it wasn't exactly inanimate.

It was simply ready.

Meanwhile, back in the Orient Express bar car, Freddy Manichean Heresy had been pondering Polydoor's truce offering, and had come to a decision.

Freddy wasn't all bad, as you know. He had his good side; he only killed people who irritated him.

True, he was interested in finding the Power of Durable Evil and using it for his own ends, but aren't we all!

Anyway, after the shocking episode with Polydoor, Freddy decided to try doing good for a time. Maybe it would make him feel better.

Before Freddy could try out being good, however, he had to learn how to stifle the

nastiness in his system.

How could he accomplish this? Who could he turn to?

Certainly not a theologian. We all know about theologians!

What about a guru?

Fortunately , just as his thinking reached this delicate stage, a homeless person accosted him.

"Spare fifty runtbungers for a trip back to Earth?" the fellow said.

This must be a guru, thought Freddy, and he beamed at him, shocking the poor man.

"I'll just be on my way, then, shall I?" said the guru nervously.

"Earth is gone," said Freddy. "Can you tell me, oh guru,

"What I have to do to stop being evil and start being nice?"

The homeless person didn't even blink. Right away he said, "Well you can start by giving me ten thousand Gazabian runtbungers."

"I haven't got any runtbungers," said Freddy. "But how about this?"

Then he gave him an RV, a set of Tupperware containers, a bank account crammed with lots of Canadian loonies, and the secret recipe for Kentucky Fried Chicken.

"Thank you very much," said the homeless person. "What can I do for you?"

"I'd like an answer to my question, oh homeless person guru," said Freddy.

"Well, technically I'm not a homeless person anymore, because I have an RV. I'm special now."

"Well I have two heads," said Freddy. "So I'm certainly special."

"Yes, but mine is bigger than yours," said the homeless person.

There was no answer to this. Freddy looked at his newly rich companion and marveled at the profound and rapid effects of wealth creation on the downtrodden.

Who would have imagined that, beneath their wretched exteriors, they were exactly the same as everyone else.

Still, he was a guru.

"Okay," said Freddy. "So you're special! Even so, you may still retain some guru like qualities. Can you answer my question?"

"Sure," said the no-longer homeless rich person. Your problem is that you serve two masters, one good and one evil. That's a conflict of interest."

"What should I do?"

"Get rid of one of them."

"How am I supposed to do that?" wailed Freddy. "Chop off one of my heads?"

"You could try seeing Philip Napoleon. He offers discounts on multiple personality disorders."

"That fool!" said Freddy. "Ha, ha, ha!"

Then he thought about Philip's vast accumulation of wealth, his ranking among respectable philosophers in Tockworld, his before-and-after picture of a lunatic.

"Hmm," he said.

Moments later, Freddy was on his way to catch some therapy with Philip Napoleon.

The homeless person drove to Palm Springs, won a lot of money at the casino, and was abducted by aliens while golfing with a Lawrence Welk impersonator.

Custer's Last Stand had a bad feeling about this....

CHAPTER 150:PHILIP 1, ALIENS 0

The homeless person didn't really mind being abducted; it was better than dealing with a golf ball that had a mysterious obsession with sand traps, weeds and ponds.

And the energy beam that had pulled him up had done a nice job on his set of McBowel's combination golf clubs and wiener forks.

Still, it was the principle of the thing that counted. It's not very polite to abduct people, conduct experiments on them, mess up their internal organs, and return them, disoriented and traumatized to their homes.

That's what hospitals are for.

The aliens sat in their rocking chairs, watching him. They looked like pelicans in kilts. One was bright red from head to foot; the other was yellow.

"What do you want from me?" said the homeless person.

The aliens stopped rocking and looked at each other.

"You tell him, Ardrige," said the yellow alien.

"No, you tell him, Bungo," said the blue alien. "You're the captain, after all."

There was a silence.

"Um, actually, I don't know why we abducted him," said Bungo.

Ardrige was scandalized. "You don't!" he squawked. "You made me sit through twenty-five weeks of Earth TV to acclimatize myself to these idiots, and you don't even know why we abducted one of them!"

"I thought you did," said Bungo sheepishly.

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm just an acolyte; nobody ever tells me anything."

"Well, that isn't entirely true. I told you about the haggis traps."

"Yes, but you didn't tell me where you set them. I was in agony for HOURS AND HOURS!"

"Sorry about that, but they were kind of obvious. I mean what else looks like a sheep bleating for its licorice!"

"I bet you don't even know why we were sent here," said Ardrige. "It's not as if we needed a trip to this crazy planet."

"Tell me about it!" said Bungo. "I need a voyage to Tockworld like a I need a hole in the head."

"So why were we sent?"

"Orders."

"Whose orders?" said Ardrige. "Nobody gives orders on our planet. People who stick their necks out and become leaders are instantly assassinated."

"True."

"So who gave the orders?"

"Hmmm," said Bungo. Then he looked at the ship's computer, which was skimming through an old copy of a magazine salvaged from Earth.

It was OH, PSYCHOLOGIST!, actually.

The computer looked up at them and frowned.

Computers from the planet Laksta, by the way, were quite active physically. They possessed a wide variety of accessories, including all manner of appendages, tank tracks, pincers, antennae, and spatulas.

"Just a minute," said the computer. "I'm thinking. According to OH, PSYCHOLOGIST!, I'm not having a satisfactory intimate life."

The aliens looked at each other.

"Oh, oh!" they said.

"Remember what happened the last time FunBytes read a magazine from Earth?" said Bungo.

"That was PLAYBOY, wasn't it?" said Ardrige.

"He programmed the ship to abduct two rabbits and a wet T-shirt."

"And six weeks later a gang of punk rabbits nearly took over our flying saucer."

"Then there was that horrible New Age magazine," said Bungo.

"Don't remind me!" said Ardrige. "Incense burning on every floor. Crystals. Wind chimes. Harps, bagpipes and Celtic moaning."

"Even the ghosts complained about the racket," said Bungo.

The two aliens went gingerly to their computer and peeked over its shoulder at the

magazine.

"How to get more pizzaz out of your--" read Ardridge. Then he clapped a hand over his mouth. "Good grief! No wonder Earth blew up! Computers don't do that kind of thing do they?"

"I should hope not!" said Bungo. "My heart wouldn't take it."

"Of course, we haven't really seen all of his attachments," said Ardridge.

"Can we safely assume FunBytes is a HE?" said Bungo. "After all, neither of us read the manual when we got him."

"I thought we agreed on that," said Ardridge. "We've been calling him a HE long enough."

"Yes, but we never checked. Maybe Funbytes has other ideas."

"You mean he could be a she?" said Ardridge.

"From Hal to Holly in one flip-flop," said Bungo

"I'm not sure I like the idea of a female computer watching our every move," said Ardridge.

"We have nothing to be ashamed of; we've both read Matthew Arnold. Pure in heart and body."

"Um, I wonder if she can read lips."

"So we're agreed she's a she now?," said Bungo.

"Do males put on lip gloss?" said Ardridge.

Bungo peered at the computer. "Egad! That can't be right! I didn't even know she had lips!"

"I think that's her speaker," said Ardridge.

"Hey, will you guys finish with the abduction so I can go home," said the homeless person.

"I thought you were homeless," said Ardridge.

"I was, but I'm middle class now; I have an RV."

"If we don't know why we abducted him, we should send him back," said Bungo.

"Wait a minute, big boy!" said Funbytes. "What's the hurry."

The aliens shrank back fearfully as the computer sashayed towards their abductee.

Now that she was standing clear of the magazine, they could savor the full beauty of her get-up.

Funbytes was festooned in a miniskirt and black bra, which showed through her sheer blouse. She had a blonde wig, lip gloss, and eye shadow smudged around her optical sensors.

She looked like the Tin Man in drag.

"We're in trouble," said Ardridge.

"Tell me about it!" said Bungo. "We need her sane to get us back home. I have no idea where we are."

"Tockworld."

"Yes, but I don't know how we got here."

"On this flying saucer," said Ardridge.

"I'm so glad you came up to see me," said Funbytes.

The homeless person rubbed his eyes.

"Do your abductions include hallucinogens?" he said.

"I think we're going to get along just fine," said Funbytes.

"You aren't going to cut me open and take out my internal organs, are you?"

"I love it when you talk dirty."

"Because I don't have any. They rotted from being oppressed. So you might as well send me back."

"We'll make beautiful music together."

"I smell bad. I haven't taken a shower in years because the capitalists are hogging all of the showers."

"Ripeness is all."

"Not only that, I don't know anything about computers. I'm technically illiterate."

"I wasn't asking you to read me. You can if you like, though."

Funbytes stroked the abductee's forehead.

The aliens grew alarmed.

"We have to stop her," said Ardrige.

"How?"

"We have to get her to submit to analysis."

"Who's going to analyze her?"

"Somebody from Tockworld."

Bungo fumbled for his copy of the Tockworld Yellow Pages. He dared not use the computer because it was too unstable.

"Here's a good one," he said. "Look at this before-and-after picture of a lunatic!"

"Philip Napoleon," said Bungo. "I've heard of him. Set the coordinates, Ardrige, and we'll beam ourselves down."

"Wait a minute," said the homeless person. "What about me? What about my abduction?"

"It'll have to wait," said Bungo. "Something just came up."

"That's not fair!"

"I thought you didn't want to be abducted," said Ardrige.

"I've changed my mind."

"I knew you would," said Funbytes."

"Why don't we just land the flying saucer?" said Ardrige.

"Are you kidding? Do you know how much they charge you for parking a flying saucer in Toronto?"

"We can afford it. The loonie is very cheap now."

"So is the Gazabian Runtbunger."

The homeless person complained so much, they gave him a Game Troll and started up Candyland for him.

"I never heard of that video game before," said the homeless person.

"It's more fun than the board game," said Bungo. "It has sound effects."

Thus it was, the two aliens, gingerly holding Funbytes between them, beamed themselves down and landed outside Philip's clinic, just as Freddy signed up for his own therapy.

"Group therapy," said Philip, beaming. "Special rates."

"How does it work?" said Freddy.

"You all get into the Napoleon Box at the same time. Then I push the START button."

"It's just the computer that needs therapy," complained Ardrige.

"You know what they say," said Philip. "If you don't think you're mad, then you really are cracked."

"How about you, Philip?" said Bungo. "Do you think you're mad?"

"I don't have to be sane," said Philip. "I'm a shrink."

In short order, everyone climbed into the Napoleon box.

"Don't crowd," said Freddy. "I'm evil, mind you."

"Oh, two heads!" said Funbytes. "That really turns me on. Are they detachable?"

Freddy eyed the computer up and down.

"Who did your makeover, sweetheart?" he said. "You got taken."

Just then, Philip pressed the START button, and a lot of odd images began floating in the air.

There was a scream, and a loud report.

Meanwhile, back on the ranch, a wandering encyclopedia salesman made his pitch to Hank of Ur.

"Is there anything in here about building a great nation?" said Hank.

"Of course," said the salesman, whose name was Harmon. "It even has a picture of a great nation. It's an encyclopedia from Earth, mind you, so it's a city from old Earth."

"Scotland," said Hank. "Principal exports: haggis, oatcakes, Scotsmen."

"They export themselves?" said Thunderbags. "What kind of economy is that?"

"It's their way of taking over the world," said Harmon. "They start as humble immigrants in foreign lands; then they get everybody hooked on clans and tartans. They control the franchise, of course."

"What's this?" said Thunderbags, pointing at a vast assemblage of cranes and scaffolding.

"It's a shipyard."

"That's what a nation looks like?" said Hank.

"That's part of it. It's called a subsidized industry. Every great nation has lots of subsidized industries."

"So we need a haggis factory, an oatcake factory, a bagpipe factory and a shipyard?" said Hank.

"A shipyard could come in handy if you ever needed another ark," said Harmon.

"We were promised we wouldn't," said Thunderbags.

"Well you might want to recreate the original event one day, just to show the kiddies."

"Can we build all of this with mud bricks," said Brubaker.

"I don't see why not."

"And with this subsidized shipyard thing; we use it to build lots of ships, then we wait for a heavy rainfall so the ships can float away to the sea?" said Hank, who wasn't much of a sailor.

"Um, Hank..., " said Brubaker.

"I know, I know; I wasn't born yesterday. We'll use the ships for storing milk and honey, in case we have another famine."

"But we haven't found any milk and honey," said Brubaker.

"We will. We were promised."

Thus it was, Brubaker took charge of the preliminary details, because he'd pointed out so many problem areas.

It pays to keep your mouth shut at committee meetings.

Vast quantities of mud bricks were assembled. The foremen studied the encyclopedia illustration, but the more they pored over it, the more it looked like something that had come down from the executive offices.

Eventually, however, in the ruined city of Bucket, the first part of a great new nation arose. There was a shipyard, a haggis factory, an oatcake factory and a bagpipe factory.

Six months later, the first ship slid down the causeway into a sand dune.

"That can't be right!" said Thunderbags.

"It'll give the archaeologists something to worry about," said Brubaker.

Meanwhile, the camels admired their new industrial economy, and their mud-brick ships.

Just then, the Canaanites attacked.

Brubaker had a bad feeling about this....

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