

Captain Quark and the Time Cheaters

by

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1.01

A corsair closed in on a remote island. Landing parties assembled, received orders, and, bristling with steel, swarmed into small boats.

Islanders gathered on the beach. Infants wailed as fear stiffened their mothers' arms. A group edged forward to greet the mysterious intruders.

Storm waves washed the rowboats ashore. Sailors leaped into the surf and, clashing and cursing, hauled their crafts onto the sand. Ignoring the parley, they cast their eyes seaward.

Through a spyglass, the skipper studied the brigands as they clustered landward of the boats. Lowering the glass, he issued a command and then resumed observations.

An emissary shuffled forward. Eyeing his approach, the pirates drew their swords. The man pleaded, "Peace! We welcome you!" At the same instant, explosions rent the air. Spouts of flame burst from cannons and impacts rocked the beach.

Amidst the islanders' screams, the pirates launched a fearsome assault. The buccaneers ransacked the island. Ultimately, discerning a dearth of booty the raiders quit the island and resumed their quest for new worlds, new peoples, and the hidden paths to legendary riches...

2.01

August 15, 2721, 3:15pm

"...I'll bet that's not what you read in high school." Maxwell Muddle, professor of history at Santa Barbara College, surveyed the amphitheater. Some of the faces registered alarm. Dr. Muddle, in his early forties, balding, but otherwise sound of mind and body, had a tendency to call on his students. Worse, he often did so without posing a discernible question. Gesturing to the top of the amphitheater, Muddle hazarded, "But isn't that why you're in college? To learn the truth?"

A fit of coughing broke out. Muddle scowled at the culprit, a graduate student named Angellica de Claire. Gellie was outfitted in a striped blouse, comfy leggings and black boots. Angellica had cinched her hair into a ponytail save for a springy lock that dangled in front of her left eye. She countered Muddle's frown with an exaggerated smile.

Accustomed to taunts of this sort from his teaching assistant, Muddle responded in kind. Clapping a hand over his heart, he crooned, "Thank you ever so much, Gellie. What would I do without you?"

Sensing Muddle's sarcasm Angellica blipped out her tongue.

Over scattered chuckles, Muddle ignored Gellie's parry in favor of pursuing his elusive point. "Ironic as it may seem, the truth is..." He arched an eyebrow to emphasize the significance of his next statement, "...there is no such thing as truth."

Pausing to roll up his sleeves Muddle observed the effect his remark had produced. As he hoped, his comment created a stir that, as the moments ticked by, escalated into an agitated buzz. Drawing on long experience Muddle often instigated a climate of disciplined rowdiness as a way of sparking interest in his lectures. He called out over the hubbub, "I repeat, if it's truth you're after, don't bother searching for it in history books."

This statement achieved the agreeable result—to Muddle's ear—of arousing even greater rancor among his students. The uproar provided Muddle with an excuse to amplify his next thought. Filling his lungs, he cried, "And, in case you were wondering...the truth remains elusive because all historical facts are open to endless interpretations!" Muddle flung his arms wide, "Indeed, there are as many interpretations of history as there are interpreters. For some, the fall of Rhome was a disaster. For others..." He pumped a fist, "...a triumph!"

Muddle held his tongue to give his students time to ruminate. During the lull, Muddle swatted a spot of chalk on his slacks before posing a weighty question, "So, my fine young scholars, how do we know if one interpretation of history is better than another? Hmmm? Are all truths equal, or are some truths more equal than others?" Wandering to the front of the lecture dais Muddle splayed his hands, "Anyone care to comment?"

Intimidated by the cavernous lecture hall, the students shrank silent as snails into

their seats. Muddle sympathized. If he was in their shoes, he would do the same.

Being a requirement for most majors Muddle's Western Civ classes usually filled to the rafters. Although high enrollments had made him the darling of administrators Muddle's popularity also had drawbacks. He often had nightmares about drowning in oceans of unmarked papers.

Muddle's question dangled. Being an opponent of torture Muddle decided to answer it himself. "You know those old chestnuts about wooden teeth and coonskin caps?" Muddle wagged his head to add a finer shade of balance to his next comment, "Let's just say those versions of history don't hew as close to truth as one might wish."

The professor grinned in anticipation of his next thought; a sales pitch that he always delivered on the first day of class, "That..." Muddle beamed, "...is why it's so important to study history!"

The fact that Muddle loved his work was a secret to no one. Students often grumbled about his exams, but few complained about his lectures. Even Muddle's most disenchanting students would often concede that Muddle had a flair for making mind-numbing drivel, like history, come to life.

Muddle's eyes sparkled as he drew the disparate threads of his lecture together, "When you begin to look closely, you will see that history is full of surprises. And most surprising of all..." He delayed half a beat for emphasis, "...is that history changes."

Gleefully, Muddle noted the consternation on his students' faces. "Surely..." Muddle bopped his forehead, "...if history is naught but a transcription of past events, then it can't change! ...*Can it?*"

As he prepared to dissect this mystery Muddle noticed an odd character seated in the amphitheater. It was not uncommon for students to attend class wearing all sorts of costumes. SBC was situated on a dazzling stretch of the Pacific coast and students often attended lectures sporting little more than bathing togs. But this guy was different. To begin with, the mystery man looked like he made a living by crawling through cobwebby caves. Nor, Muddle noted wryly, did Mr. Mysterioso blow much cash on dry cleaning. In response to Muddle's gaze, the mystery man tugged his fedora down to cover his whiskery face.

Muddle tried not to stare. Strange as it seemed the mystery man could be just like any other student. SBC had recently launched a number of special degree programs for mid-career professionals. Muddle cajoled himself. Grubby or not, the mystery man probably had as much right to be in his classroom as anyone.

Speaking of classrooms, Muddle suddenly recalled that he was in the midst of a lecture. Thanks to the mystery man Muddle had completely lost his train of thought. *Hmmm... Where was I? I remember something about the Rhoman Empire and then...Aww, nuts!*

Muddle castigated himself, "*You idiot! When will you learn? If you've got to daydream, do it in your office!!*"

As a means of buying time Muddle tapped the microphone that was clipped to his shirt collar. The mike, as Muddle knew only too well, was in perfect working order and transformed his finger taps into ear-splitting thunderclaps, "Ka-THUNK! UNK-UNK!!"

While his students howled in fright, Muddle skittered to the lectern and riffled through his notes. Muddle soon found the point where he had drifted from his prepared

comments. Seeing that it would be a simple matter to get his lecture back on track, Muddle heaved a sigh. "So..." the absent-minded professor recommenced, "...do you remember all that talk about truth?" The devilish gleam rekindled in Muddle's eyes, "Well, if you study history carefully enough, you'll quickly discover that it contains no truth whatsoever!"

Muddle's students shifted in their seats. Why their professor should be so elated about his field's grievous shortcomings was a real puzzler.

Aware that he was skating on thin ice, Muddle added, "Once you delve into the illusions of orthodox history—such as, who deserves credit for discovering Amerrica—you will understand how the past can change, because..." Muddle's pulse quickened, "...*you* will have changed it!"

Muddle fell back a step and held his breath. He had dropped his bombshell. The professor exhaled slowly and agonizingly. Down and down sank his chest and with it went Muddle's hopes. Instead of erupting into riotous applause Muddle's students looked singularly unimpressed. Muddle imagined that he could hear crickets chirping in the amphitheater.

He sighed. Some things never change. Muddle encountered the same reaction whenever he trotted out his blockbuster theory of *Historical Transitivity*.

Crickets...

The gist of Muddle's theory was simple but provocative. Interpretations of the past often change when priorities shift in the present. Wars, dynasties, even entire historical epochs were forever falling in and out of historical fashion. With that in mind, historical transitivity asserted that the past was just as malleable as the present.

If Muddle's theory had stopped there, he might have been able to generate enough polite interest to assuage his damaged ego. But Muddle insisted on adding another wrinkle that, as far as his students were concerned, pitched Muddle and his theory into the abyss of certifiable insanity.

Ever the optimist, Muddle was convinced that, with the right tools, he could do more than change the way that people *interpret* history. Muddle believed that, via the magic of historical transitivity, he would—somehow, some day!—find a way to alter the course of human history. For Muddle, history was not a lifeless record of bygone events. Muddle believed that history contained all of the answers to humanity's most vexing problems. All he had to do was identify the key turning points in history and then find a way to change their outcomes...*for the better!!*

Before he could finish that thought, Muddle noticed that Gellie had turned an odd shade of green. Her mouth fell open and she hoisted a shaky finger toward the classroom's flatscreen.

Being philosophically opposed to teaching with computer gadgetry Muddle rarely even glanced at the flatscreen. A screensaver typically scrolled innocuous Faux News teasers throughout Muddle's low-tech lectures. Muddle was on the verge of shooshing Gellie outside for a breath of fresh air when he noticed similar expressions throughout the amphitheater. Curious, Muddle turned to examine the screen. What he saw nearly knocked him on his can.

Instead of Faux News blurbs, the SmartScreen displayed the mind-blowing image of a vast spacecraft descending over Washington, PC. Muddle guessed that the

ship must be upwards of a kilometer—perhaps even two—in diameter. The ship was tall enough to hover a dozen meters above the White House, while, at its topmost curve, it was obscured by low-flying clouds. Though he found the idea bewildering, Muddle couldn't help thinking that the spacecraft bore an uncanny resemblance to a colossal bike wheel. The wheel rotated at a modest pace, which drew attention to its sorry state of repair. In addition to being woefully out of true a majority of the ship's spokes were either broken or missing.

As Muddle tallied the wheelcraft's list of shocking defects, a column of purple light sputtered to life at its base. The purple beam struck the White House and, for one anxious moment, Muddle feared that it might vaporize the old plantation villa. But, instead of destroying the White House, the beam popped, fizzled and then conveyed three opaque forms to the rooftop.

The first figure to emerge from the beam was a large, orange humanoid. In addition to having sunset orange skin the alien's body was shaped like an overripe citrus. The orange blob's head was topped by candy floss hair and his doughy face was accented by a triple-double chin. The alien was just as pudgy below the neck as he was above. He wore a suit of armor—which would have been intimidating if the alien's marshmallowy flesh didn't protrude through its seams.

Following the dough ball a shirtless weasel wearing camo slacks stepped out of the beam. Without a shirt, it was evident that the weasel had undergone extensive cybernetic modification. There were sensors, metallic sinew and electric motors operating throughout the critter's torso. The weasel's eyes were sharp and accusing.

The third figure to step out of the beam was a spindly, self-conscious geek. The nerd was outfitted in a black scuba suit that was bedazzled with the moniker, "The Plumber!" Comically, the plumber also toted a toilet plunger over his shoulder much as a sentry would bear a rifle.

An object unspooled from the wheelcraft. When it dropped low enough, the weasel caught it, flipped a switch on its base and then spoke into it with a heavy east European accent, "Tisd, Tisd. Von, doo, tree. Ees vorking, eh? De mick?"

Loud speakers installed in the wheelcraft's hull blasted the weasel's mike test out to a ten block radius of the White House. The dough ball assured the weasel that he was indeed holding a hot mike.

"Hokay." The weasel passed the mike to the dough ball, "You spick in de mick."

The orange blob snatched the mike from the rodent's hand. Only then did Muddle notice that the dough ball's hands were laughably tiny. In an abortive attempt to conceal this shortcoming, the blob had sheathed his right hand with a golden gauntlet. Even with the gauntlet, the poor guy had to use both hands to hold the mike. Gazing out over a swelling sea of spectators, the dough ball sneered, "Greetings, Earthlings!"

When he spoke, the blob scowled so much that Muddle wondered if his tongue had gone rancid, "Today, you have the honor of being addressed by the most awesome bazillionaire in the Infiniverse!"

Muddle blinked, "Did that guy just say he's...?"

"That's right," The blob cut Muddle off, "You never thought you would be so lucky, did you?" To encourage audience feedback, the dough ball raised his arm in an alarming approximation of a Nutzi salute.

There were gasps from Muddle's students. Not believing his eyes, Muddle turned to Gellie, "Is this some kind of joke...?"

"That's right..." The orange blob resumed, "...today you have the great good fortune—and I mean the really amazing fortune—of being addressed by the most amazing speaker who's ever set foot in this shithole country." The dough ball encouraged the crowd to shower him with affection, "Throughout my life, my two greatest assets have been mental stability and being, like, really smart. Which not everyone has. I can assure you."

In response to a signal from the blob, the weasel and Plumber began whapping out a drumroll on their thighs.

The dough ball soaked up a few more moments of adulation before braying, "...Get ready to be amazed, Earthlings. Cuz, I am the one! The only!! **URANUS BLOWHARD!!!**

There was a confused silence. Practically everyone on Earth expected the speaker to confess that he was a poker-faced comedian rather than a nincompoop named Uranus, but that didn't happen.

"No doubt..." Blowhard wagged a teensy finger at the White House crowd, "...you are wondering, 'Why is this sex-pot bazillionaire wasting time on losers like us?'" Blowhard didn't wait for his audience to register the insult, "The answer is that I have come here to help you."

Uh, oh! Muddle's skin crawled, *What's this guy up to?*

"At great personal cost, I have come here..." Blowhard droned hypnotically, "...to build border walls, badmouth immigrants, commit high crimes and misdemeanors and, generally speaking, do everything I can to Make Amerriica Great Again. "

No sooner had Blowhard uttered those altruistic sentiments than an infectious chant began to emanate from the wheelcraft.

"MAGA...MAGA...MAGA..."

Without knowing why, the crowd outside the White House felt a burning urge to chant.

"MAGA! MAGA! MAGA!"

Like pistons in an engine, Muddle's students took up the chant.

"MAGA!! MAGA!! MAGA!!"

Like a fast-moving pandemic, people in every corner of the USA suddenly started babbling.

"MAGA!!! MAGA!!! MAGA!!!"

Feeling queasier by the moment, Muddle tried to dismiss his students, but his fare-thee-wells were drowned out by his students' deafening cheers.

"MAGA!!! MAGA!!! MAGA!!!"

2.02

August 15, 2124, 3:48pm

Clutching a wad of lecture notes Muddle unlocked his office door and nudged it open. The office, furnished in tasteful hardwood, was overstuffed with straggling heaps of junk--or what Muddle preferred to describe as historical artifacts. Despite the best efforts of a first-rate ventilation system, a musty-attic smell pervaded the room.

After tossing the lecture notes on his desk Muddle plopped into a chair, unlocked a secure side drawer and shuffled through its contents: a multitude of brownish prescription bottles. Sifting through the containers Muddle eventually located a bottle in which a few tablets rattled. He wrestled with its cap. When the cap wouldn't budge Muddle scrutinized the label to see if the bottle was, in fact, worth opening.

Snick...

A bank of fluorescent lights flickered to life overhead.

"Hey, Max, it might help if you had some light." Muddle turned to discover Angellica's bright eyes peeping around his door. She inquired, "Mind if I come in?"

"No. Not at all, Gellie, come right in." Muddle waved toward a wingback chair that was occupied by a teetering stack of newspapers. "Don't mind the papers, Gellie. I'm just going to recycle them."

Angellica rolled her eyes and tipped the papers to the floor before flouncing sideways into the wingback. "So..." Angellica gushed, "What did you make of that whole 'MAGA, MAGA, MAGA' thing?"

"Ugh..." Muddle winced as his headache spiked, "It was like a bad dream."

"*Like a bad dream?* Is that all you have to say, Max?" Angellica swung her feet to the floor and scooted her chair closer to Muddle's, "C'mon, Max! You can do better than that. I mean..." She slapped Muddle's knee, "Do you think Blowhard's MAGA mania could have anything to do with that dopey theory of yours?" Gellie threw back her head and roared with laughter, "Wouldn't that be hilarious, Max? I mean, you could finally say that your crackpot theory isn't the dumbest thing since self-igniting matches."

"Wha-...!" Muddle clutched a hand to his heart, "Crackpot theory...!?"

Before Muddle could say any more, there was a heavy knock on his door, "BANG! BANG! BANG!"

Muddle and Gellie exchanged looks.

The visitor knocked again with greater urgency, "BANG!! BANG!! BANG!!" and then inquired, "Hello? Is anyone there?" The voice, though growly and bear-like, also bore a note of good cheer, "Ahoy! I seek an audience with Professor Maxwell Muddle. Is this his place of work?" The visitor pounded again—this time nearly hard enough to bash the door off its hinges, "BANG!!! BANG!!! BANG!!!"

Fearing that the visitor's door-knocking might soon bring the roof down, Muddle sang out, "Uhh, hello? Who, may I ask, is calling?"

“Ah, good!” The cheery voice boomed, “Er...If it’s not too much trouble, would you mind opening the door?”

Muddle cringed, “Well, I...don’t usually open the door to strangers. Especially strangers who sound like bears. I hope you understand.”

“Ah, yes.” The thundering voice conceded, “I get that a lot. To put your mind at ease, professor, I assure you that I am not a bear. Also, I have been given a password that should convince you of my good intentions. Would you like to hear it?”

A password? Muddle glanced at Gellie for advice. She shrugged, “Either way, you don’t have to open the door.”

Seeing the sense in Gellie’s feedback, Muddle shouted to the caller, “Okay, my good man. Please tell me your password.”

“Ah, good...just...one moment...” There was a short pause followed by a sequence of growly grunts and groans. The next thing Muddle heard was the creepy sound of a bear panting beneath his door. The visitor puffed, “...I do apologize, professor, but my visit must remain a closely-guarded secret. Would you mind if I whispered the password into your ear?”

“Oh...ugh!” Muddle recoiled at the thought of a grizzly bear nuzzling his ear. Instead, he threw caution to the wind and, in spite of a frown from Gellie, opened the door. To Muddle’s lasting surprise, he found a huge viking lying horizontally in the hallway.

The viking beamed, “Professor Muddle! We meet at last. I am Thud, the God of Thunder.” The viking tried to hug Muddle, but was thwarted by the Lilliputian doorframe. Following the failed hug, Thud inquired, “Professor, would you mind if I entered your office?”

“Oh...” Muddle fell back a step and compared the viking’s shoulders to the doorway, “Sure, Thud. If you can squeeze through, be my guest.”

“Ha-ha! Not to worry professor.” Thud paused to direct a smile at Gellie, “As you might guess, I encounter this problem a lot, so...” The viking wheezed, “...I get plenty of practice.”

Thud was wearing a Minnesota Vikings jersey. As he wriggled through the doorway, Thud’s labors were accompanied by the sound of shredding fabric. By the time he finished, the jersey was in tatters.

Once inside Muddle’s office, Thud sat cross-legged to keep his head below the ceiling tiles. Assessing the sorry state of his jersey, Thud addressed Gellie, “Dear lady, would you care for a souvenir?”

“Excuse me?” Gellie blinked.

“My jersey.” Thud indicated his demolished shirt, “Women find me irresistible and they are ecstatic whenever I remove my clothing, so...” Thud whisked the jersey over his head, “...I am always happy to oblige.” Every muscle in Thud’s torso rippled like corded steel.

“Ach! No, please!” Gellie averted her eyes, “Look, Thud, that’s kind of you, but I have a boyfriend, and he may not be a Norse god, but...” Gellie’s eyes gleamed at the thought of her beau’s antique slide rule collection, “...he’s my guy.”

“Nonsense!” Ignoring everything Gellie just said, the viking balled up his shirt and tossed it to her, “I am Thud, the God of Thunder. No woman can resist me. You see?”

Thud struck a pose and gazed rapturously at himself.

Gellie frowned at the jersey and, when Thud wasn't looking, tossed it aside. Sensing the opportunity, Gellie made a beeline for the door, "It's been a pleasure gentlemen, but I've got to go."

"Wha-at?" Muddle's voice cracked, "Aw, come on Gellie. Can't you stay? I mean..." He gestured toward Thud, "Please!!"

"Professor?" Thud stopped flexing long enough to interpose, "I believe your associate is correct. It would be best to keep our conversation private."

"See, Max?" Gellie suppressed a giggle, "You don't want me eavesdropping on your man-cave bidness, do ya'?" Gellie managed to get one foot out the door before Muddle bounded across the room and caught her by the shoulder.

Panting into Gellie's ear, Muddle pleaded, "Gellie, I...I really wish you would stay."

Deaf to his request, Gellie waved farewell to Thud, "See ya' later, big guy. It's been a pleasure."

"Dear lady," Thud blew a kiss, "The pleasure has been all mine."

Gellie pretended to catch Thud's kiss and then, as Muddle pressed close, wiped her hand on his shirt.

"Gellie, please!" Muddle whined, "You can't leave me alone with this guy!"

"Max," Gellie jabbed a finger into his chest, "Don't you think it's a little strange that only blippets after Uranus Blowhole arrives...?"

"*Blowhard*," Muddle corrected.

"Who cares?" Gellie retorted, "Think, Max! There's gotta be some connection..." She thrust Muddle back into his office, "...and it's your job to figure out what it is."

As Muddle stumbled backward, Thud snagged him by the shirt collar, "Gotcha, professor!" Hoisting Muddle like a prize fish, Thud beamed, "Guess who won the Asgardian fishing contest three years running?"

"Hah!" Gellie admired Thud's trophy, "See ya' later, Max! Oh, and, Thud...?" She winked, "...not if I see you first, pal!" Without awaiting a reply, Gellie vanished like a Republican on tax day.

Meanwhile...

Shillary Claptrap was scribbling memos when a column of purple light erupted in the Oval Office. Out stepped Uranus Blowhard. The blob had traded his battle armor for an ill-fitting business suit.

"So, if it isn't Crooked Shillary," Blowhard sneered, "Still up to no good, I'll bet."

"Ha!" Claptrap countered, "The pot badmouths the kettle." She raked a reproachful eye over the blob, "You don't have the necessary clearance for Oval Office visits, Blowhard, so I suggest you clear out."

"Necessary clearance? Ha!" Blowhard plopped down on a settee, "Did you have the necessary clearance for that email server of yours?"

“Very funny.” Claptrap glowered, “You play dirty, Blowhard. I’ll give you that.”

“Speaking of which...” Blowhard snapped his fingers and his sidekick, Igor Lutin, popped out of another purple transport beam, “...Igor has reviewed the vote tallies from your so-called...” He twiddled his fingers, “...popular election. And, as I suspected, Igor has discovered a number of alarming irregularities...”

“Da!” The little weasel chimed in, “I spot chitting mile 'vay.”

“Chitting?” Claptrap rounded, “Don’t be ridiculous. I crushed Dimbulb Tramp by three million votes.”

“So? You admit it!” Uranus swatted Lutin’s arm, “See? I told you we would catch her out, didn’t I?”

“Da.” Lutin acceded, “Yoo zay, zhe zay”

“What are you babbling about?” Claptrap ticked off a few of her unprecedented electoral achievements, “I am the first woman to be elected US President, the American people love me and I am sending thank-you cards to everyone who helped Shillary ‘*The Hotrod!*’ Claptrap pull off such an historic victory.”

“The people love you?! Don’t make me laugh!” Blowhard scoffed, “There’s no way you could get that many votes without cheating.”

“How dare you?” Claptrap was aghast, “I won the election fair and square.”

“That’s a lie!” Blowhard pointed at a stack of documents that Lutin was carrying, “You only won because millions of illegal aliens stuffed ballot boxes for you.”

“Hogwash!” Claptrap steamed, “Let me see that report.”

“Nyet! Nyet!” Lutin tucked the documents behind his back.

“Not so fast, Shillary,” The blob struggled to his feet, “Igor and I have just had a meeting with the Supreme Court. We all agreed that you are as crooked as a dog’s hind leg.”

“But...” President Claptrap appealed to the heavens, “...the Supreme Court has no jurisdiction...”

“Put a cork in it!” Blowhard barked, “Everyone agrees that my scheme is vastly preferable to having you in the White House.”

Claptrap was thunderstruck, “...your scheme?”

Blowhard whipped an envelope out of an inner pocket and slapped it on Claptrap’s desk, “Read it and weep, Shillary...” The blob savored each word like a bacon-wrapped weenie, “*Yuhh* fi-yuhhed!”

2.03

August 15, 2124, 4:23pm

Thud smiled at his prize fish, "Gotcha, Professor! Now where shall I put you?"

"Dccchhnnn...plzzzz...", Muddle choked as his collar cut into his throat.

"Oh, of course!" The thunder god released Muddle and the professor crumpled to the floor.

Concerned by Muddle's lassitude, Thud tried to deliver a bracing whack on the professor's back. However, Muddle saw the brute coming and skittered out of range. "Forggcchet it, Thud," Muddle rasped, "I'm fine. Juccht fine." When his windpipe eventually snapped back into shape, Muddle struggled into his chair and urged Thud to sit in the furthest corner of his office, "I think you'll find...hack-ack...that's the most comfortable... hack-ack...seat I have..."

"Thanks anyway, professor..." Thud demurred, "...but none of your chairs are equal to the challenge. If you don't mind..." Just as he had done in the hallway, Thud stretched out horizontally, "...this is the safest way for me to repose in a dollhouse."

Muddle raised an eyebrow, but elected not to comment, "...so, Thud...what can I d-...?"

"Hold it right there, professor..." Thud cut in, "I'll wager you are wondering why I'm here. Isn't that right?"

"Yeah, okay." Muddle bobbed his head, "You are the first Nordic god who has ever dropped in on my office hours. I can't wait to learn what would occasion a visit from someone of your eminence."

"HA-HA!!" Thud chuckled, "That is kind of you to say, professor. However, the honor is entirely mine." Feeling duty-bound to reciprocate, Thud placed a hand over his heart and pronounced, "And you, Professor Muddle, are the first teacher with whom I have ever discussed anything but lost homework."

Muddle smiled. The oversized puppy was difficult to dislike. Duplicating the god's good cheer, Muddle invited, "Okay, Thud. Enlighten me..." The professor steeped his fingers, "...how can I be of assistance?"

"Ah!" The god tapped his nose, "Time for brass tracks, eh, professor?" Thud unsnapped the thigh pocket of his cargo pants and produced a travel-weary envelope. Holding the crinkled missive between thumb and forefinger, Thud presented it to Muddle.

The plot thickens!

Muddle's expression remained blasé, but his heart pounded. Hoping that the message would shed more light on Thud's unusual visit, Muddle accepted the envelope. But, before he even resettled in his chair, Muddle frowned and tried to return the letter, "Sorry, big guy, but you've delivered this to the wrong person. This letter is addressed to..." Muddle stifled a snicker, "...Dr. Stephen Strangelove."

“No, professor!” Thud drew back as if the letter was made of rotten fish, “That letter is yours to keep.”

“Hmm...” Muddle tried to trick the thunder god into reclaiming the envelope, “...okay, Thud, but I just noticed my shoelace is untied. Would you mind holding the envelope until I re-tie it?”

“I am sorry professor...” Thud wagged a finger, “...but my supersister, the Black Window, cautioned me against that very ploy.” The god shook his head, “Nothing you can say will convince me to reclaim that letter. I’m sorry.”

Muddle gazed at the envelope. “Well...” He fussed, “...what am I supposed to do with it?”

“I beg you, professor.” Thud exhorted, “Read the letter. Though I cannot join your adventure, I am here to help you make the best possible start.”

Muddle’s eyes flitted between Thud and the missive. Though worse for wear, the envelope was made of a lustrous paper that added a certain gravitas to the dispatch. The professor shot one final glance at Thud and then reached for his letter opener. After slicing open the envelope, Muddle drew out a card that felt more like balsa wood than paper. The card’s outer face was devoid of markings.

When he opened it, Muddle was surprised to find nothing but splotches of ink. Not knowing what else to do, Muddle touched one of the ink spots and then, before his eyes, the ink began to swirl and dance.

Watching the ink cavort, Thud advised, “Do not be alarmed, professor. The sender thought it best to encrypt the message.”

Muddle peered at Thud, “Encrypt?”

Thud nodded, “Give it a blippet.”

No sooner had Thud spoken than the ink began to resolve into a flowery script, “Ah...” Muddle settled a pair of reading glasses on his nose, “...here we go.”

Thud gazed warmly at the text as if at an old friend. “It is a remarkable form of encryption. No one has ever cracked the code because retrolactic splatter only decrypts when the person who is responsible for the mess tries to clean it up.”

If anything, Thud’s explanation only confused Muddle more. Setting aside the enigma of spilled milk encryption, the professor focused on the card’s now-legible message:

Dear Dr. Strangelove,

Universes are colliding. There is a great disturbance in the Farce. Much that once was is lost, for none now live who remember it. And some things that should not have been forgotten were lost.

I hereby summon you to the Council of Ozland. The Council will take place this evening at the Crossroads of Humanity...

Muddle gawked at Thud, “Council of Ozland? Crossroads of Humanity? What is this?”

Thud shook his head, “Please read the entire message, professor.”

Seeing little alternative, Muddle huffed and then resumed reading:

...We believe that you hold the key to resolving this cosmic crisis. I implore you to attend tonight's Council. We must act swiftly, or all will be lost!

Sincerely,

Lady Galahadriel & Co.

Muddle re-read the message and then looked Thud square in the eye, "Is this some kind of joke?"

"No, professor! It is no joke." Thud replied, "I should have thought Uranus Blowhard's untimely arrival would have made that obvious."

"What?" Muddle gasped, "You mean, this has something to do with Blowhard?"

"Oh, dash it...!" Thud groaned, "...they told me not to divulge that. I am such a dunderhead!" He cracked a meaty fist against his skull.

"Easy, big fella!" Muddle winced at the knuckle marks on Thud's forehead, "Just forget it. Okay? I won't, uhh....Hmm... Hang on a sekk..."

Silence.

Muddle reflected on the circumstances surrounding Thud's visit and suddenly experienced an "Aha! moment." His eyes flew wide, "Now I get it! The 'they' you just referred to is the Scavengers, isn't it?"

Thud turned a whiter shade of pale, "...uh...I...uhhh...."

Muddle was too caught up in his excitement to register Thud's woe, "What a great idea! The Scavengers are going swoop in and save the day! Oh, what a relief!!"

Then Muddle noticed that the Thunder god's complexion had morphed from rosy to green. "Hey, Thud." Muddle prodded, "What's up? You look like there's been a death in the family."

Thud winced when Muddle raised the issue of family mortality. Stiffening his upper lip, Thud blubbered, "Sniff-sniff. It is ironic that you should mention deaths in the family, professor, because..." Thud's voice cracked, "...because..."

"Oh, no...!" Muddle clapped a hand over his mouth, "I'm so sorry, Thud. Is...it your brother? What's his name...Loogi? Has he pretended to die again?"

"Would that it were so, professor." Thud sobbed, "Unfortunately, Loogi is in perfect health. No..." The hulking Norge clambered into a sitting position and produced a god-sized pocket tissue, "...death has not claimed any *single* member of my family. Rather, death has robbed me of my entire superfamily. The Scavengers are..." Thud trailed off, "...no more..."

"What?" Muddle flew out of his chair, "Nooo!! The Scavengers can't have disbanded! You're the earth's most profitable heroes, aren't you? I thought the Scavengers had sworn to combat evil to eternity and beyond!!"

"Bah!" Thud flipped his hand, "That's all a PR smokescreen. The truth is we can't stand each other." The god's voice gnarled with wrath, "And the Iron Maiden is worst of all!" He mocked, "'Ooooh, look at me. I'm rich. I'm good looking. I can count to a thousand...' Aaarrgghh!" Thud pounded an imaginary Iron Maiden into the dirt.

Muddle refused to give up, “C’mon Thud. Couldn’t you reunite long enough to kick Blowhard’s butt and then go back to hating each other?”

“No!” Thud growled, “It can’t be done. I’ve tried, but it’s no use. The Scavengers will not answer the call. Not this time.” Wistfully, he added, “Perhaps...nevermore...”

“So...” Muddle clutched two handfuls of hair, “...the Scavengers refuse to battle an intergalactic tyrant, and *I’m* the next card in your rolodex?”

Thud’s brow furrowed, “What’s a rolodex?”

“Doesn’t matter.” Muddle flopped face first across his desk. Without lifting his mouth from the desktop, he garbled, “My point is that I have nothing—and I mean NOTHING!!—to offer in the fight against Uranus Blowhard. Why come to me?”

“Actually, professor...” Thud parried, “...that is not true. Remember what Lady G said, You...” Thud rumbled his voice, “...*hold the key!*”

“The key?” Muddle kept his face mashed on his desk, “What key? I don’t have any key.”

“But that’s where you’re wrong, professor...” Thud ransacked his memory. As he did so, waves of heat radiated from the god’s overtaxed brain until... “Ah, yes! The Black Window said the ‘key’ is something you wrote.”

“What...?” Muddle perked up, “Something...I...wrote, you say? Wow. Did the Black Window say anything...else...?”

“Hmmm...” Thud summoned every watt of brain power in his cranium, “...the Black Window said something about...a...a hyperbolic nativity,” Thud shrugged, “...but it didn’t make sense, so I didn’t mention it...”

“Hyperbolic nativity...?” Muddle’s heart thumped. *Could it be?!?* Smelling a rat Muddle scanned the room for hidden cameras. Seeing nothing untoward Muddle waded in ever so gently, “Sooo, Thud...do you think the Black Window might have said something like ‘historical transitivity?’”

“Hysterical transistery? Hmmm...” Thud stroked his chin, “Noooo...I don’t think so...”

“Transitivity, you...er... great guy...!” Muddle barely bit off the insult in time. He took a deep breath before trusting his mouth again, “Admittedly, transitivity doesn’t exactly roll off the tongue...”

“No! It doesn’t, but...” the thunder god hedged, “...it’s not the sort of word you’d easily forget, is it?”

“No...” Muddle’s voice cracked, “...no, it isn’t”

“Well, that settles it!” Thud boomed, “Now that you mention it, I clearly recall that the Black Window subscribes to your theory of horizontal relativity. If...” Thud deferred to Muddle, “...that means anything to you.”

“Oh, yes...” Muddle sniffled, “Yes, it does.” With that, Muddle rose to his feet and pronounced, “After giving the matter all due consideration, I have decided to attend tonight’s Council of Ozland.”

“Hooray!!” Thud whooped, “You have no idea how happy that makes me, professor.”

Strutting around like he had just won the Monaco Grand Prix, Muddle beamed at Thud, “So, where is this Crossroads of Humanity, anyway?”

“Ah, how could I forget?” Thud rattled the loose screws in his head, “The Crossroads of Humanity, my dear professor..” He swung a hand skyward, “... is located on the moon.”

Muddle choked, “On the moon!!!”

“Indeed.” Thud chuckled Muddle playfully on the chin, “And the best part is that I have personally arranged your transportation...”

Meanwhile...

Back in the Oval Office, there was a knock on the door.

Blowhard sang out, “En-Tahhh!!”

The geeky plumber poked his head through the door, “You called, sir?”

“Da.” Lutin beckoned, “Vee spick you, Edfarrht.”

As he shambled to Blowhard’s desk, the Plumber stammered, “Hey, Igor, it’s not a big deal or anything, but would you please stop calling me Edfarrht?”

“Vat?” Lutin blinked, “I zay, Edfarrht. Vat ees problem?”

“No, no.” The Plumber wrung his hands, “I don’t mind if you call me Edward, or Snowjob, but please don’t call me Edfarrht. Okay?”

Lutin was lost, “You zay Edfarrht ees problem?”

Snowjob nodded, “Yes, it’s embarrassing when you call me Edfarrht.”

“Ah, zo...” The weasel struggled to wrap his head around the problem, “I zay Edfarrht? Ees feex?”

“No, no, no...!”

“Enough!” Blowhard interrupted, “No one cares, Edfart. Take a seat.” As Snowjob settled into a chair, Blowhard got right down to business, “Igor tells me you’re the best plumber in the business.”

“Da.” Lutin broke in, “Edfarrht ees beast. Trust, Igor. He know.”

“Course, I trust you.” Blowhard patted the rodent’s head, “I never make a move without you, do I?”

“Da. No moof teel I feex.”

“Edfart, I have a very important job for you.” Blowhard directed Snowjob’s attention to a door several meters from his desk, “The toilet in the executive washroom is woefully inadequate. I need you to install an upgrade.”

“Inadequate, sir?” Snowjob cringed, “How so?”

“Let me put it like this...” Blowhard laid his cards on the table, “...I eat twelve full meals per day, Edfart. So, when it’s howdy-doddy time I need a high-capacity fixture. Get it?”

“Oh...” Snowjob looked confused, “...but you know I’m not *that* kind of plumber, don’t you?”

Blowhard stared daggers at Snowjob, “Igor told me that you have the necessary skills for this job, Edfart. Are you saying Igor is wrong?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Snowjob saw Igor slash a finger across his throat.

"No!" Snowjob shrieked, "I would never say that! Of course, I can handle the job. You can count on me!"

"Good." Blowhard shifted his attention to other matters, "You need to get right on this, Edfart. I haven't saddled up all day and it's almost high noon. Capish?"

"Sir!" Snowjob bolted to his feet, "Yes, sir! I'll have that toidy flowing like Victoria Falls before you can say, Deep State Conspiracy!" Then Snowjob raced over to the washroom, flung the door wide and dove headfirst into the commode.

2.04

August 15, 2124, 6:47pm

Concealed in an evergreen thicket, Gellie waited for Muddle to emerge. From her current position, Gellie could monitor the lights in Muddle's office while also keeping an eye on his preferred exit. The exit opened onto SBC's central quad. The quad's extraordinary vista daily inspired students to sunbathe, play volleyball, throw frisbees—anything but study. So much for academics at Santa Barbara College.

Gellie could only guess what Muddle was up to. More than once she had been tempted to scale the wall outside his office—a tricky maneuver due to the building's smooth adobe surface. In the past, Gellie had routinely spied on Muddle that way. But, wacky as this day had been, Gellie feared that Muddle would choose today of all days to notice a pair of prying eyes outside his window. Curious as she was, Gellie decided that patience would net the greatest gains.

As the sun sank, a dreamy glow spread over the campus. A cool breeze, pungent with coastal eucalyptus, wafted from the beach. Gellie snuggled inside her overcoat to stave off the chill. The zephyr also bore the rumble of high-tide breakers pounding the beach. Following a long afternoon of ceaseless observation, Gellie was on the verge of drifting off when Muddle finally burst out of his building.

Instantly on full alert, Gellie produced a pair of opera glasses. Remaining tucked in the bushes, she muttered, "Sooo, Max...why the sudden hurry?" Following a peek over her shoulder, she added, "You didn't even switch off the lights in your office. Hmmm. That isn't the Max Muddle I know."

In the distance, Muddle veered off the sidewalk onto a path that angled directly to the library. Peering through her field glasses, Gellie remained hidden until Muddle had nearly crossed the quad. When she judged that Muddle had accumulated a sufficient head start, Gellie tucked her binoculars away and stepped out of the bushes. Wary of remaining unnoticed, she set off in hot pursuit of her quarry.

Gellie noted that Muddle was traveling light: at present he only toted a slim briefcase. Also, cool as the day had become, Muddle's sleeves were still cuffed to his elbows. Gellie reflected. *Feeling the heat, Max? I wonder who else is on your tail?*

As she hastened across the quad, Gellie was surprised to see Muddle mount the steps into the library. She muttered under her breath, "What's this, Max? A detour?"

Sprinting to close distance, Gellie's clothing and exceptional speed rendered her as invisible as a raptor flitting beneath the moon. When she arrived at the library, Gellie skipped up the steps two at a time.

Like many of SBC's buildings, a wealthy alumnus had financed the library's construction. In gratitude, SBC had christened the building with its benefactor's melodious name. In addition to gratifying egos, personalizing buildings also enhanced patron generosity. What well-heeled narcissist could tolerate having their name

emblazoned on an eyesore? Consequently, SBC was swarming with architectural gems, and none was more stylish than the twelve floor, art moderne Helga Humbugger Library. Affectionately nicknamed, The Jukebox.

Peering through the library's first floor windows, Gellie detected no sign of Muddle. As she pushed through the revolving door, Gellie concocted a cover story in case she bumped into Muddle, "...oh, hey Max! Yeah, I'm checking out some books. Sure, they've got the same volumes at UCLA, but Humbugger is usually less busy. Especially on weeknights...Yadda, yadda, yadda..."

A quick scan of the lobby revealed no sign of Muddle. Gellie hastened to the circulation desk where the librarian, Lester Fine, remarked that he might have spotted Muddle only blippets earlier.

"Hmm, I can't be certain, Ms. de Claire, but I think someone dashed into the elevator a little while ago." He jerked his head toward the bank of stainless doors. "It might have been Dr. Muddle, but I couldn't be sure."

"Thanks, Lester." Gellie examined the elevators. One was on the ground floor, whereas the other had just begun a descent from the tenth floor.

Muddle's carrel was on the tenth floor!

Lester noticed that Gellie seemed anxious, "Is everything alright, Ms. de Claire?"

Gellie answered breezily, "Sure, Lester, everything's fine. Some students and I are throwing Dr. Muddle a surprise party. If you see Max, please don't tell him I'm looking for him, okay?"

Hearing this, Lester's eyes widened, "Oh, now I get it."

Something in his tone halted Gellie in her tracks, "Uhh...excuse me, Lester. Did you say you noticed something?"

Lester cupped a hand to his mouth, "Now that you mention it, Ms. de Claire, there was a man looking for Dr. Muddle earlier." Lester shivered, "He looked pretty sketchy. But, now that you mention the surprise party, I guess it makes sense..."

Still troubled by the memory, Lester added, "That guy sure didn't look like a student. If anything, he looked more like an old western outlaw, but, um... never mind..." Lester absently thumbed a stack of scratch paper, "Soooo...about that surprise party...it wouldn't happen to be a costume party, would it?"

Gellie's forehead furrowed, "What? Costume party? I...I don't know, Lester..." Sensing disappointment, Gellie adjusted, "Hey, you know what? Now that I think about it...Sure, it's a costume party." She examined the elevators again, "Uhh, Lester, did that outlaw arrive just before I got here?"

"No," Lester shook his head, "He's been here a while."

The descending elevator arrived with a subdued ding. Its doors breezed open and out shuffled an ancient librarian pushing a massive book wagon. The cart appeared to outweigh the librarian by ten-to-one. Seeing his colleague, Lester shouted, "Hey, Myrtle! Guess what? They're throwing a surprise party for Dr. Muddle!"

Myrtle received the news without so much as a raised eyebrow. Instead, she plucked a hanky from her right sleeve and honked an extraordinary cloud of book dust from her nose.

Undeterred, Lester hastened around the circulation counter, "That's not the even best part, Myrt!" He shook both fists exultantly, "It's going to be a *costume* party!"

Still evincing no sign of interest, Myrtle lifted the reading glasses from her nose and began polishing them on her blouse. Sidling up to his colleague, Lester proposed, "Myrt! This is our big chance! Remember our lion tamer costumes? We can finally break them out tonight!" Initially, Myrtle remained unmoved, but then, ever so slowly, one corner of her mouth twitched upward.

Gellie turned away from the screwy librarians and raced to the library's central staircase. The Jukebox's infinite stairway was a quirky work of art. It corkscrewed all the way from the lobby to the library's rooftop observation deck. On each floor, the staircase afforded glimpses of the library's award-winning collections. On this night, Gellie had no time for Humbugger's collections. She raced up the stairs with a singular purpose: she had to warn Max of the danger stalking him.

The stairway's stone slabs were not only beautiful, they were also designed to muffle even the heaviest footfalls. Consequently, a gazelle like Gellie could fly up the stairs more silently than the air that sighed through the Jukebox's ventilators.

Arriving at the tenth floor, Gellie paused for a breather. Turning left she trotted between tall stacks. At each intersection, Gellie stopped and scrutinized her surroundings minutely. Along the way, she sensed nothing untoward save for the undulating flicker of a dying fluorescent tube. As she passed the moribund lightbulb Gellie peeked into a dim clearing beyond the bookshelves.

Gellie spied Muddle's carrel dead ahead. The carrel was a private reading room that was large enough to contain a desk, reading chair and a couple of stacks of books. Gellie was surprised to find the carrel's door ajar. A light was burning inside and it sounded like someone was rummaging through the carrel's contents. Remaining safely tucked in the stacks, Gellie called out, "Hey, Max? You in there?"

There was no reply, but the sound of plunder ceased. A few moments ticked by and then a figure emerged from the carrel. It wasn't Muddle. Gellie silently complimented Lester on his observation skills. The intruder definitely looked like an outlaw. Gellie noted the weapons dangling from his belt. A six-shooter hung from his right hip and on his left...Hmmm. Gellie couldn't be sure, but it looked sort of like a bullwhip.

The outlaw's clothing was grubby. He wore a leather coat and, atop his unwashed head, a soiled fedora. As he exited Muddle's carrel, the outlaw paused for a moment to admire the object he had pilfered. Gellie was certain that the outlaw had stolen the object because she had twice observed Muddle transferring the treasure from one hiding place to another.

The object was an old, oversized pocket watch. It was made of glass and a dull silvery metal. The watch was far too large to fit into anyone's waist pocket, but with the exception of being ten times larger than average, the device appeared outwardly like any other pocket watch.

The outlaw grinned crookedly and stuffed the watch into an inner pocket. Then the rogue began scanning his surroundings for the source of the noise he had heard. The outlaw growled, "Who's there? Step out where I can see you and you won't be harmed."

Agreeably, Gellie stepped out of the shadows. She appraised the outlaw and demanded, "Hand over that watch, pal!" Then she added playfully, "Do what I say and

you won't be harmed."

The outlaw chuckled, "Very funny." In bald defiance, he zipped his jacket to his chin. "I'd like to oblige, ma'am, but I've promised to deliver this watch to its new owner and..." He tipped his hat, "...I always deliver on my promises."

"I'm sure you do, but..." Gellie stated flatly, "...Max is going to be disappointed when he learns that Indiana Bones has stolen a precious artifact from him."

Bones stopped dead in his tracks. Without facing Gellie, he asked, "Uhh...what makes you think I'm Indiana Bones?"

"Ohhh..." Gellie mused, "... maybe because you're world famous for stealing treasures like the one stuffed in your jacket."

Indy's shoulders sagged, "Okay, ya' got me. I heard a rumor that Muddle had come into possession of a very precious artifact." Indy patted the bump in his jacket, "Knowing what I do about this baby, I decided it would be safer in my hands than Muddle's."

Gellie shook her head, "Since when have you become a bag boy for grave robbers, Indy?"

The barb stung. "Hold it right there, missy. If you're half as smart as you seem, you must have noticed that Max Muddle is a blithering idiot."

"Of course, he is," Gellie bopped her forehead, "He's a professor! It goes with the territory."

Dang! Bones thought, *Who was this woman? Her insults stung more than bullet wounds.*

"Very funny," Indy retorted, "My point is that scary people want to get their hands on this item. No disrespect intended, young lady, but I'm much better equipped to deal with those people than Muddle."

"I agree..." Gellie fired back, "...except for the last part." Indy looked baffled, so she clarified, "I agree that the watch is not safe in Max's hands, or in yours, but..." Gelli extended an open palm, "...it will be in mine."

"Hold it right there, sister," Indy drew his pistol, "I don't want to hurt you..."

"Then don't!" Faster than the eye could see, Gellie flashed across the room and snatched the pistol out of Indy's hand.

Wide-eyed, Bones stammered, "Hey! How did you do that?"

"Oh, that's nothing." Gellie laughed, "Watch this!" Holding the pistol in both hands, Gellie bent the steel gun barrel into a backward-curving U. "How's that for tricks?" She handed the mangled weapon back to its owner.

Numbly, Bones accepted the gun. He gazed at it in disbelief then dropped it to the floor. For the first time, Gellie heard a note of fear in Indy's voice, he quavered, "Who are you?"

"Who am I?" Gelly responded gaily, "I guess you could call me a guardian."

It took a long moment for Bones to register Gellie's answer. Finally, he stammered, "You're ...a what...?"

Gellie answered as if Indy was hard of hearing, "I s-a-i-d, I am a g-u-a-r-d-i-a-n." She could sense that Indy was still in a fog, so Gellie kept her explanation simple, "It's my responsibility to keep Max safe. Y' see?"

"Oh..." Indy moaned, "You mean you're Muddle's muscle?"

“Max’s muscle?” Gellie giggled, “Oh, that’s funny! Wait until I tell Ubie!” She flexed her arms, “I AM MAX’S MUSCLE!! Ha-ha! I’ll be baaaack!”

Even though Gellie was kidding, Indy was too shaken to discern subtleties. He raised his hands, “Well, I guess this is it, sister. Ya’ nabbed me fair and square.” Bones took in his surroundings with a heavy heart, “Who would have thought it would all end here? Indiana Bones’ last stand...” As a final gesture, Bones dragged off his hat and squashed it over his heart, “...all I ask is that you do me in quickly. Okay? I don’t want to suffer.”

“Do you in?!” Gellie parroted, “What’s that supposed to mean? I’m a guardian, not an assassin.” Gellie gave Indy’s shoulder a friendly pat, “Trust me, amigo, you’ll outlive us all.” Keeping her hand on Indy’s shoulder, Gellie adjusted her fingers and then said, “There is one more thing I’d like to show you, Indy. It’s a sure-fire cure for insomnia that I learned from an old Vulcan friend...”

Gellie tucked the watch in a side pocket as she flew down the stairs. When she exploded into the lobby Gellie was astounded to find Lester and Myrtle prancing around in sparkly costumes. Myrtle cracked a bullwhip, while Lester shouted, “What do you think, Gellie? We’re lion-tamers!”

Gellie stumbled to a halt. The librarians looked like they were primed for a Las Vegas stage show. Lester said, “You’re headed to the party I assume? We’re just closing. Where should we meet?”

A torrent of thoughts flooded through Gellie’s mind, “Oh...the party! That’s right. It’s, umm...” She snapped her fingers a couple of times until a thought sparked, “The party’s at the campus police station. But, you better hurry, or you’ll miss it!”

Lester turned to Myrtle and squealed, “Did you hear that? Grab your keys and let’s go, Myrt!”

Myrtle gave her whip another vicious crack.

Confident that Lester and Myrtle would soon be out of harm’s way, Gellie sprinted for the exit. Lowering her shoulder, Gellie bashed through the library’s revolving door and then leapt down the staircase in one great bound.

The Guardian hit the ground so hard that her inertia flung her into a somersault. Thinking nothing of this, Gellie completed the roll, sprang to her feet and took off running. Pressing a finger to her ear, Gellie activated a tiny communicator. “You there? Good. Guess what? I ran into some company.” She dodged around a bush and spoke again, “Nah, I’m fine, but I think we need to accelerate the timetable!”

Snatching a look over her shoulder, Gellie slowed to evaluate her surroundings. “No!” Gellie shouted into the device, “I know what we said, but this changes everything.” She nodded and then said, “Alright! I’ll see you in two blippets!”

Gellie muted the communicator and then hurdled a wooden fence. Once over the fence, Gellie skidded to a halt and found herself on a gravel track. She scanned the path in both directions. Spotting no one, she paused long enough to smile. With her hands free and a smooth, flat surface beneath her feet, she could finally turn on some real speed. Gellie lowered her head and blasted off for the beach like she had been

fired from a cannon.

Meanwhile...

“Now, that’s what I’m talking about.” Blowhard was admiring the high-volume toilet that Snowjob had installed, “Nice work, Edfart.”

Somewhere Snowjob had located a huge stone throne. It was high-backed and ornamented with frightening skulls. The coolest part were the blue-flame thrusters mounted underneath each leg.

“I’ve never see one one like this!” Raved Blowhard, “What kind of fuel does it burn?”

“Uhh...” Snowjob wrinkled his nose, “...I guess biofuel is probably the best way to put it.”

“You don’t say?” Blowhard whacked Snowjob chummily on the back, “Just wait till some tree-hugger accuses me of being anti-green energy! Heh-heh...” Blowhard shooed Snowjob out of the washroom, “Run along and get my iPhony, Edfart. There are urgent matters of state to which I must attend...” He patted the throne, “...while I’m ensconced...”

2.05

August 15, 2124, 7:56pm

Peace reigned on the landward face of the Helga Humbugger Library. A car rolled out of the library's parking lot. The driver switched on her headlights to cut through the deepening dusk. One spunky little car, a blue Mooney Motors Mini, remained in the center of the lot. A pinpoint of light flashed intermittently on its dashboard.

"Ka-bam!" A sharp bang flushed a dozen birds out of the eucalyptus trees ringing the parking lot. Moments later, a metal door at the library's southeast corner rattled violently. More silence followed, and then with a resounding, "KA-BLAM!!" the door blasted open. Dozens more squawking birds erupted from their perches, while, unable to control his momentum, a man wearing a solid black unitard tumbled into the parking lot.

The library's alarm system erupted into full cry and spotlights flooded the parking lot. Shaking his head the cat burglar hustled back into the basement. The cat fumbled past the broken door and snatched hold of an overstuffed backpack. As he hoisted the straps over his shoulders the burglar shrank at the sound of approaching sirens. Clipping the pack's hefty belt around his waist, the cat hustled outside and, racing toward the foliage, melted into the darkness.

Moments later, three police cruisers with lights blazing and sirens blaring skidded into the parking lot. Two officers burst out of their units, drew their weapons and hastened toward the smashed basement door. Their car radios crackled with urgent dispatches. A third officer switched on her door-mounted spotlight and began combing the parking lot's perimeter.

The black cat, who was surprisingly light on his feet, dove to the ground as the search beam scorched overhead. Panting, the cat lay on his belly, tense and fearful, as the searchlight homed in on his dust trail. Pulse pounding, the catman slid back his right sleeve to expose a sparkly, multi-hued dragon tattoo. Tapping a succession of keys embedded in the dragon's spiky teeth, the tattooter's quantro-drive nanomatrix activated and projected a 4-d dragon hologram on the black cat's arm. The cat whispered an urgent series of commands to the dragon which puffed out a noxious cloud of fumes as it idled on the black cat's arm. When the cat completed his command sequence, he said, "Y' got that, Smog?"

The little dragon bowed, "Yes, Sensei. Will ...hack-hack...that be all, Sensei?"

The cat nodded and Smog croaked, "It is an honor...hack-hack...to serve, Sensei."

Though he kept the thought to himself, the cat was annoyed that his brand new tattooter seemed to be powered by soft coal. Given the urgency of the moment, the

catman set aside his irritation and commanded, "Then off you go, Smoggie!" At the same instant, the search beam lit up the cat like a barbecued catfish.

Through a bullhorn, the officer bellowed, "All units! I have located the suspect!" Then refocusing on the cat, Officer Bernice Dentley commanded, "You there! Stand up and put your hands behind your head!"

To elude detection, when the cat said "Go!" the little dragon had spread its wings and glided in a wide, low arc to the little blue Mooney. Upon arriving at the car, the dragon melted through the passenger-side window and smote the dashboard like an adorable little meteor. Through a plume of smoke, Smoggie choked, "Ca-hack-tain Solu? Hack-ack! You have been...ca-halled to hack-tion."

In answer, a woman clad in a black unitard popped up in the rear seat and said, "Thanks, Smoggie!"

"My hack-ak-ak...Grrr!" The little dragon hacked up a volcanic cloud of smoke, "My hack-ack...pleasure...Cack-tain!" Solu slipped into the driver's seat and in the same motion powered down the Mooney's passenger window. With a jerk of her thumb Solu signalled that it was time for Smoggie to clear out. Still hacking, Smoggie streaked back to the catman.

As soon as she was buckled in, Sian Solu retracted her unitard hood and exposed two dazzling green eyes. Solu's extraordinary eyes equipped her with a superhuman ability to pilot any vehicle through any set of obstacles. No matter how hazardous.

In place of her hood, Sian slipped on a sleek racing helmet. Sian's laser green eyes cast an eerie luminescence throughout the Mooney's interior. Peering through her face shield, Solu surveyed the surrounding activity while firing up the Mooney's hot little engine. As a precaution, Solu switched on her hazard lights before throwing the Mooney into reverse and, with tires smoking, hurtling straight toward Officer Dentley.

Instantly alert to the danger, Dentley dove into her cockpit. Solu smashed Dentley's door closed and then sideswiped her rear fender. Neither car was damaged enough to prevent a chase. While Dentley seized her radio and called for additional backup, the Mooney whirled past the other stationary cruisers and gave each a solid whack before hightailing out of the parking lot.

Wasting no time, as soon as Solu had launched her attack, the catman took to his heels. The cat was confident that Solu would keep the police occupied for at least the next thirty blippets. In approximately twenty-two blippets, Solu planned to exit the north end of campus via an unpaved service road. Solu would whiz four kilometers along a gravel track and, after activating the Mooney's self-destruct sequence, Solu would launch the Mooney off of a three hundred foot seacliff. As the Mooney plummeted, Solu would eject a split sekkent before the Mooney exploded into a million scorched fragments. SBC's keystone cops would search the shoreline in vain for Solu's charred remains.

The black cat grinned. He was practically home free. While Sian drew attention to the north, the cat would escape unmarked to the south. After exiting SBC, the cat would proceed to his rendezvous at Diablo Point, a rugged, wave-washed outcrop two kilometers south of Santa Barbara College.

Aided by night-vision goggles, the catman hastened through the trees fringing

SBC's southern boundary. Locating a disused footpath, the cat padded silently along it despite its thick clutter of eucalyptus litter. Hyper-attuned to any sign of pursuit, the cat darted from tree to tree as he scurried along the dusty path. As the footpath approached the seacliff it plunged into a steep arroyo. The gulch cut a delightfully concealed route to the beach.

After placing one foot in the arroyo, the cat froze at the unmistakable crack of gunfire.

That was unexpected.

Peering through the trees, the cat grew indecisive. Solu had not outfitted the Mooney to withstand gunfire because the cat had assured her that the cops would never discharge their weapons on campus. While he dithered Smoggie started to steam and whistle like a tea kettle. The tatterer was right. There was no way to help Solu now. The cat burglar would just have to hope that Solu was as indomitable as advertised. The black cat hastened into the arroyo and scuttled down to the beach.

A breeze whistled through the ornately eroded crevice. Combined with the thunder of low-tide breakers, every peep of the hubbub on campus soon faded. Adjusting audio controls beneath his right ear, the catman was able to resume monitoring the chaos on campus. Occasional pops of gunfire echoed through the arroyo and set the cat's teeth on edge.

At the base of the cliff, the arroyo opened onto a wide, sandy beach. The cat hung back and scanned for signs of life. SBC's lights cast a faint luminosity over the sand. The cat tinkered with his hood-mounted goggles. When he shifted to beach-life mode, the shoreline came alive with a riot of nocturnal activity. Birds, bugs, and other creatures of the night scurried across the sand unaware that the cat now spied their every movement.

Intriguing as it might have been to some, the catman had no interest in the peculiarities of intertidal marine life. He had eyes for one species only. An exhaustive survey of the coastline revealed that the nearest humans were several kilometers offshore in small fishing boats. When Smoggie confirmed this report, the catman heaved a sigh. For a few minutes it had been touch-and-go, but the cat was finally convinced that he had escaped SBC unmarked.

As he rolled his head to ease the tension in his neck, the cat began to feel constricted inside his protective hood. To remedy the situation, the catman pinched the fabric at the base of his throat. Instantly, a bright flash lit his fingertips and arced in a thin circle around his neck. With a hiss of escaping oxygen, the catman's hood recoiled like a window blind into a tiny storage chamber at the base of his skull.

For the first time in an hour, Maxwell Muddle could feel fresh air on his cheeks. The evening breeze blew a chill across his forehead. Muddle raked the hair loose from his scalp and, feeling much perkier, he adjusted his backpack and trotted to the water.

Without the aid of audio amplifiers, the uproar on campus wafted to the beach in staccato bursts. SBC's south lagoon lay between Muddle and campus. Some of SBC's most venerable buildings ringed the lagoon. Without doubt, it was one of SBC's most attractive features: a brackish inlet surrounded by sweeping landscaped lawns. As is often the case with superficial beauty, the lagoon's charms were more artifice than reality.

It had cost SBC a fortune to carve a false front out of the shoreline's natural cliff face. In addition, it required massive annual outlays to repair the damage inflicted by seasonal rain and storm waves. Still, the investment had paid for itself many times over. Dazzling sunsets over the faux lagoon attracted a never-ending stream of once and future alumni.

Muddle was about to turn south when a horrendous clamor broke out. The little blue Mooney with its horn honking ecstatically exploded onto the lagoon's east lawn. Right on the Mooney's heels came a fleet of black and whites. The sea of cruisers, with lights flashing and sirens wailing, mowed down hedges, tore up flower beds and annihilated wicker furniture. Fanning out behind the Mooney, the cops appeared to be gaining the upper hand. As it angled down the lawn, the Mooney flung itself into a dizzying spin. Hurling a cyclone of mud and sand, the Mooney staved off its pursuers as they collided into a demolition derby-style blockade.

Unnerved by this spectacle, Muddle summoned Smoggie to see if Sian needed help. The little smoke-bomb streaked across the lagoon to powwow with Solu. Moments later, Smoggie zipped back and perched on Muddle's arm. Through their reptilian intermediary, Captain Solu informed Muddle that, as usual, she had her business completely under control. As for Muddle, Solu urged the meddlesome professor to devote the entirety of his remaining energies to minding his own business.

Muddle clicked his tongue. Message received.

Thinking they finally had the Mooney cornered, officers began springing out of their vehicles. Taking up positions behind their cars, the cops started peppering the Mooney with a hail of bullets. A stray slug shattered the Mooney's driver side mirror into a cloud of glassy fragments. As if in outrage, the Mooney's hood, hatch and doors began flapping like bird's wings. With the Mooney's appendages all aflutter Sian backed all the way down to the lagoon's edge. There was no escape in that direction unless the Mooney could somehow sprout fins and swim. Puzzled by the Mooney's tactics, officers along the blockade exchanged confused glances. Several holstered their weapons and edged toward their cockpits. Officer Dentley, who was cruising behind the barricade, bellowed into her PA system, "Hold your positions! We have the assailant cornered! I repeat, hold your positions!!"

At the bottom of the hill, Sian brought the Mooney to rest and throttled down to an idle. With its headlights directed at the ring of cars it looked like the Mooney had summoned the phalanx of cruisers to attend a bizarre after-hours lecture. During the lull, the sound of gunfire increased as several sharpshooters seized the opportunity to fire at a stationary target. One especially well aimed slug took out the Mooney's left headlight. The lamp expired in a dramatic explosion of glass and sparks.

In response to this affront, Sian tooted the Mooney's horn ferociously. Moments later, the horn quieted only to be replaced with the high-pitched scream of the Mooney's engine revving to the red line. With RPMs at the max, Sian dropped into gear with a transmission-mangling crunch. Fishtailing crazily, Sian tore up the slope and angled toward a tantalizing seam in the police blockade. The Mooney's doors remained splayed open, evoking a bizarre, quixotic madness to Solu's suicidal charge.

From her position behind the barricade, Officer Dentley spotted the seam that Solu was hoping to exploit. Yanking her car into reverse, Dentley floored her accelerator

and smashed the gap closed a millisekkent before the Mooney's arrival.

Not to be outdone, in the same fractured instant Solu whipped the Mooney into a wrenching right turn. Instead of dissipating its momentum on a fruitless collision with Dentley's bumper, the Mooney slewed sideways and plowed door-first into the squad car. The Mooney's hydraulic door yielded under the bone crunching impact, but only momentarily. Rather than smashing shut, in the blink of an eye, the door collapsed to absorb much of the impact and then sprang back; much like the action of a vaulter's pole and achieving much the same effect.

To the astonishment of all, the Mooney sprang into a high, twirling arc above the thunderstruck police officers. After completing no less than three barrel rolls—throughout which Solu saluted the cops with a Vulcan peace sign—the Mooney hit the ground on the uphill side of the blockade. Solu tooted the Mooney's horn jeeringly before tear-assing back to the center of the campus.

While her fellow officers gaped, Bernice Dentley shook her head. *Why did the craziest stuff always happen on her shift?* Surreal as it may have been, Dentley and her colleagues still had a job to do. Disbelieving the words even as she uttered them, Dentley roared, "Attention, all units! We have a fleeing suspect to apprehend! Return to your vehicles and resume pursuit! Let's move!"

The officers responded like they were lost in a waking nightmare. One after another, the cops fumbled into their cockpits, revved their engines and set off in pursuit of the psychotic Mooney.

Fearing that the Mooney's lease on life was dwindling fast, Muddle spun on his heel and raced toward Diablo Point. Muddle chugged along in the dense sand closer to the surf. In addition to finding firmer footing, Muddle was eager to erase all evidence of his passing as quickly as possible. Although his overstuffed backpack groaned, Muddle breezed along with only the slightest effort. Among his unitard's many amazing features, Muddle's favorite was its strength-enhancing tensioners.

Like most professors, Muddle spent the majority of his time behind a desk. Although he kept reasonably fit, Muddle was no prize fighter. Without the unitard, even a brief sprint would have left Muddle hopelessly winded. With the unitard, Muddle could shoulder backbreaking loads while loping along at a pace that would humble most track stars.

Muddle restricted his pace to minimize damage to his backpack. While the unitard was nigh on indestructible, Muddle's backpack was less remarkable. Gentle as his pace had been, Muddle had already popped several of the pack's double-stitched seams. The good news was that there was no point in hurrying. According to Smoggie, seven blippets remained before Muddle's 8:45 departure. The less time Muddle lingered at the rendezvous, the better.

As he approached Diablo Point its crags became more intimidating. A fresh breeze lashed the Point and whipped up whitecaps that pounded the barnacle-cruste rocks.

Diablo Point was famous for its unique wave break that, when conditions were just right, afforded surfers a quarter-myle of rideable, but treacherous swells. Over the jahrs, more than one surfer had misjudged the baffling array of hidden rocks and shifting currents and had been claimed by "the Devil." Or, at least, that's what locals whispered

to out-of-towners.

Muddle slowed to a walk as he approached the Point. Once again summoning his bio-scanning goggles, Muddle inspected his surroundings minutely. In the midst of his search, a shooting star streaked overhead. Muddle cursed and fell flat to the sand. Just to be safe, he remained on his belly while completing the rest of his survey.

When he was satisfied that there was no human activity, Muddle sprang to his feet and jogged to a hump of sand on the north side of Diablo Point. He shrugged off his backpack and dug through it until he located a small, pen-shaped object. Holding the device lengthwise, he twisted in opposite directions. In response, the pen stretched into a meter long, ultra-thin transponder.

Assaying the low-lying dune, Muddle tested the ground with a toe while casting an appraising eye to the horizon. Finally settling on a particular spot, he stabbed the antenna deep into the sand. Once planted, Muddle touched a tiny sensor atop the antenna. In answer, the curious device emitted a pinpoint of bluish light that, ingeniously, was only detectable by vessels approaching from the sou'west.

Muddle checked his tattooter. Smoggie hacked up the news that Muddle was still three blippets ahead of schedule. Although he was usually a stickler for running precisely on time, Muddle desperately hoped that the transponder might encourage his transport—*How had Thud described it? "...a right proper lanskip!"*—to arrive a few blippets early.

Now that he was on the cusp of departure, Muddle was assailed by anxiety. In addition to an overpowering sense of urgency, Muddle felt painfully exposed. Practically crawling out of his skin, Muddle trotted back to his pack to search for any other devices that might hasten the lanskip's arrival. Thus distracted, Muddle was caught napping by an armed intruder.

"What-o, old chap! You must be that dashed Muddle bloke everyone's nattering about. Ay, what?" An absurdly overdressed man whose accent hovered somewhere between Glasgow and Barkingmad hastened toward Muddle, "Would you be so kind as to hoist your clappers, mate?"

Heart in his throat, Muddle's mind screamed. *Who is this!?!*

The stranger was tall, slim and wore an impeccable evening suit. The bespoke gent also carried a pistol that he aimed at Muddle's vitals, "I say old bean, would you mind dancing a caper?" The dapper dude whirled a finger to illustrate, "You seem a right cob and, I'd rather not gawp your mug when I plink you."

"Plink me?!?" Muddle cried, "Why are you going to plink me?"

"Ach!" The Brit groused, "Would that I knew, mate. Just between us punters, the spyin' game i'n't what it used to be. Not by 'alf, but..." The agent's eyes took on a dreamy cast, "...back in me salad days! Those wuz a merry mess of capers! Gurgling vodka, ponking biglies, snogging petunias. Ah, those were the days, Jim! But now it's come to this...?" He snorted at Muddle, "...Special Branch has me punching timecards for wankers like you! I despair for the profession, mate, I really do..."

"Hey, wait a sekkent!" Muddle squeaked, "Did you say Special Branch?"

"Err..." The agent squinted at Muddle, "...I may 'ave, ya' ruddy berk... What of it?"

"Oh, nothing..." Muddle gulped, "but, y-...you're not that notorious secret agent

who goes by the name of...Bunk...are you?"

"Heh-heh, 'at's right mate," The assassin never tired of introductions, "Me name is Bunk..." *Pause*, "...James Bunk." The double-O extended his right hand, "Pleased to meet yer, guv."

"Oh...great...thanks..." Muddle shook Bunk's hand gingerly, "Y-...you've racked up quite the body count during your career haven't you...eh...Bunk? Heh-heh..."

"Oh, that." Bunk harrumphed, though he was clearly pleased to be infamous by reputation, "Anyone could have done it, laddie. Anyone..." Bunk stole a moment to check the time, "Crikey! I'm late fer me bridge club." Frantically, the double-O thrust his Saltwater PPK into Muddle's sternum, "Right! Cough up the secret code Beano, or I'll do you a treat!"

"Er..." Muddle looked lost, "...sorry, Bunk, I have no ide-..."

Suddenly, less than a kilometer offshore a three-masted Yankee Whipper erupted from beneath the waves.

Muddle's jaw dropped. Pointing at the ship, he quailed, "D-...did you see that, Bunk? That ship popped out of the water like... a champagne cork!"

"Bloody 'ell...!" Bunk cried, "I've never seen the like, 'ave I?"

Before Bunk could say any more, the Yankee Whipper began firing its cannons. Bursts of cannonfire revealed that the Whipper was hot on the heels of a smaller boat. The Whipper's prey looked more like a half-submerged bank vault than a seaworthy vessel. Nonetheless, Muddle felt a thrill of delight when he spotted a pinpoint of light on the bank vault's prow.

A hail of cannonfire shattered the ocean aft of the vault. The Yankee Whipper's crew adjusted their trajectories and quickly loosed another volley. Each time a cannonball struck the vault, a resonating "Ka-Thunnkkk!!" rattled the teeth of the beachfront observers.

"Cockles and mussels...!" Exclaimed Bunk. "Ee's for it now, i'n't 'ee, luv?"

"Is that supposed to be a question?" Muddle growled, "'Cause I didn't understand a word you said."

Being a historian, it irked Muddle that the Yankee Whipper's cannons fired more rapidly than they should have. However, Muddle didn't dwell on that mystery because, ever since it had surfaced, the Yankee Whipper had been cruising upwind against the current without any detectable means of propulsion. Muddle wondered if he had taken one too many headache tablets that afternoon.

Luckily for the bank vault, it had enough thrust in its engines to outpace the Whipper, but only just. As the vault closed in on Diablo Point, it switched on its deck lights. Muddle howled, "Nooooooo!!" The professor suspected that igniting party lights while under enemy fire was not considered a 'best practice' among salty sea dogs.

"Smoggie," Muddle barked at his tattooter, "I need a pair of night-vision binoculars!" As soon as Smoggie deployed the binoculars, Muddle scanned the vault from stem to stern. Muddle was pleased to spot a fine mesh of laser-shielding whenever a cannonball struck the vault.

Under magnification, Muddle could see that the vault was merely the upper tier of a much larger vessel. As Muddle marveled at the ship's titanic wake, the boat collided with a wave that boosted its prow just high enough to expose the ship's moniker: Star

Truck CNN-1701.

Bunk tapped Muddle's arm, "Oi. Is it just me, ducks, or is them crates 'eadin' straight for the rocks?"

In its zeal to outpace the Whipper, Star Truck's skipper had failed to consider other existential hazards. The Yankee Whipper had herded Star Truck into a trap. What the Whipper could not accomplish with its guns it would delegate to El Diablo's maw.

"Ka-Rrunccchh!!" At full throttle, Star Truck torpedoed headlong into El Diablo's submerged boulders. For a moment, the collision popped Star Truck's bow completely out of the water, but the ship's defiance of gravity was short-lived. Star Truck slammed down on a battlement of serrated rocks that crunched deep into its hull.

In a desperate attempt to jostle off the rocks, Star Truck's skipper gunned its docking thrusters. Alas, instead of shaking free, this maneuver only jammed the stranded ship deeper into El Diablo's gullet.

When the docking thrusters proved ineffective, Star Truck fired its primary jets. The skipper gunned the engines for all they were worth. A long roostertail spewed from Star Truck's stern. The ungainly vessel shuddered and held fast.

"AAaaaggggh, no!" Muddle howled, "You'll rip out the bottom!" Heedless, the luckless skipper gunned Star Truck's engines higher and higher. Each added decibel drove a stake deeper into Muddle's heart.

Eventually, with a gut-grinding *Scccrunchh!!* Star Truck blasted free of the rocks. Sadly, the skipper's woeful miscalculations had condemned Star Truck to a watery grave. The ship went down like a cold beer in July. There was no sign of survivors.

"The fools!" Not knowing what else to do, Muddle appealed to Bunk, "You're a secret agent, aren't you?! You must know what to do in situations like this!"

"That's a bad job, that is." The double-O shook his head, "I prefer the 'ollywood endings, I does. This 'ere..." He gestured at the swirls of foam marking Star Truck's demise, "...this is rubbish. It's like a Swedish film."

Muddle frowned, "What are you babbling about, Bunk? This isn't a movie."

"Course it's a movie," Bunk rounded on Muddle, "What else would it be?"

"Wait...what...?" Muddle suddenly felt woozy. Having nothing to clutch for support, Muddle collapsed dizzily to the sand, "Aww, geez..." Muddle complained, "...my stomach's churning, I...I can't catch my breath..."

"Don't worry, guv." Bunk checked the ammunition in his handgun, "I'll have you right in two shakes..." The double-O stood over Muddle and cocked the pistol, "Any last words?"

Try as he might, Muddle couldn't clear the cobwebs. Bizarre images swam in and out of his consciousness. Muddle tried to swat them away, but in his delirium, all he could do was groan, "ugghh..."

"What a tosser!" Bunk jeered, "For the last time, you 'opeless wanker, 'ave you any last words?"

The rising tide flung a mischievous wave far up the beach. Bunk cursed as the sweeper soaked his shoes. The cold surf also jolted Muddle out of his delirium. Muddle's vision cleared just as Bunk leveled the PPK at his nose. The professor gaped at the gun and then shouted, "Oh, my stars, Bunk! Watch out for that giant clam!!"

Meanwhile...

"White supremacy is an outrage!" Uranus Blowhard was holding his first cabinet meeting. "Just look at yourselves! Every one of you is a rich white snob!"

A few of Blowhard's sniveling secretaries tried to defend themselves, but el Presidente wouldn't hear of it. "And don't tell me white privilege is a fiction! 'Cause it's everywhere you look! For crying out loud..." He appealed to the heavens, "...we're meeting in the *White House*! What more evidence do you need?"

"But Mr. President...?" One of the reporters in the Free Speech Cage cried out, "...aren't you a white supremacist too?"

"Eh?" Blowhard scoured the room, "Who said that?"

"Eek!" The guilty party raised her hand, "I...I'm Argy Bargy, sir, your Faux News correspondent."

"Hmmpf..." Blowhard scoffed, "...I expect Faux News reporters to show a little more subservience." The orange blob pointed at his mug, "Do I look like a white supremacist?"

"Er..." Argy Bargy's tongue refused to cooperate.

While Argy Bargy was carted off to the dungeon, Blowhard turned to his cabinet team, "What about you weenies? Do you think I'm a white supremacist too?"

Blowhard's cabinet was even more tongue-tied than Argy.

"Nothing?" Blowhard's lip curled, "You can't answer a simple question?" Like most despots, Blowhard derived great pleasure from making his lackeys squirm, "It doesn't take genius to see that I am not a white supremacist. How could I be?" The President rolled up his sleeves to expose creamsicle orange arms, "Truth be told, there is no one I despise more than white supremacists."

Ironically, Blowhard's cabinet chose that of all moments to morph from white to green skin.

"That is why I am pleased to announce that, as of right now..." Blowhard lingered gleefully over the moment, "...white supremacy is dead."

You could have heard a feather drop in the meeting room.

"Say it with me brothers and sisters..." Blowhard sallied shamelessly to the top of his own mountain, "A new day has dawned. I hereby decree that henceforth Americans will celebrate August 15, 2124 as day-one of America's Post-Paleface Period." Blowhard whipped out a hankie and theatrically dabbed his dry eyes, "No longer will heartless white overlords persecute Amerrica's communities of color."

From sea to shining sea pasty-faced old boys broke out in a cold sweat.

"Beginning right now..." Blowhard rapped his knuckles on the table, "...I am calling upon all Amerricans to join me in creating a kinder, gentler pigment-loving society. At long last, Amerrica will no longer be held hostage by corrupt white supremacists. Instead, Post-Paleface Amerrica will be governed by only the best and brightest..." Blowhard's face twisted into a self-satisfied smirk, "...Orange Supremacists!"

2.06

August 15, 2124, 8:43pm

“Aaaghhh!!!” James Bunk howled as a clam-headed man cracked his skull.

“Oi! Iss that any way ta’ interduce y’sself?” A drunken, but authoritative voice, snapped at the clam. “ ‘elp that man to ‘iss feet ya’ murderouss mollusck! And look sharp, or you’ll ansswer’ to me ya’ gutless gooey-duck!”

Muddle gazed open-mouthed at the creature who had just reprimanded the clam. A man-sized seamonkey wearing a tricorn hat slurrily conveyed his regrets, “I’m terribly ssorry, mate.” The seamonkey extended a cluster of claws, “I’ve jusst promoted the clam to ssecond mate, and the power’ss gone sstraight to ‘is head.” The seamonkey’s claws curled around Muddle’s arm and hauled him to his feet. Once Muddle was upright, the seamonkey launched straight into introductions, “Iss’a pleassure ta’ make your ‘quaintance, me jolly jimcrack.” The seamonkey pumped Muddle’s arm, “Though I’ve not had the pleassure, I’ll wager you’ve heard me name a time or two, har-harr...”

Muddle wasn’t sure, but the seamonkey seemed to be contorting its features into something resembling a smile. “...no matter what you’ve heard, if you’ll judge me on me meritss, I’ll pledge the same ta’ you! Har-haaar!!” With that, the seamonkey swept off his hat and bowed, “Me name’s Davy Jones! The Flying Dutchboy and itss mutinouss crew are at yer sservice!”

“Whaa...?” Muddle choked, “...did you say your name was Davy Jones...?”

“Aye! That I did, ya’ barmy bilge rat! What of it?” Jones drew a crusty jug from his belt, popped its cork and guzzled half a pint of rum. Since a seamonkey’s mouth is not ideally-suited for gargling rum, most of the spirit cascaded over Muddle’s head. Jones belched, “Ahhhh!” and then punched the cork back into his bottle.

“So...uhh...” Muddle swiped the burning liquid from his eyes, “If you’re Davy Jones, does that mean I...” Muddle gulped audibly, “...*I’m dead?*”

“Har-de-HAAAR-AARRGH!!” Davy Jones clapped a cluster of claws on Muddle’s shoulder, “Nay, me hearty! Thass a common misconception if ever there wuz one. Ssure as I’m barking with a’ two-legged sseal I vow you’ve nowt to fear on that sscore! HARR-ARGH!” The seamonkey punctuated his pledge with another gurgle of rum.

This time, Muddle saw the torrent coming and deployed his hood in time to deflect the brine shrimp’s overspray. With the help of his hood’s night vision goggles Muddle saw that the Flying Dutchboy had dropped anchor north of Diablo Point. Scores of massive crustaceans were swarming off the ship bearing crates to the beach.

The giant clam hauled James Bunk to his feet and began swatting sand from his suit. Before Bunk could process any of the bizarre goings-on, Davy Jones cried, “Well, I’ll be dipped in tartar ssauce! Izzat me old mate, Jamess Bunk?”

The secret agent's eyebrows nearly shot off his forehead. Bunk reflexively reached for his pistol, but came up empty. He had lost the PPK when the second mate cracked his skull. Instead, Bunk backed away, "Uh...sorry, laddie, I...I think you're mistaking me for some other seafood..."

"Nay, come on, Bunkie," The seamonkey capered over and embraced Bunk like a lost brother. "Ssurely ya' remember!"

Enfolded in Jones' twiggy feelers Bunk was the very picture of distress. Blind to Bunk's discomfiture Jones waxed nostalgic, "Shore'n it'ss been a few moons, Bunkie, but back in the day we wuz inseparable, wassn't we?" The seamonkey uncorked his jug and offered Bunk a swig. Bunk retched, so Jones had a gargle for both.

Following a ghastly belch, Jones continued, "Ah, thosse were the dayss, Bunkie! Crashing one 'ollywood mixer after the other. Remember the time we kidnapped Johnny Depth's shih tzu, eh? We barely esscaped prosecution for that'n, din't we? Harr-Aaarr!"

"Davy Jones!? Bunk blanched and fought his way out of the seamonkey's touchy-feelers, "You mean, you're *THAT* Davy Jones!?" As the truth sank in, Bunk moaned, "But, Davy...look at you, lad! How...? Er...Why...?"

"I knew ee'd remember! Shore as I'm sstandin' here!" Jones tickled his chest with twiggy claws, "I'm the ssame Davy Jones who melted all thosse teeny-bopper heartss back in the day."

To illustrate, Jones pointed to the work his crew was doing. Bunk and Muddle were floored to see a heap of crustaceans assembling an ornate concert stage. As they took it all in a rhino-sized dungeness crab connected two electric cords with soaking wet claws. Following a spectacular explosion, the crab and its smoking pincers hurtled high above the stage and then plummeted into the briny deep.

Jones roared, "It never getss old, does it, Bunkie? I still get goosebumpss whenever me roadiess start unpackin' the stage." Jones extended one of his claws toward Muddle, "Lookie 'ere, mate! I've got goosebumpss all up me arms!"

Muddle examined Jones' gruesome guns and then called time out. "Hold on a sec, guys," Muddle massaged his forehead, "I'm sorry, but you've lost me..." Before he could finish, a deafening sound check rang out. "CHECK! ONE. TWO. CHE-CHECK! ONE, TWO!!" As soon as he could raise his voice above the din, Muddle shouted, "Isn't Davy Jones the legendary sea captain who shepherds lost souls at sea?"

"Of course he is," Bunk sulked, "but he's also much more than that, or, at least he was..." Bunk's voice warbled, "...before he changed..."

"Well, 'oo hasn't changed?" Jones fired back. Fed up with being judged by his former wingman, Jones poured his heart out to Muddle, "Mebbe, you'll catch me drift, sealie. I'm dead ssorry if I don't meassure up to me old matess' expectationss. But ee's actin' jusst like the scurvy fanss who loved me image more'n me. They wouldn't gi' me room ta' change. Grow! *Evo/ve!* Y'ssee?" Jones sighed out a gluey clump of bubbles, "Finally, I couldn't carry on. I had ta' admit that the Seamonkeyss were nothin' but a cheap knockoff of the Beagless!"

"Oh, Davy! No! Don't say that!!" Bunk whimpered, "The Seamonkeys were more. Much more!"

"Acchh!!" Jones retorted, "You're living in a dream, mate. The Seamonkeyss were never anythin' but a ssham. A mockery! But..." Jones jerked his head toward the

stage, "...after a lotta dark nightss an' lonesome vigilss I decided to crack on." Almost prayerfully, Jones added, "We've given the act a complete do over, and it'ss finally sstartin' ta' gel. The boyss 'ave chucked the kiddie 'urdy gurdy for real music. Ssoul music..."

As if in deliberate contradiction, a jarring screech erupted from the stage, "Ssskkrrreeeeeeekkk!!"

"Oh, uh...don't mind that." Embarrassed, Jones tried to shrug off the clamor, "It's jusst...heh-heh...the audio techss performin' a ssound check." Despite Jones' insouciance, a knot of concern gnarled his brow.

Rather than dying away, the racket escalated to a nerve-jangling cacophony. With his attention fixed on the stage Jones quickly forgot about Bunk and Muddle, "...I'll, uhh...just nip over and ssee if I can help..." Jones quickened his pace as, with each passing moment, the ear-cracking clangor became worse and worse.

As Jones creepy-crawled across the sand, the lights on his stage exploded to life. Though he was hardly in the mood, Jones jukeed expressively to the pulse-pounding strobe lights while he launched his inquiry, "Wha'ss going on ya' brainless sea slugss? Cut off that that noisse, or I'll cut off yer bleedin' 'eadss!"

A mic'd-up lobster tried to give Jones a rundown, but the seamonkey couldn't 'ear a bleedin' word. Jones clapped two knots of claws over his ears and appealed skyward for help—whereupon, the salty seadog discovered that deliverance would not come hence. Atop the cliff, Jones spied a firestorm of scorching, swirling, burning light. The skipper screamed, "Fire!! Break down the sstage ya' snivelin' sardiness! The mother of all barbecuess is comin' ta' toasst our succulent sweetmeatss!"

Jones raged and cursed, but his deafened crew remained heedless. The seamonkey's worst fears were realized when the inferno overtopped the cliff and rained hellfire down below. "Aaagghh!!" Jones screamed, "Run fer yer livess, me heartiess!" Jones leaped off the stage a split second before a flaming meteor smashed the concert venue into a shattered heap of abandoned dreams.

Not finished terrorizing the pirate, the flaming meteor erupted from the wreckage and hurtled straight at Jones. Caught flat-footed, the projectile swacked Jones like a two wood to the upper decks of the Dutchboy, "Aaaiieeee!!"

As he soared aloft Jones gained a whole new perspective on the drama unfolding at Diablo Point. Instead of a wildfire, the fiery skylights emanated from a boiling sea of police cruisers. In addition to dozens of cars, several helicopters—that scorched the earth with intense search beams—had joined the chase.

Confused, Jones searched for the cops' quarry. Only then did he realize that the projectile that had smashed his stage was not a meteor but a fire-roasted blue Mooney. Jones roared, "Blasst yer scurvy hide ya' glorified dung wagon! Ye'll not get away with thiss! Davy Jones ne'er fergives and he shorely ne'er forgets!"

While Jones bewailed the demise of his rock 'n' roll comeback, Bunk made use of the light from the burning stage to recover his Saltwater PPK. When Muddle heard Bunk chambering a bullet, he spun, spotted the gun and cried, "Holy frijole, Bunk!! Watch out for that blue Mooney!!"

Bunk had just enough time to whinge, "Oh, crumbs!" before the Mooney struck him squarely amidships. The double-O's recriminations, "Bah! Bloody Yanks and your

blinkin' NASCAR...!!" were cut short by a bracing plunge into the Pacific.

After dispatching Bunk, Solu skidded to a halt and sprang out of the Mooney. She fixed her hypnotic orbs on Muddle, "Where's the ship?"

Atop the cliff, police cruisers braked to a standstill inches shy of the precipice. As more cop cars arrived they smashed into a bumper-to-bumper heap of gridlocked black and whites.

"Sian?" Muddle retracted his hood, "...I thought you were on the ship..."

"No!" Solu shook her head, "Change of plans. Couldn't be helped." As she spoke Sian scanned the shorefront for her ship. Urgently, she demanded, "Where is Star Truck!!?"

When Muddle heard the words 'Star Truck,' it rang a bell, "Oh, you mean the bank vault?"

"Bank vault...?" Solu squinted at Muddle, "Wha-? You mean...my ship?" She swept her arm to the western horizon, "Well, where is it?"

"Ah!..." Muddle racked his brain for a cheery way to convey the news of Star Truck's demise, but failed. In the end, he confessed, "...it sank."

"Sank!" Solu clapped both hands over her face and bellowed, "He had one job to do! ONE!" She slammed both fists on the Mooney's hood and roared, "It was as easy as 1-2-3!"

"Sian? If I may?" Fabled diplomat that he was, Muddle tried to put in a good word for the apprentice skipper, "For what it's worth, I believe your pilot did the best he could under difficult circumstances."

"Oh, really...?!" Solu glared at Muddle, "...well, I guess that's where you and I differ, Mudd. You believe that sinking a ship is the best a pilot can do and I think it's the worst."

She had a point.

Vanquished, Muddle fell on his sword, "Sorry, Sian. All I meant was that your pilot never had a chance. It was Davy Jones who sank your ship."

Solu's eyes glinted. She shook her fist at the pirate ship and then, for the time being, set the matter aside. Never one to dawdle over spilled milk, Solu poked her head into the Mooney and said, "Time to hop out, Gellie. You can't hide in there forever."

Gellie! Muddle was certain he had misheard. The Mooney's passenger door swung open and out climbed none other than...

Muddle gasped, "Gellie!?"

Gellie waved cheerily, "Hey, Max. How's it going?"

Instead of answering, Muddle stood frozen to the spot while a choking sound emanated from his larynx.

Solu had no time to tarry. She waved Muddle and Gellie out of her way, "You two stay here while I search for Star Truck." The first wave of irate crustaceans were bearing down on Gellie and Muddle. High above, astonished helicopter pilots tracked the bizarre sea creatures with their intense search beams. One of the copters illuminated an enormous scallop as it tried to wrestle Solu away from the Mooney. Calmly, Solu reached for a small, silver pistol that was holstered on her right hip and shouted, "Back off, Buster!" When Solu pulled the trigger a feisty blob of phraser light erupted from the gun barrel, formed the text, "Back off!" and then blasted the scallop

thirty meters from the Mooney.

Solu waved at the riots of crustaceans, cops and helicopters and said, "You'll have to deal with this until I get back. Okay?"

Gellie shrugged, "Sure, no problem."

Muddle gawked at Gellie as if she had taken leave of her senses.

Seeing Muddle's incredulity, Gellie gave it another thought and shouted, "Hey, Sian! Would you ask Ubie to come and help us?"

Solu nodded, slipped her driving helmet over her head and bid farewell. As Solu settled into her cockpit an angry mob of crustaceans surrounded the Mooney and tried to roll the little car onto its roof. Solu sighed, drew her phraser and hollered, "Get outta my way you stinky sand fleas!" As before, with each word that Solu uttered—"Get!" "Outta!" "My way!"—a spunky text of phraser light erupted from the gun and sent the crustaceans flying like ten pins.

Now that the way was clear, Solu dropped the Mooney into gear and set off with tires smoking. As a parting gift, Solu sandblasted a gang of crustaceans that were trying to sneak up on Gellie and Muddle.

Though he may have been in mortal danger Muddle could not help but admire Solu's driving skills. As she raced toward Diablo Point a massive sweeper wave side-swiped the Mooney and tipped it up on two wheels. Most drivers would have panicked, but Solu didn't even flinch. She switched on her windshield wipers and powered through the tsunami like it was a sidewalk puddle.

Muddle feared that Solu's luck might have run out as she hydroplaned toward the vertical face of rock that was Diablo Point. At the moment of impact Muddle covered his eyes and listened for the inevitable "Ka-Rrunncchh!!" But instead of a game-ending collision, Solu willed the Mooney up the rock face by finding traction where, physically speaking, none existed.

"Max!" Gellie clapped a hand on Muddle's shoulder, "We'd better get moving!" Though Muddle was loath to tear his eyes from Sian, he knew Gellie had a point.

"Davy Jones' boy band has regrouped and..." Gellie shuddered, "...they're uglier than Justin Beeper without his hair gel!"

There are few things more terrifying than an enraged horde of homicidal crustaceans. Few who've witnessed that spectacle have lived to tell the tale. When Muddle dragged his eyes from Sian he confronted a horde of ravening crustaceans who were bent on clawing he and Gellie to shreds.

Muddle gasped.

Gellie snorted, "No kidding."

Breathlessly, Muddle whispered, "Wh-...what are we going to do?"

The mob of gnarly sea villains was nearly upon them. The mere sound of their gnashing stampede was enough to reduce a strong man to tears. Their concert had been canceled and their stage had been demolished. Now, the boy band was out for blood.

Without taking her eyes off the shellfish Gellie said, "Hey, Max! If you could transform into any kind of animal you wanted, what would it be?"

Muddle thought his ears were on the fritz. The sea bullies were so close that Muddle could smell their foul breath. The meager highlights of Muddle's life were flitting

before his eyes, and, amidst all that, Gellie wanted to know... "What...?"

Gellie edged closer, "C'mon, Max. What would you choose?"

Beset with terror Muddle could barely think. Still, if it made Gellie feel better, Muddle would do his best. As fear liquified his resolve, an image of the strangest animal Muddle could conjure flashed through his mind. Muddle's mouth was so dry that he could barely squeak, "W-, what do you mean, Gellie? S-, something like a forty-foot centaur? Or...?"

As a chambered nautilus lunged for Gellie's throat, Muddle experienced the tummy-tingling exhilaration of being rocketed into space. Soon gravity reasserted itself and Muddle began a stomach-churning descent, but he did not plummet as far as expected. Instead, he fell flat on a warm chestnut rug. Muddle was at a loss until he heard Gellie shout, "Great idea, Max! I've always wanted to be a centaur!"

Muddle followed the sound of Gellie's voice and was astounded to see a gigantic version of Gellie's torso rising in front of him. Atop the torso Muddle discovered Gellie's face beaming over her shoulder. She smiled, "Now, we won't have any more trouble with that crabby boy band." Gellie sprang into the air. A dozen shellfish that had begun clawing up her shins lost their pinch-holds and toppled back to the sand. Police helicopters trained a dazzling ring of spotlights on Gellie's every move.

"Hold tight to my unitard, Max," When Muddle examined the fabric covering Gellie's torso he silently thanked Thud for providing Gellie with a bullet-proof unitard too. A moment later, Muddle was even more grateful for Gellie's protective shielding. As Gellie capered away from the creepy crustaceans one of the Flying Dutchboy's cannons fired. The cannonball smote Gellie squarely on her solar plexus, "OOOOFFF!!"

Thanks to Gellie's unitard, the cannonball did not pierce her skin, but the impact knocked every atom of wind out of her lungs. Still, in centaur form Gellie stumbled sideways and slammed into the beach cliff. Her impact rocked the cliff and rattled the teetering police cars. Gellie fought like mad to gulp air, but soon lost that battle and slipped into unconsciousness.

"Harr-de-Harr!" Davy Jones rejoiced as he watched the giant centaur collapse. "One down!" the pirate jeered, "And one more ta' go! Harr-Harr!" He dashed from the Dutchboy's port to starboard gun batteries as Sian surmounted Diablo Point. Jones trained one of his long guns on the Mooney and, when the right moment arrived, touched a smoldering ember to its fuse, "Ka-Booom!!" The ball whistled a few inches over the Mooney's roof.

Sian gritted her teeth and angled the Mooney toward a boulder that would serve as a makeshift launch ramp. The Mooney clobbered the rock with a tooth-rattling "Ssscccreekkkkk!!" and then went airborne. Jones held his breath. He had one more chance to exact his revenge. As the Mooney soared over the Dutchboy's topmast Jones made a fine adjustment to his cannon and then....*waited...for...it...* "Ka-Blaaamo!!"

As the Mooney plummeted Jones' cannonball struck it amidships and the rascally little car exploded into a spectacular fireball. The force of the explosion knocked most of the onlookers off their feet. It was difficult to imagine that anyone could survive such an explosion. Before the smoke cleared what little remained of the Mooney sprinkled down to the ocean's surface and sank to the seafloor.

Admiring the fireworks, Jones howled, "'At's whatcha git fer messin' wi' Davy

Jones! May the urchins feast on your cold, dead bones.”

When they saw the centaur collapse the crustaceans raised their voices in a riotous cheer. The shellfish issued an even more odious hurrah when they saw Jones blast the Mooney to bits. Jones had tied up one loose end and it was the boy band’s job to stitch up the rest.

The unconscious centaur did not plummet so much as she deflated. Muddle tumbled far less gracefully down the cliff face. He hit the beach face first and then raced to Gellie’s now-human form. Fearing the worst, Muddle strained to hear the faintest whisper of breathing. The professor was readying for resuscitation when Gellie gulped in a deep strangled breath. She coughed, spluttered and sucked wind like she had inhaled a hot brick. Muddle pinched the fabric at the base of Gellie’s neck and deployed her hood. Once Gellie was encased in protective body armor, Muddle turned his attention to the stampeding boy band.

The raging crustaceans were still out for blood. Muddle curled his fists half-heartedly. He was no prizefighter. Even in his unitard, Muddle judged that he might last two blippets (at best!) in hand-to-hand combat with the cutthroats. When, once again, he whiffed the crustaceans’ fetid breath, Muddle sealed his unitard and braced for impact.

The crustaceans fell upon Muddle like an avalanche. The shellfish beat, bit, battered and pinched Muddle in such a cataclysm of abuse that he quickly lost the ability to distinguish one ache from another. Though he knew it was inevitable Muddle’s heart sank when he heard his unitard tear. Still, Muddle fought on until a tank-sized stone crab scissored a horny claw around his neck. The crab pinched its gnarly nipper until Muddle’s eyes popped.

Then all went quiet. From afar, Muddle heard the sickening sound of healthy bones cracking. A moment later Muddle realized that the noise was coming from his own neck. As his lights dimmed Muddle stopped feeling physical pain and he began to dream. It was a wondrous dream.

In Muddle’s dream, something that moved faster than the eye could see mowed through the crustaceans like a buzzsaw. Muddle wept for joy when the buzzsaw scattered a gang of tiger prawns who were poking and prodding Gellie. When the buzzsaw paused over Gellie, Muddle discovered that the buzzsaw was in fact a goddess. *A warrior goddess.*

The warrior wore a black unitard, a gold headband and had two hefty swords strapped to her back. While the warrior attended to Gellie a mob of conniving crustaceans sneaked up from behind. Sensing their approach, the warrior raised both fists, summoned a bolt of lightning and then slammed both fists to the sand. Like a missile striking a pond, shockwaves exploded through the sand and knocked the stupefied shellfish completely off their crawlers.

Liberated from the stone crab’s death pinch Muddle flopped face-first to the sand. He teetered on the edge of consciousness until he felt a friendly pat on the back. Lifting his face, Muddle beheld the warrior goddess. She took hold of Muddle’s arm, hauled him to his feet and said, “I am Uber Woman. Come with me if you want to live.”

“Oh...” Muddle blinked, “...yes...I would like that.”

“Good.” Ubie smiled, “That will make it easier.” The warrior scooped Gellie into

her arms and beckoned to Muddle, "Follow me."

Muddle set off at a trot behind Uber Woman.

There were twitching heaps of shellfish all over the beach. As Ubie hastened along, she explained, "I estimate that the Scyllae..." She wrinkled her nose at the creepy crustaceans, "...will remain unconscious for the next ten blippets." Muddle grimaced at the mounds of stinky shellfish.

When they arrived at a familiar dune, Ubie settled Gellie on the sand. Muddle was surprised to spot the transponder that he had planted earlier. He tapped Ubie's shoulder, "What now?"

Ubie whispered, "We wait." Leaning close, she added, "We will rendezvous with Sian here." Ubie touched the transponder which caused it to emit a coded ping.

The ping jogged Muddle's memory. He spun on his heel, "There's something I need to find. I'll be right back."

"No, professor!" Ubie warned, "It's too dangerous."

"Don't worry!" Muddle raced away, "I'll be right back."

Uber Woman shook her head, but dared not shout. Instead, she kicked the sand and yearned for Sian to arrive sooner than planned.

Muddle stooped low as he scuttled along. Just as he was losing hope Muddle spotted a shoulder strap poking out of the sand. He fell to his knees and dug out his backpack. Following a rapid inspection, Muddle concluded that the pack's contents were still intact. He slung the pack over his shoulders and set off at a run.

When Ubie saw Muddle returning, she exhaled, "Thank Gaea!" Eyeing the mucky backpack, Ubie asked, "What's so important about that?"

Muddle shook his head, "...you have no idea..."

"Avasst ya' sscurvey stage-wreckerss!!" With cutlass drawn Davy Jones erupted from the surf. At his back, hundreds of Scyllae boiled out of the ocean. Jones cackled, "I invited a few more o' me matess t' the party, harrgh-arrgh!"

Behind Ubie and Muddle, battle-weary shellfish shook off their stupors and crowded in behind their quarry.

In the corner of his eye, Muddle spotted Ubie conferring with a tattooter in the form of a magnificent flaming bird. Muddle was incensed to see that, though it was completely engulfed in flames, the firebird did not emit the tiniest puff of smoke. While Muddle grumbled about warranties and receipts, Ubie raised her arm and commanded, "Rise, Phoenix!"

Unused to being ignored, Davy Jones snarled, "If ya' think that wee birdy iss gonna ssave ya', Missy, you've got anoth-..."

In answer to Ubie's command, the Phoenix blasted off like a bazooka, "Ka-Blamo!!" The firebird streaked spectacularly through the sky, but instead of exploding, the bird slowly fizzled out. When its fuel was spent, the Phoenix's ashey remains settled lightly on the Dutchboy's sails and were no more.

As if on cue, Gellie awoke. She yawned and clambered to her feet. Surveying the encircling Scyllae army, Gellie crooned, "How cute!"

"Ah, good!" Ubie hugged Gellie, "You're awake."

Jones scrunched his gnarly face, "You mean..." He pointed at Gellie, "...*that's it!*?"

Uber Woman frowned, "You were hoping for worse?"

"Wuz I hopin' fer worse?" Jones chortled, "Truth be told, missy, I'd have expected worse from a wet candle! Harrgghh-dee-Arrghrr!!"

The Scyllae tittered dutifully.

Unmoved, Ubie waited for the laughter to subside, "Captain Jones?" She counseled, "You should be careful what you wish for."

"Bah!" Jones fired back, "I'll wish fer whate'er I please, missy."

"So be it." Ubie directed Jones' attention to the Flying Dutchboy, "The thing you must remember about phoenixes..." She tapped a series of commands into her tattooter, "...is that they rise from the ashes..."

Jones prepared to lob another insult, but stopped when he noticed faint lights flickering on the Dutchboy, "Ahoy!" Jones quavered, "What be that?"

"Oh, that?" Ubie studied the now-visible flames, "That be your wish coming true, Cap'n."

"Me...*what!*?" Jones screeched.

Ubie lifted her right arm like a symphony conductor and commanded, "Rise, Phoenix!"

There was an ominous silence and then, like a rocket blasting off, a gigantic flaming Phoenix erupted from the Dutchboy's bowels.

"Aaaiieeee! Not me darlin' Dutchboy!!" Jones wailed.

Thus cameth the mother of all barbecues that Jones had portended.

Flinging its wings wide, the Phoenix loosed a battle-shriek that rattled the Scyllae down to their horny toenails. The firebird fanned the flames until it set every organic particle on the ship alight. As a coup de grâce, the Phoenix wrapped its mighty wings around the ship and crushed it into a towering plume of smoke and ash.

Her work complete, the firebird saluted Ubie and then descended feet-first into the ocean. The sea roiled volcanically around the subsiding firebird.

Mad with terror Jones and his Scyllae army fled as fast as their flippers, flappers, and crackers could propel them.

Below the waves, the Phoenix's enchanted ashes settled on the wreckage of a luckless ship. As a parting gift, the firebird's cinders transferred the necessary jolt of energy to bring the deadened ship back to life.

With that all-important jump start, Sian fired-up Star Truck's main thrusters. Moments later, Star Truck broke through the ocean's surface and cruised to the agreed-upon rendezvous. Once the bedraggled landing party was safely aboard, Sian gave the command to set off for the Crossroads of Humanity.

Meanwhile...

"...oh, and there's one more thing..." Blowhard called to his cabinet as they shuffled out of the meeting, "I won't have any further need of your services."

"What...?" Vice President Tuppence choked, "...y-...you mean we're...?"

“Good riddance!” Blowhard waved toodle-oo to Tuppence, “The only help I need to run this country is a Twaddle account and a high-volume toilet. Oh, and speaking of which...” Blowhard whipped out his cell phone and called to his cabinet, “On the count of three, I want y’all to smile and say, ‘Yuh Fi-yuhhed!’”

3.Ø1

Spacetime: 97253.6.071

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance.” Muddle was shaking hands with a Poetic Intelligence construct named Rudyard. The PI was the same size and shape as Muddle, but had darker hair and smiled more frequently. The PI was outfitted in a standard-issue unitard and he was humanoid except for having one pair of pointy ears and two pairs of eyeglasses: One on his nose and the other, inexplicably, atop his head.

Muddle and Rudyard were conversing in a glass tube that was two meters high, and three meters long. There were hatches at each end of the tunnel. The inner portal gave way to ComCen, Star Truck’s command center, and the outer permitted egress to the great outdoors.

“Poetic Intelligence? Hmmm...” Muddle wondered, “What exactly is that?”

“Ah!” The PI brightened, “So good of you to ask.”

Dang! Muddle regretted the question before it had even escaped his lips.

“Now, where should I begin...” The PI stroked his chin, “...I want to give you the full picture, soooo...Have you ever heard of australopithecines?”

Muddle considered faking a heart attack until he seized upon a better idea. “Heyyy...Rudyard?” The professor snapped his fingers, “I really wish I could stick around, but, umm...You know, Sian? She asked me to do something...uhh, somewhere...”

“Not again!” The PI sulked, “I can’t even say two words without Sian pulling the plug on me. It’s so unfair.”

Muddle nodded, “That does sound harsh...”

“Hey, I know!” Rudyard brightened, “How about if I give you the cereal box version?”

“The...what...?”

“It’s the compact version of a literary masterpiece.”

“Well...” Muddle edged toward the escape hatch.

“Don’t worry, Kyptin!” Rudyard promised, “We won’t journey back in time any further than Homo erectus.”

“Oh...!” Muddle consulted a nonexistent wristwatch, “Sorry, Rudd, but...”

“Ha-hah!” Rudyard cheered, “I’m kidding, Kyptin! Isn’t that great?”

“...uh...” Muddle looked confused, “...I guess...”

“No, no,” Rudyard punched Muddle’s arm, “You’re missing the point. The fact that I have impeccable comedic timing is—in and of itself—the cereal box version of PI.”
If anything, Muddle looked more confused.

“Okay...how about this?” Rudyard sensed Muddle was fast losing interest, “Artificial intelligence is great for jabbering about what’s already known. But what about the unknown? Eh? What can AI tell us about that?”

Muddle shrugged, "I don't know..."

"Exactly!!" Rudyard cracked a fist into an open palm. "The infiniverse is full of mysteries that AI can't begin to fathom. So, as the saying goes, where AI fails, PI prevails. To infinity and beyond!!"

"Hmm..." Muddle nodded, "That's interesting."

"No!" The PI countered, "It's *fascinating*."

Before Muddle could respond a robotic voice boomed, "***Attention all personnel! Will Maxwell Muddle please report to ComCen? Over!***"

Unsure what to do, Muddle stammered, "Uhh, h-hello...?"

"Will Maxwell Muddle please report to ComCen! Over!"

"Uhh..." Muddle signaled an apology to Rudyard, "...I guess that means me." Then the professor called out, "Okey-dokey, I'll be right there."

...silence...

"Are you finished talking?"

"Uhh..." Muddle fumbled, "...you mean me?"

"When you finish talking you have to say, 'Over!'"

"Oh, I se-..."

"How can I tell if you're finished, if you don't say, 'Over'?"

Muddle froze. There was something familiar about that voice, but he couldn't quite place it...

...or could he!

"Hey!!" Muddle barked, "Is that Gellie?! 'Cause if it is, you're gonna regret it the next time you take one of my exams!"

...silence...

"Are you finished talking?"

Muddle snarled, "Where is she?"

"Never fear, Kypin." Rudyard directed Muddle's attention to a ceiling-mounted intercom, "We can fight fire with fire." Rudyard punched the 'com's power button.

"Genius." Muddle sighed as the light drained from the intercom. The professor extended his right fist, "Rudyard, it's been a pleasure."

The PI knuckle-bumped Muddle, "Zee plizzure izz all mine, Kypin."

Muddle blinked, "Who's that supposed to be? Colonel Klink?"

"No, no," The PI laughed, "It's someone else."

Muddle awaited further illumination. When none was forthcoming, he decided to move in a new direction, "...Rudyard?" Muddle slipped off his backpack, "Can I stow my pack in here?"

"What?" Rudyard gasped, "You want to store that filthy thing in my shuttle bay?"

Muddle hung his head. The PI was a genius at running conversations completely off the rails. "Uhh, Rudyard..." Muddle flung up his hands, "...Sian told me to stow the pack, sooo..."

Then Muddle froze, "Hey...? Wait just a sekk!" Following an interstellar mental

detour, the words “shuttle bay” finally registered in Muddle's geek-cortex. “Did you say...” Muddle scoured the tube from end to end, “...this is a shuttle bay?”

“I wish.” Rudyard moped, “I’ve been submitting requisitions for lightyears, but I’ve never heard a peep from Star Fleece.” The PI brushed his fingertips along the tube’s molded surface. “Perhaps...one day...” He trailed off, “Until then, this garbage chute will have to remain the placeholder for my dreams.”

“I get it, man.” Muddle was mucho simpatico, “You’ve gotta fight for your dreams, Rudd. Who knows? Maybe one day Star Fleece will deliver. Or, maybe...” Muddle’s horse-trading wheels were beginning to churn, “...if they won’t give you a shuttlecraft, maybe you could finagle an escape pod.”

“Ewww!” Rudyard acted like he had stepped on a cowpie, “I would never forego a shuttlecraft for anything as banal as an escape pod. You must be space sick.”

“Nah!” Muddle parried, “I’d take an escape pod over a shuttlecraft any day. Shuttlecraft are for Sunday drivers, escape pods are for adventures.”

“That’s absurd,” Rudyard snorted, “Escape pods are glorified ballast at best...” Before the PI could sink his incisors into the argument, the tube’s inner hatch whooshed open. Gelli stepped into the tube with a tiny palm tree on her shoulder. When the tree spotted Muddle it cried, “I am Froot!”

Muddle’s jaw dropped. However, Gellie and Rudyard acted like talking palm trees were as common as jelly donuts. Unsure of the protocol for greeting sentient trees, Muddle bowed so low that he almost fell on his head. The baby plant laughed so hard that a cascade of colorful loops shook loose from its scalp.

“Frootie!” Gellie wagged a finger at the plant, “Be quiet! I need to talk.” Froot obediently clapped two tiny leaves over his mouth, but continued snickering naughtily.

Ignoring the rascally plant, Gellie demanded, “What’s the hold-up, guys? You’re needed in ComCen. Move it or lose it!”

Meanwhile...

“Plumbin’?” Colonel Billy Bob Shebang spat a gob of tabakkie on the floor, “Ain’t nobody said nuthin’ ta’ me 'bout plumbin’.”

An uppity weasel and shifty scuba diver were demanding permission to carry out an ill-defined plumbing project at the National Security Asylum. The NSA was located in a glass edifice in **REDACTED**, Virginia. Snowjob and Lutin were hoping to dive deep into the NSA’s lower GI tract, but, so far, had managed to get no further than the visitor's entrance.

“I’ll have you know Colonel...” Snowjob sniveled, “...my associate and I have permission from the highest authority to infiltrate the NSA's sewage system.”

“Da!” Lutin concurred, “I zay vee doo ze projekt. Zo, vee doo ze projekt!”

“No, Igor.” Snowjob whispered into the weasel’s ear, “I am referring to Uranus Blowhard. He is the highest authority in the land.”

“Okay, Edfarrht.” Lutin stifled a snicker, “Eef you zay zo.”

“You fellas say ya’ work fer Blowhard, huh?” Shebang’s eyes narrowed, “Well, what proof do ya’ have? I mean, how do ah know ya’ ain’t pullin’ a fast one?”

“Fezzt vun?” Lutin shook his head so hard that goo came out of his nose, “Nyet, comrade! Vee dun’t pool fezzt vun!”

“Hey, I know!” Snowjob had an inspiration, “I have a photo that will prove we work for President Blowhard.”

“Whuss’ ‘at ya’ say? A photah?” Shebang scratched his head, “Heck fire, I ain’t sure that’ll...”

“Please, Colonel!” Snowjob simpered, “Don’t judge till you’ve seen the picture, okay?” The Plumber had to scan through several gigs of Back Sea vacation photos before locating the crucial image, “Ah! Here it is...”

Snowjob handed his iPhony to Shebang. In the image, Snowjob’s head is poking out of Blowhard’s high-volume toilet while Lutin solemnly presents Blowhard with a roll of heavy-duty TP.

“Wowie!” Shebang handed the iPhony back to Snowjob, “Ah’m powerful shamed fer doubtin’ ya’, Mr. Snowjob. ‘At’s what ah call compellin’ evidents.” In strict compliance with the NSA’s airtight security standards, Shebang inquired, “Shucks, fellas, how long ya plannin’ ta’ stay?”

“Vell,” Lutin performed a series of mental calculations, “Eef vee doo guud chobb plumink, izz like vee neffer leaff. Heh-heh.”

All three belly-laughed at Lutin’s wisecrack. Then Shebang presented Lutin and Snowjob with lifetime VIP passes and wished them well in their endeavors.

3.02

Spacetime: 97253.6.094

As Muddle followed Gellie and Rudyard out of the garbage chute, he was struck by a thought, "*Now, I can finally get a good look at ComCen!*" When he stepped through the hatch Muddle was flabbergasted. "Wow! This is amazing!" Muddle whacked Rudyard's chest, "Why didn't you say it was exactly like the USS Entrezvous?"

The PI nearly jumped out of his skin. He clutched Muddle's arm and drew him aside, "Ssshh! Don't let anyone hear you!" On the down low, the PI confided that he had already been banished to the brig twice for making unwelcome references to Star Tech. Rudyard had learned the hard way that, as far as Sian, Gellie and Ubie were concerned, there was never a good time to mention Star Tech.

Muddle was dismayed. Though he wasn't a card-carrying Techie, Muddle had a soft spot for the intrepid Captain Kook, and his green-blooded logician, Commander Spork. That said, Muddle promised to keep mum on the subject—though he expected he'd soon be doing hard time in the brig with his geeky bro, Rudyard.

With Rudyard's warning ringing in his ears Muddle pointedly ignored the fact that Sian's vinyl captain's chair was affixed to the geometric center of ComCen. Even worse, while ensconced in her retro-mod command chair, Sian scribbled on a futuristic, wedge-shaped clipboard.

Muddle gritted his teeth. It was going to be grueling, but somehow, some way he would suppress the screaming geek inside.

As she brought her captain's log up to date Sian conversed with her helmsman, a spunky AI bot, named WONK-E. WONK-E had tractor-tread feet, a binocular head and a smart-alecky personality. WONK-E wasn't programmed to speak natural human languages. Instead, WONK-E communicated through the medium of R2-Deet, an old binary language that had morphed into an exotic form of machine intelligence in the anything-goes multiverse of AI cosmockery. Rather than speaking, WONK-E tweeted expressively about the contours of his wide-ranging feelings. Though he never uttered a word, everyone knew precisely where they stood with WONK-E.

Gelli slipped into an empty seat next to WONK-E. The bot trilled, "Da-Vvvveetie-Doo."

Gellie smiled, "Nice to see you too, WONK-E."

Froot scrambled from Gellie's right shoulder to her left. Once balanced on his new perch, Froot shouted, "I am Froot!!"

WONK-E ignored the sapling, which made the little tree sag. As he gave Froot the cold shoulder, WONK-E stealthily maneuvered his right arm behind Gellie and plucked one of Froot's sugary loops. When Froot felt the tug, he spun to confront the culprit. Only then did WONK-E open his right gripper to reveal his clandestine maneuver. When Froot realized that the thief was none other than his beloved BFF, the little tree squealed, "I am Frooot! I am Frooot!!"

WONK-E giggled back, “Trilleelee-Weeelliee-Woo!” and then he and Froot fell about the nav station in laughter. Observing their descent into buffoonery, Gellie spot-checked the navigational controls. Once, while WONK-E and Froot were horsing around they accidentally nudged Star Truck onto a collision course with a solar flare. If Gellie had not been standing sentinel, the ditsy duo’s unplanned detour would have been Star Truck’s last rodeo.

While Gellie made a couple of fine adjustments to Star Truck’s heading, WONK-E prepared to dine on his pilfered fruit loop. To Froot’s delight, WONK-E made a grand show of depositing the sugary loop into his file-drawer tummy. The bot crooned as his gastro assembly initiated its digest-o-matic features. All went swimmingly until WONK-E developed a case of indigestion. The bot started with a cough and, moments later, he began sputtering uncontrollably. As WONK-E’s condition worsened his eyes began drifting toward each other. When they met in the middle the bot’s pupils switched from circles to Xs and then his running lights went dark. As a coup de grâce, WONK-E’s tummy sprang open and jettisoned the homicidal fruit.

WONK-E maintained his state of decease as long as he could—about two heartbeats. Then his composure cracked and WONK-E laughed himself into a helpless pile of spare parts on the floor. Froot followed suit by leaping off of Gellie’s shoulder and, as he plummeted, the sapling screamed, “I am Froooooot!!”

WONK-E saw the rapscaillon coming and in the blink of an eye snatched the little shrub out of his freefall. WONK-E conveyed the little palm to his shoulder and waited for Froot to take root before resuming his responsibilities at the navigation console. Reunited with his BFF, Froot snuggled against WONK-E’s binocular head and sighed, “I am Froot.”

Throughout these goings-on, Ubie was hard at work at her science officer’s console. When Sian concluded her captain’s log entries, she directed her attention to Ubie, “Commander, you’ve been unusually quiet. Do you have anything to report?”

“As a matter of fact...” Ubie re-checked a couple of readouts before replying, “... I do, Captain. I’ve been monitoring strange energy pulses on the lunar surface, and they appear to be getting stronger.”

“Oh, wow!” Muddle hastened to Ubie’s console, “May I see?”

Fearing the worst, Rudyard snapped, “No, Kyptin! Don’t touch anything! You’re not qualified!”

“Take it easy, Rudyard...!” Muddle gestured toward Ubie’s sensitive instruments, “...I would never... Yeeooowww!!”

Before Muddle could finish, Rudyard darted over and karate-chopped Muddle’s outstretched arm. “Oh, no you don’t, Kyptin!”

Instead of averting disaster, Rudyard’s karate chop hacked Muddle’s hand down in the worst possible place: a flashing red button with the warning, “Cloaking Device. Do not deactivate!!!”

When Ubie saw Muddle’s hand strike the cloaking button, she howled, “NOOOO!!”

Deactivating the cloaking device triggered Star Truck’s red alert sirens. While the alarms shattered his eardrums, Muddle cradled his aching arm and stumbled to the communications console.

Rudyard moaned, "Oh, Kyp tin!! Look what you've done."

Quick as she could, Ubie punched a large, green, "Initiate Cloaking" button that was positioned immediately next to the de-cloaking control. The Initiate button pulsed green for an instant and then went dark. "Aaarrgghh!" Ubie shouted at the ship's sentient computer, "Re-engage cloaking! This is an all-systems priority. Re-engage cloaking immediately."

"Commander!" Sian called to Ubie. Realizing that she could hardly hear herself over the sirens, Sian sprang out of her chair and raced to the science console.

Ubie explained, "Captain, I can't re-engage cloaking. It might be due to damage the ship sustained at Diablo Point. I am conducting a system-wide scan to locate the malfunction."

Sian nodded and then hastened back to her captain's chair. She snapped a switch on the chair's right arm and commanded, "Computer! Cancel red alert. I repeat, cancel red alert. Over."

As soon as Solu uttered the magic word, Star Truck's red alert siren ceased. A chill AI voice responded, "*Captain's voiceprint verified. Red alert cancelled. Over and out.*"

Solu heaved a sigh and then inquired, "Computer, what is the status of the cloaking system? Over."

The computer flashed through the most recent data and reported good news, "*Cloaking is rebooting. Full functionality will resume in two blippets.*"

"Can you confirm?" Solu checked with Ubie.

Ubie's hands flew over her console. When satisfied, she replied, "Confirmed. Cloaking will be fully operational in exactly 1.64 blippets."

"Ah, good." Solu nodded, "That's a relief. Hopefully, we'll re-cloak before anything..."

"...*Caaaaptaaaaain Quaaaark...*"

Solu snapped, "Who said that?"

Gellie shook her head, "Wasn't me." Then she and Sian frowned at WONK-E.

The bot trilled, "Dontee veedi bwee."

Without prompting, Froot added, "I am Froot!"

"Hmmm...strange..." Solu's brow knitted, "I wonder what...?"

"...*Caaaaptaaaaain Quaaaark...*"

Sian's laser eyes flashed to each entity on ComCen before deciding, "It must be coming from the viewscreen."

"But..." Gellie ventured, "...isn't permission required before messages can be displayed onscreen?"

"It must have something to do with the cloaking malfunction." Ubie speculated, "Something could have breached our systems while we were de-cloaked."

Sian frowned, "Any idea what?"

Before anyone could respond, a faint oval of light winked into existence in front of the viewscreen. A gravelly voice rasped, "...*Caaaaptaaaaain Quaaaark...*"

Initially, the oval was translucent, but soon a blob of protoplasm began to wiggle and dance inside. Muddle examined the oval from several angles and then remarked, "Cool! It looks like a lava lamp."

Sian heard him, but pretended she hadn't.

There was a moment when the blob of goo faded, but that backstep was followed by a bolt of lightning that singed ComCen from floor to ceiling.

WONK-E's eyes were the first to recover from the flash. What he saw made him scream, "Svvveeetie Pa-teeetie!!" The lava lamp was gone, but in its place stood a ferocious reptile.

The dino-man hissed, "*Caaaaptaaaain Quaaaark!!* At last, I have found you!"

"Holy space invaders!" Rudyard cried, "It's a Gorn!" Then, realizing his slip-up, the PI begged, "Please don't ask how I know that."

The Gorn was a terrifying bi-pedal reptile. It's head was ridged with spikes and its eyes were silvery and pocked. Muddle cringed at the thought of how painful it must be whenever the Gorn blinked. Worse, the Gorn boasted the kind of sharp, curving teeth that would have made it the envy of Komodo Island.

"...*Caaaaptaaaain Quaaaark...*"

If anything, the Gorn was just as intimidating below the neck as it was above. The gorn's body looked like it had been carved from solid green rock. The lizard was so ripped that it could easily have taken the prize at any reptilian body-building contest. Evidently, the Gorn was proud of its guns because, apart from a pair of elbow-length gloves, the sentient dinosaur wore nothing but a short, sleeveless tunic—which left precious little to the imagination.

Intimidating as its physique was, the Gorn's most nerve-jangling feature was its voice. The lizard's chords were gnarly, deep and resonant with hate. Also, the fact that the Gorn's mouth didn't move when it spoke made its verbalizations even freakier, "Caaaaptaaaain Quaaaark! At laast I have found you...prepaare to meeet your doooooom....!"

"Hold it right there, mister!" Sian drew her trusty silver phraser, "Don't you dare barge onto my ship and start threatening people. Drop your weapon and stay where you are. You've got some explaining to do."

"Bah!" The Gorn brandished an obsidian spike, "I have not combed the infiniverse to bandy words with a green-eyed snake. I am here to exact revenge...!" The gorn directed its obsidian shank at Muddle, "...upon you! The cowardly Captain Quark! The fraidy cat who wouldn't stand still and fight fair."

The gorn slavered and slobbered with an exuberance that bordered on the obscene.

"Of all the nerve!" Muddle was scandalized, "I hope you're not directing those defamatory comments at me Mr. uhh... Gorn." Muddle puffed himself up as if he was preparing for a duel, "You will keep a civil tongue in your head sir or, rest assured, there will be consequences!"

The Gorn hissed, "I will not speak politely to a crybaby who shoots people with bamboo cannons! By the way, that was cheating Captain Quark. No one said we could make cannons, or I would have made one too. Obviously. And don't try to lie about it either! The Metrons uplinked the video, so everyone saw you cheat!"

Rudyard punched Muddle playfully, "I knew you were a Kypin! I knew it!"

"What are you talking about?" Muddle swatted Rudyard away, "Captain what...? Quark...? I'm sorry to rain on your parade, Mr. Gorn, but you are sadly mistaken. My

name is Muddle. Always has been. You will have to continue your search for the elusive Captain Quark in some other time and place.”

“Liar!” The Gorn slavered, “You always take the coward’s way out, Quark! I promised to be merciful and swift and then you clobbered me with that styrofoam rock. How was that fair?” The Gorn spurned Muddle’s expression of disbelief. “Don’t pester me with any more of your lies, Quark. You had your chance for a quick and merciful death. So, prepare yourself for a slow, painful...”

“That’s enough!” Sian snapped, “Disarm!” A flash of text erupted from her phraser and swacked the Gorn’s obsidian stabber out of his hand.

The fight was on!

Desperate to exact his long-smoldering vengeance, the Gorn went straight after Muddle. That said, for anyone who is not familiar with the original Star Tech series, there’s something you need to know about Gorns. Gorns are slow. Verrrry sloooooow. Gorns make tree sloths look like quarter horses.

The Gorn launched his assault on his hated foe at about .02 kilometers per heuer. As he galloped along the Gorn snarled, “Just wait’ll I get my hands on you, Quark. I’ll tear you him limb from limb. You’ll wish you’d never been born. Just you wait and see...”

Wait is right. Somehow the Gorn managed to say all that without taking one full step toward Muddle. The poor dino-man was so slow that, before long, everyone—with the glaring exception of Muddle—started feeling sorry for the old campaigner.

Sian consulted her celestial chronometer, “We don’t have spacetime for this. Gellie...?” Sian summoned her Head of Security, “Would you and the guys put the Gorn in one of the staterooms?”

“Oh, sure!” Gellie was overjoyed to roll out the red carpet for the Gorn. “Hey, guys.” She signaled to WONK-E and Froot, “Help me escort our special guest to one of the staterooms. How about the Buzz Lightyear Suite?”

Froot chirped, “I am Froot.”

Muddle was flabbergasted, “That dino-assassin has been threatening to kill me for the past thirty blippets, and you’re putting him in a stateroom?”

“He’s harmless.” Gellie dismissed Muddle’s bellyaching, “Anyway...” She wagged a finger, “...if you had been nicer the first time, he wouldn’t be so put out.”

“There was no first time!” Muddle raged, “That Gorn’s off his rocker. I’ve never seen him, or anything like him before.”

“So...!” Ubie interjected, “That’s all the more reason to treat him courteously. He might be an endangered species. We have a responsibility to be good stewards, you know.”

Muddle threw up his hands, “Okay, do whatever you want.” He was hopelessly outnumbered. Even Froot was giving Muddle dirty looks. “But if that T-Rex knock-off gets the drop on me, you’ll have to add my name to your list of endangered species, won’t you?”

Gellie laughed, “That Gorn couldn’t get the drop on a marble statue. Look at him!” She adopted a loving expression, “He’s barely moved since he beamed aboard. He’s so cute!!” Gellie wrapped both arms around the Gorn’s waist and hoisted him off the ground.

“Hey!” The Horn hissed, “What’s going on?”

“Don’t worry, Gornie,” Gellie trilled, “We are taking you to the best room in the house.” She called over her shoulder, “WONK-E grab Gornie’s toy, okay? He might want to play with it in his room.”

WONK-E complied, “Waveebie-doooba.” The AI bot snagged the obsidian artifact and whizzed into the turbolift at Gellie’s heels.

As the turbolift doors snapped shut an alert sounded on the nav console. Sian glanced at Ubie, “That sounds like our countdown for the Council.”

Ubie consulted her instruments, “Yep, we have just begun orbiting the moon and the Council is scheduled to begin in ten blippets.”

“Good.” Sian strolled back into her captain’s chair, “Please make final preparations for landing, Commander.”

“Of course,” Ubie answered, “What coordinates should I lock onto?”

Sian smiled, “Remember those strange energy pulses you were monitoring?”

“Ah, I see.” Ubie nodded, “Okay, coordinates locked in.”

Sian turned to Muddle, “If I remember correctly, Mudd, you need to make a costume change. Don’t you?”

“Oh, that’s right.” Muddle snapped his fingers, “The costume is in my backpack.”

“Yes, I recall.” Sian winked, “I expect you’ll find everything you need in the shuttle bay.”

Meanwhile...



Uranus J. Blowhard

@theRealUranus

45=#1

HELP!!!!!! I am locked in OVAL OFFICE powder room. Can’t get OUT!!!!!!

Crooked Shillary is to BLAME. Lock her up! Lock HER up!!!

#FreeUranus

47 Following

67.3M Followers

3.03

Spacetime: 97253.6.101

“Funny,” Ubie observed, “It doesn’t look like much.” Star Truck was flying low over the lunar landscape. The terrain could not have been more stark. Craters pocked the rocky surface as far as the eye could see.

Gellie and company returned from escorting the Gorn to his stateroom. Apparently, when the Gorn learned that he could stream unlimited satellite TV, he had mellowed out remarkably. In blippets, the Gorn was chillin’ with a frosty mug of beer while watching Star Tours on his flatscreen.

“That’s intentional,” Sian consulted her wedgeboard, “We’re trying to keep the Council low-key. There are lots of troublemakers who want to crash the party.”

“We are approaching the Crossroads of Humanity,” Gellie announced.

Sian settled into her Captain’s chair, and Ubie counted heads, “All personnel are present and accounted for except Dr. Muddle.”

“Oh, that’s right!” Sian punched her intercom, “Ahoy, Mudd. We are approaching our destination. Please report to ComCen and strap in for landing. Over.”

Silence.

Sian allowed a few moments to tick by before following up, “Muddle? Do you read? Over.”

“...click-ick-ick...” Muddle fumbled with the intercom, “...Yeah...I read...”

Silence.

“Sian,” Gellie interjected, “We have arrived at the specified coordinates. Should I initiate descent?”

Sian glanced at the viewscreen. The meeting site was a precisely excavated rectangle on the lunar surface. The Captain shook her head, “No, hold descent until pretty boy straps in.” Sian clicked the intercom, “Is there a problem, Muddle? Over.”

“No...it’s not...a problem...!” Muddle ground his teeth loud enough to be heard over the intercom, “It’s just...aarrgh! I’m having a wardrobe malfunction.”

“Oh...” Sian suppressed a snicker, “...sorry to hear that, Mudd, but we can’t land until you strap in.”

“Hmmpff!” Muddle’s vexation was palpable, “Sooo...is this really a life or death situation? I mean...” Muddle chewed his lip, “...will I die if I stay in here?”

Tired of the tomfoolery, Sian laid it on the line, “Yes, Mudd, you will die. Because I will march in there and strangle you with my own two hands. Do you read? Over.”

Ubie informed Sian that the exotic energy pulses she had been monitoring were increasing in strength and number.

“Okay,” Sian issued the long-awaited command, “Gellie, you may initiate descent.” Sian was on the verge of rounding up Muddle at gunpoint when, to her great relief, the hatch whisked open.

Gellie announced, “T-minus 20 seconds.”

No Muddle.

“You better get out here, Mudd...” Sian shouted, “...or you’ll be bunking with the

Gorn!”

Gellie announced, “T-minus 10 seconds.”

“Alright, already...” A dark figure streaked through the hatch and strapped in at the communications console.

Gellie announced, “T-minus 5...4...3...2...1...Touchdown!” She winked at Ubie, “The Phoenix has landed.”

A gentle shudder ran through the ship. Gellie allowed Star Truck’s touch pads to kiss the lunar surface hard enough to confirm their arrival on an alien world.

“Good work everyone,” Sian consulted her chronometer, “Let’s assemble at the transporter in five blippets. WONK-E, you have the con. I will lead the away team, and Mudd will...” Sian turned toward Muddle, and her mouth fell open.

The silence hit Muddle like a sledgehammer. He grumbled, “This was not my idea.”

Rudyard exclaimed, “Holy wormholes, Kypin! Have you gone spacebugs?”

No one else said a word because they were too busy bursting with laughter.

Muddle failed to see the humor in the situation. Thud had bamboozled him into playing the role of Dr. Stephen Strangelove long before saying anything about a costume. The thunder god had browbeaten Muddle until the professor swore a blood oath to wear Strangelove’s foppish robes. Muddle had completed the ensemble, as per Thud’s exacting instructions, with a dark wig and adhesive goatee.

Once the laughter died down, Gellie informed Muddle that she had the perfect accessory for his wardrobe. Gellie nudged WONK-E, “Open sesame, monsieur.” As WONK-E unlocked his tummy-safe, Gellie instructed Muddle to close his eyes.

Smelling a rat, Muddle complied—but reluctantly. He sensed Gellie drape something around his neck and felt a thump on his sternum. Though he anticipated giggles, Muddle imagined he heard murmurs of wonderment. Finally, he exclaimed, “Can we please get to the part where you pull your hilarious prank on me?”

“Okay, Max,” Gellie refused to be baited, “Open your eyes.”

Expecting to see a “Kick Me!” sign around his neck, Muddle was surprised to discover an authentic treasure.

“Gellie?” Muddle removed the object and held it in his hands, “Is this the mysterious pocket watch that appeared on my desk last moonth?”

Gellie nodded, “Yes, it is, Max.”

Confused, Muddle asked, “I stored this artifact in a top secret location. How did it fall into your hands?”

“Yeah, about that,” Gelli laughed, “Let’s just say that your secret hiding place wasn’t so secret.”

“What?” Muddle gasped.

“Hmm...How should I put it?” Gellie lifted the watch out of Muddle’s hands, “The safest place to keep this thing is right here...” She rehung the watch around Muddle’s neck and then added, “...while I watch your back.”

An alert sounded at Ubie’s console. She checked the readout, “Oh, great! Lady Galahadrielle has just arrived.”

Sian said, “Can you put it on screen?”

“Of course,” Ubie routed the transmission to the main viewscreen, which

displayed the now familiar image of the excavated rectangle.

Sian squinted, "I don't see anything."

Ubie counseled, "Wait for it..."

An instant later, a glistening comet streaked into view and struck a large, black obelisk in the center of the excavated rectangle. The impact suffused the obelisk with ghostly, pulsing light. As the light throbbed a luminous orb that looked remarkably like a large soap bubble puffed out of the obelisk. Inside the bubble a human figure—gleaming like starlight—gradually became visible. The figure grew and grew until, *Poof!*, the bubble popped and out stepped the shimmering form of a female knight errant.

Rudyard gasped, "F-a-s-c-i-n-a-t-i-n-g!"

Sian fixed him with a frosty glare, "I've heard fascinating things are happening in the brig, Rudyard. Would you care to see for yourself?"

"Uhh..." The PI whapped a hand over his mouth, "...how about if I pack a picnic lunch for the landing party?"

"Yeah," Sian did a 'fingers do the walking' sign, "You do that."

Meanwhile...

"I have a problem," Blowhard fidgeted behind his desk.

In a flash, Lutin appeared at his elbow, "Vat problem you haff?"

Blowhard steepled his fingers, "Nasty Pelousy and Chuck Schemer are trying to run me out of office."

"You vant I feex?" Lutin licked his weaselly lips.

"Hypothetically..." The orange splodge peeked behind a curtain, "...how would you fix a problem like this?"

"Vait! I show." Lutin dashed to a nearby sofa, reached underneath and drew out a vicious disemboweling blade. The weasel eviscerated a roomful of imaginary foes before presenting the stabber to Blowhard. "Eez call glaiffe," Lutin bowed when Blowhard lifted the weapon from his hands, "You enfite Peloshki and Zkimmer. I yooz glaiffe. Problem feex."

"Hmmm..." Blowhard admired the weapon, "...it is tempting, but..." the blob shook his head, "...this job calls for more subtlety."

"Zoodledee? Yoo vant zoodle? Hokay..." Lutin stroked his chin, "Vat 'bout thees? I meex dreenk. Geef to Peloshki and Zkimmer. They go zleep. Don' vake up. Verry zoodle."

"Interesting..." Blowhard drummed his fingers on the glaive, "Hypothetically, could you serve these cocktails secretly?"

"Heh-heh," Lutin's eyes glittered, "Zecrit eez meedle name."

"In that case..." Blowhard patted Lutin's head, "...we never had this conversation, did we, Igor?"

"Nyet!" Lutin drew a finger across his throat. "I know nahthink."

3.04

Spacetime: 97253.6.220

“Is everyone here?” Sian counted heads, “Let’s see...Gellie, Ubie, Rudd, Mudd. Perfect. All present and accounted for...” To avoid the typical overreactions to her laser green orbs Sian had donned a pair of wraparound sunglasses. An enchanting glow illuminated the spaces around her eyes.

“Sian!” Rudyard raised a hand, “Shouldn’t I remain on board to take charge in the event of an emergency?”

“Uhh...” Sian tried to filter the sarcasm out of her response, but failed, “...that would be a big, fat ‘NO!’ to the guy who sank Star Truck during the last emergency.”

“Aww, c’mon!” Rudyard wheedled, “I promise it won’t happen again because...” The PI played his trump card, “...I’m a sentient being who has the ability to learn from my mistakes.”

Sian retorted, “So am I.” Having settled that matter to her satisfaction Sian turned to other business. “Please sound off to confirm you are wearing an operational life-support belt.”

Each member of the landing party responded, “Aye...Aye...Aye...” There was a lag and then Rudyard grumbled, “...aye...”

When activated, the life support belts swathed their bearers’ in a luminous enviro-bubble. The belts were a huge improvement on clunky, old pressurized space suits, but they also had drawbacks. A life support bubble’s outermost layer behaved like a bullet-proof forceshield. Consequently, cramming landing parties into restricted spaces like the garbage chute was like inflating beach balls before packing them into a picnic basket. That’s why Sian delayed belt activation until the very last moment of debarkation.

“Ubie?” Sian called out, “On my mark, please seal the inner hatch.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Gellie?”

“Yes, Sian.”

“Are you in position to blow the outer hatch?”

“Yes, Sian.”

“Are you sure?” There was a distinct undercurrent in Sian’s query, “Do you recall what happened last time?”

“Yes, Sian. It will remain forever seared into my memory.”

“Hey!” Muddle broke in, “Is there something you should be telling me?”

“No. Don’t be a worrywart.” Sian refocused on Ubie, “Commander, please seal the inner hatch...Now!”

Ubie punched a flashing yellow button next to the hatch. The inner hatch swirled shut with an airy whoosh.

Sian double-checked Gellie’s proximity to the “O-Hatch Release” button.

Satisfied, she proceeded, "On my mark, I want each of you to activate your life support belts. Do you copy?"

Muddle interrupted, "Come on, Sian, these procedures are way too elementary..."

"Input noted." Sian signaled for Muddle to button his lip, "I don't have time to explain every little detail, Herr Professor. Trust me, I know what I'm doing."

Muddle bristled, but managed to keep his pesky mouth shut.

"On the count of three..." Sian held three fingers aloft, "I want everyone to hit the activation buttons on your life support belts. Do you copy?"

"Wait a sekkent..." Muddle looked lost, "Are you counting up to three, or down...Agghhhh!"

As soon as Rudyard heard the word "three" he panicked and activated his life support belt. A nanosekkent later, the belt's forcesshield pancaked everyone in the garbage chute.

"Ugh!" Ubie groaned, "Not again!!"

Rudyard cried, "Open the hatch! Open the hatch!"

"Which one?" Gellie quizzed, "Mine or Ubie's?"

"NO!" Roared Sian, "You'll kill us all. Rudyard, deactivate your belt!"

The PI moaned, "I'm trying, but it's jammed!"

In ComCen, WONK-E and Froot were kicking-back and delighting in every detail of the latest debarkation fiasco via CCTV. Froot munched on a hot Cheez-O and cheered, "I am Froot!"

Outside, Lady G grew puzzled about the delay. She knocked on the exit hatch to prod the landing party to action, and got more than she bargained for. Following her knock, the hatch whirled open and the landing party popped out like gumballs from a pressurized candy machine.

Gellie was the first to eject and, thus, had the misfortune of knocking Lady G flat on her back. When Gellie finished skittering across the lunar surface she hopped to her feet and raced back to the knight. Along the way Gellie braced for the prospect of being run through by Lady G's gleaming sword. But instead of facing an enraged warrior, Gellie was startled to find Lady G rolling on the ground with laughter. Gellie stammered, "I...I'm so sorry..."

"Nonsense!" The knight's billowy hair flounced as she clambered to her feet. "I've not been so agreeably pell-melled since Prancelot hid a whoopie cushion under Merkin's saddle!" The knight extended her right hand, "I am Lady Galahadrielle, Keeper of the Unknown Secret and Knight of King Idler's Timetable."

Gellie reached out to clasp Galahadrielle's hand, but was foiled by her enviro-bubble. Thinking fast, Gellie flashed Lady Galahadrielle a Vulcan peace sign, "Live long and perspire, m'lady."

"Sister..." Galahadrielle did a double-take, "...am I deceived, or did you say, 'Live long and *perspire*'?"

"That I did, Lady G," Gellie hastened to clarify, "It's a traditional Vulcan greeting that's meant with only the best intentions. You see..." Gellie made sure Rudyard was out of earshot, "...Vulcan is a roasting hot planet and Vulcans think it's illogical to waste time endlessly apologizing for everyone's chronic BO."

"I see," Galahadrielle's face was a mask. She banished the disagreeable images by wrestling her fingers into an approximation of the Vulcan salute. "Dear lady..." Galahadrielle panted, "...I shall require much tutelage before I can master this toilsome gesture."

"Aww, forget it, Lady G..." Gellie waved it off, "...to be honest, Rudyard is the only one who cares about the finer points of Vulcanology."

"Hey!" Rudyard frowned as the landing party came hither, "Are you talking about me?"

"As a matter of fact..." Gellie raced to concoct a plausible fib, but Galahadrielle beat her to the punch.

"Perchance, would this be *THE* Rudyard of whom ye spake?" Galahadrielle wrangled her fingers into a Vulcan salute, "Good sir, thy colleague claims thou art a Vulcanologist of peerless renown. Is that so, oh Rudyard the Wise?"

"Peerless, eh?" Lacking any innate defenses against the guiles of flattery, the PI melted like butter on toast, "Yeah...sure..." Rudyard blushed, "...I guess you could say that..."

Having dispensed with Rudyard, Gellie raced through the remaining introductions at the speed of sound. Galahadrielle was grateful for Gellie's keen sense of urgency. After flashing through a disjuncting sequence of Vulcan peace signs, Galahadrielle begged, "Come, friends, we must convene the Council. There is nary a tick to tarry."

Lady G flew back to the obelisk. Literally. Her feet never touched the ground. The landing party was not nearly so light on their feet. The weak gravity and rough terrain caused a great deal of rumbling, stumbling and bumbling. Eventually, the landing party clattered into the excavation site like a wagon short on wheels.

"What's she doing?" Ubie puzzled.

Galahadrielle was standing in front of the obelisk. She had drawn her sword and held it before her as she recited an Olde Gaelic chant. Lady G punctuated her chant at intervals by tapping the butt of her sword against the obelisk. At each spot where she tapped the obelisk Galahadrielle summoned a luminous transport bubble. After creating three new bubbles, Lady G stepped back and allowed the obelisk to work its magic. In less than a blippet, the bubbles expanded, popped and produced three curious-looking men.

Just like Lady Galahadrielle, each of the new arrivals seemed more hologram than human. Two of the newcomers—one tall and bearded and the other squat and bug-eyed—wore floor length robes. The third arrival wore green tights, a puffy shirt and held a skull with which he appeared to be in animated conversation.

Galahadrielle embraced each of her colleagues, and then, with the newcomers arrayed on each side of her, she addressed the landing party, "Allow me to introduce the members of this Council." As she spoke, Galahadrielle's aura glowed like a stagelight, "Please welcome a pair of legendary knights from a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away! The incomparable Oobie Doobie Kabootie and his Juju Master Frooodaaa Boggins." Each knight's aura shimmered when Lady G spoke his name.

The landing party applauded politely. Ubie elbowed Gellie, "Darn it, Sissy, we should have brought our autograph books."

"Don't worry!" Gellie whipped a roll of TP out of a side pouch. "You never know

when it'll come in handy.”

Lady G's aura brightened as she proceeded to the next introduction, “Please welcome the most famous Star Fleece captain in the infiniverse. The one, the only Wiiiiiiiiiiiiaamm Shatspeare!”

Shatspeare struck a thespianic pose and intoned, “Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them. And I...” Shatspeare bowed low, “...derive greatness from all three.”

“Good sir!” Rudyard cupped a hand over his heart, “As a fellow bard I...”

“Sorry...!” Shatspeare cut him off, “... I never sign autographs. You see, life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury. Signifying nothing.”

Rudyard looked like he wanted to cry.

“Lady G?” Sian ignored the pointless exchange, “Now that you have introduced the Council, would you like me to introduce the members of my team?” Sian was taken aback when the Ozlanders burst out laughing.

“Captain Solu...” Lady G's eyes gleamed, “...your modesty is touching, but as you well know, the Funtastic Five's exploits are fabled throughout the infiniverse. There is no need for introductions.”

The landing party experienced a jolt of confusion. They stood stock still and peeked at each other out of the corners of their eyes. No one had the foggiest idea how to respond to Lady G's statement. After a time, Sian opened her mouth, but thought better of it and held her tongue.

“Uhh...” In the end, it was Muddle who broke the silence, “...I hate to deliver unwelcome news, Lady G, but I think there has been a misunderstanding.”

“Oh?” Galahadrielle smirked, “Pray tell, Dr. Strangelove, what would that misunderstanding be?”

“Ah, there it is!” Muddle raised a finger, “...somehow you have confused us with some other group of...uhh...funtastic people...”

The Ozlanders acted like Muddle was repeating a tired, old joke.

“So, Dr. Strangelove...” Galahadrielle decided to play along with Muddle's game, “...you walk like a duck, and talk like a duck, but...”

“No, no!” Muddle countered, “I am not a duck. Just look at me...” He gestured at his haphazard disguise, “...I'm only playacting.” For evidence, he peeled off his goatee. “Y'see? There is no duck.”

“Ha!” Shatspeare snorted, “So says the legendary sorcerer who bears the One Watch. Do you take us for fools, Dr. Lovestrangle? Well, do you?”

“I...” Muddle turned to the landing party for support. Finding none, he huffed, “...where do I begin...?”

“Enoof o' yoor sooddin' shilly-shallying!” Irritation thickened Oobie Doobie's Scottish accent, “Why moost ye' recite the same drivel at every coonvenin' of the Coouncil, eh? I'm dead weary oof it.”

Muddle was at a loss.

Finally, Ubie came to his rescue...sort of. Ominously, she said, “Lady G? Has there been a disturbance in the Farce?”

“Yes! A disturbance in the Farce. Know it she does.” Froda shook his little walking stick at Ubie, “A great disturbance in the Farce.”

Sian peered at Ubie, "What are you talking about?"

"I..." Ubie shook her head, "...I don't know...but...I'm having the strangest sense of deja vu."

"Hey! So am I!" Gellie brightened, "What a relief! I thought I was going spacebugs!"

"Ah, good," Lady G smiled, "You are recalling the artefacts of past struggles." Lady G indicated the obelisk, "We stand at the Crossroads. As we have done countless times before, we have gathered to choose a path. If we choose wisely, all will be well. If we choose poorly..."

Sensing the theatricality of the moment, Shatspeare held his prop skull aloft and cried, "...it could spell the doom of *the Infiniverse!*!"

Meanwhile...

"Edfart?"

"Yes, sir?"

Blowhard motioned for Snowjob to lean in close, "Eddie, I need you to deliver a message to the greatest secret agent of all time."

"But..." Snowjob squeaked, "...I thought J. Edgar Snooper was dead."

"No, no!" Blowhard fumed, "I'm talking about my personal attorney, Rubie Fooliani."

"Wow, I thought Rubie Fooliani was, uh... Nevermind." Snowjob broke out in a sweat, "What message should I deliver?"

"Write this down!" Blowhard snarled, "Faux News has just reported that everyone working for the FBI is a traitor."

Snowjob whistled, "I had a feeling."

Blowhard nodded, "It's amazing how many treasonous rats have infiltrated the government since I assumed the presidency. Fortunately, patriots like Igor Lutin can spot traitors a mile away."

Snowjob tapped his nose, "Keep your friends close..."

"Tell Rubie..." Blowhard handed Snowjob an envelope, "I need him to dig up dirt on the FBI. We need to destroy the FBI from within and then I'll appoint Igor Lutin to rebuild the FBI in his own image."

"Wow. You're building quite the legacy aren't you, Sir?" Snowjob stuffed the letter inside his diving suit, "I won't let you down, Your Highness." Then Snowjob bounded across the room, dove into Blowhard's toilet and flushed twice.

3.05

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“We could *doom the infiniverse?*” Sian sneered at Shatspeare, “Do the words drama queen mean anything to you?”

Shatspeare gaped. Before he could summon a Shat-worthy response, Galahadrielle drew her sword and slapped its flat against the obelisk, “Oh, mighty Stone of Destiny, please display local spacetime perversions.”

Nothing happened.

Without a change of expression Galahadrielle twisted her sword forty-five degrees so that its razor edge screeked across the obelisk’s face. Then she added frostily, “I saideth ‘please,’ did I not?”

Instantly the obelisk projected a flat, 4X4 meter image of the Earth. Galahadrielle snapped her fingers twice and the map morphed into a dynamic 4D projection.

Muddle was hypnotized by the intricately-detailed globe. He grew misty-eyed when he spied flashes of lighting along the Santa Barbara coast. Long ago, Muddle and some friends had watched a spectacular lightning storm from atop the Jukebox.

Enchanting as the globe was, Muddle also spotted the worrisome spacetime corruptions that Galahadrielle had mentioned. The globe was enveloped in a sinuous current of energy. He knew not why, but as Muddle gazed upon it the energy current imparted a marvelous sense of vitality.

From where Muddle was standing the energy flowed from left to right. Upstream of Earth, so to speak, there were five arrows that cleaved a ragged laceration in the energy current. The sundered spacefabric afforded dizzying glimpses of alternate universes. Belches of exotic energy disgorged upon the Earth as the peephole fabric fluttered in the breeze.

Gellie pointed at the arrows, “Those must be the disturbances that Ubie and Froda mentioned.”

Galahadrielle nodded, “They are called Time Cheaters.”

“Time Cheaters...!” Ubie exclaimed, “I thought Time Cheaters were pure quantro physical whimsy. Like pink unicorns. Are you saying those things are real?”

“I’m afraid so...” Rudyard chimed in.

Sian scrutinized the PI, “You’re familiar with those things, Rudyard?”

“Yes, I am, Captain,” Rudyard exhaled, “They’re the reason I exist.”

“Time cheaters?” Muddle scratched his head, “What do Time Cheaters have to do with poetic intelligence?”

“Much to do, have they.” As usual, Froda muddied the syntactical waters, “Opposites are number and poetry. Therefore, inseparable are they. Mmm-Hmm.”

Sian pretended she hadn’t heard the Juju Master. Instead, she directed a question at the only Ozlander who, in her opinion, possessed an ounce of sense, “Lady G, would you mind explaining what Time Cheaters are?”

“Gladly,” Galahadrielle seemed as eager as Sian to steer the discussion back to luna firma, “As you are aware, Earth has been invaded by the infamous roach motel

baron, Uranus Blowhard.”

Though his comrades said nothing, Muddle could feel their disapproval searing his soul. Galahadrielle, however, did not blame Earthlings for their misfortune. Instead, she thrust her sword at the Time Cheaters, “I am convinced the problem lies there.”

“Soo..” Ubie chewed over the notion, “You think there’s a connection between the Time Cheaters and Blowhard?”

“Moost assuredly,” Oobie Doobie weighed in, “There’s a troobling imbalance between Earthlings’ technological progress and their WQ.”

“WQ?” Sian wrinkled her nose, “You mean, Wisdom Quotient? What does that have to do with anything?”

“More than you might think,” Lady G interposed, “Time Cheaters are quantro dynamic constructs that modify the flow of spacetime. In this case...” Lady G spun the globe to get a closeup of the Time Cheaters, “...this cluster of Time Cheaters accelerates technological innovation, while stunting the growth of wisdom.”

“How can they do that?” Sian swatted the Time Cheaters out of her face.

When the globe re-stabilized, Galahadrielle drew attention to the river of energy flowing around Earth, “That energy stream is largely constituted of smarticles.”

Muddle snorted, “Smarticles? You must be joking.”

“Tch, tch, Doctor,” Shatspeare clicked his tongue, “There is more in heaven and Earth...”

“To be fair...” Rudyard spoke over Shatspeare, “...the Kypitin knows nothing about smarticles because Earth scientists lack the aesthetic skills to perceive them.”

“Aesthetic skills?” Gellie asked.

“I know it sounds batty,” Rudyard bopped his head, “But you can’t detect smarticles with formulae like Phranck’s Constant. You have to rely on your wits.” The PI’s passion for this subject was infectious, “No one has ever detected smarticles the same way twice. It’s almost as if the little rascals know how to play hide and seek.”

“Yeeess...” Ubie tiptoed into the discussion, “...and no. Smarticles are a type of quantro particle which energizes subjective experience, like sentience. It’s paradoxical, but you can’t detect smarticles unless you are endowed with them. If you don’t know how to feel things like love, hate or sadness, then you can’t perceive the smarticles that impart those qualities. That’s why so much of the infiniverse remains dark.”

“Sentience?” Muddle sounded fascinated, “You mean there are, uhh... particles that think?”

“No, Kypitin,” Rudyard dithered, “Particles don’t think. They are the building blocks of sentience. You are a ‘being’ because your inanimate matter is transfused with animating smarticles.”

“But..” Sian eyed Rudyard, “...I thought you said the Time Cheaters deflected the smarticles.”

“No, no.” The PI clarified, “The Time Cheaters deflect some, but not all smarticles. Earthlings are endowed with a surplus of technitrons, but a paucity of whizzitons. You see?”

“And why is that a problem?” Gellie asked.

“Because...” Shatspeare ventured, “...men lack the wisdom to control their own intelligence. The fault is not in their stars. But in themselves.”

"Rudyard," Sian frowned, "...would you mind translating?"

"Of course!" The PI loved being the smartest guy in the room, "Shatspeare means that humans are geniuses at constructing their own worst nightmares. Shining examples include, Global Roasting, Doomsday Bombs, Andromeda Strains and..." Under his breath, the PI murmured, "...Al..."

"I don't understand." Ubie grumbled, "Who would want to rob Earthlings of the wisdom to protect themselves from their own stupidity?"

In answer, the 4D Earth projection transformed into a gigantic headshot of Uranus Blowhard.

"Aha!" Gellie cried, "Now I get it."

"Never before has Blowhard..." Froda refused to gaze upon the bloated orange mug, "...conquered anything with greater intelligence than a cockroach."

"Indeed..." Lady G's voice was tinged with regret, "...the Eldar Council was astonished at the ease with which Blowhard conquered Earth."

"Roight yoo are, lassie." Oobie Doobie boomed, "Oonce soospicions were aroosed it took nae time ta' loocate the Cheaters and their knoock-on effects."

"Meaning..." Gellie summarized, "...the Earth is at Blowhard's mercy until we scrap the Time Cheaters."

"Indeed, m'lady." Shatspeare forsoothed, "Some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall. Men are deceivers ever. Sigh no more, ladies, sigh no more."

"What in blazes is that supposed to mean?!" Muddle erupted.

"It doesn't matter!" Sian cut off the exchange, "We need to destroy the Time Cheaters ASAP. That's all we need to know." Sian pressed a finger to her ear, "Star Truck do you read? Over!"

"Pepeet-Eee-Dee!" WONK-E responded.

In the background a shrill voice cried, "I am Froot!"

Sian was all business, "Fire up the engines, WONK-E. We've got a mission to complete." Sian signed off and announced, "Prepare for departure Star Truckers."

WONK-E wasted no time. Rectangular panels slid open at each of Star Truck's bottom corners and bell-shaped thrusters whizzed out. A column of blue flame erupted from each thruster and generated enough propulsion to hoist Star Truck one meter off the lunar surface. WONK-E stood by for further orders.

"Captain!" Galahadrielle called to Solu, "...I'm sorry, but you can't use your ship for this mission."

Sian looked confused, "How do you expect me to destroy the Time Cheaters without my ship?"

"You will have transport, Captain, but..." Galahadrielle directed Solu's attention to Muddle, "...your mode of conveyance will be Dr. Strangelove's One Watch."

What?!?

All eyes locked on Muddle. "Honest to Pete..." Muddle confessed, "...I have no idea what she's talking about. If this watch has special powers, then you're welcome to it..." Muddle tried to lift the watch over his head, but its chain snugged around his neck like a boa constrictor.

"Yoo've been choosen, laddie! Tis a greet hoonor and divil of a coorse. But that's as it is." Oobie Doobie thundered, "There's noot but one way ta' teckle the Cheaters,

boy-o. The Oone Watch will lead, but oonly if yoo've got the stoones and loogs t' falla'!"
Before Muddle could demand a translation, Froda summoned the Council's attention, "Quiet, friends! Listen to me you must!" The Juju Master closed his eyes:

One Watch to rule them all, my precious.
One Watch to find them.
One precious watch to bring them all, and...and...
Oh, fudge!

Froda sagged, "Sorry, am I. Never can I remember the last line, my precious."

"Noot again!!" Oobie Doobie fought an urge to smack Froda upside the head. "It's every bleedin' time, in't it? I'm tellin' ya', Frooda. Either learn it, or chook it! All this hangin' about in the middle is froostin' me cake!"

"Sorry...?" Once again, Muddle failed to glean a particle of meaning from Oobie Doobie's rant. "Would you mind...?"

"KAAA-Boooooommm!!" Muddle's request was squelched by a laser cannon shell.

The blast knocked everyone in the excavation site clean off their feet. Which, as it turns out, was a good thing because, following the cannon shell, a firestorm of laser pellets choked the space above the meeting site, "Pew-Pew, Pinka-Pinka, Pew-Pew!"

A sustained barrage pinned the Council attendees down tight.

Muddle tried shouting, but the laser fire was too loud to overcome. Unsure what to do, Muddle stayed put and evaluated his options until he felt someone whack his life support bubble. Muddle was thrilled to see that it was Sian. Solu had her little silver phraser in hand. She fired off a series of blasts, "Take! That! You! Sneaky! Rotten! Dirtbags!!" Then she motioned for Muddle to follow her to the obelisk.

When Muddle looked at the obelisk he spied Lady Galahadrielle beckoning to him. Thanks to cool-headed coordination between Sian and Galahadrielle, all of the Council attendees were slithering toward the obelisk. Sian and Gellie snuggled next to Muddle and scooted him forward. Out of the corner of his eye, Muddle spotted Ubie tugging Rudyard along.

When they were gathered at its foot, the obelisk screened enough of the laser storm to permit a few words of shouted conversation. Sian had already worked out a desperate plan. She hollered at Galahadrielle, "You say here! I'll crawl to Star Truck and fly the ship back!"

"No!" Bellowed Lady G, "There is another way!"

Just then, the bombardment took on a whole new dimension. A squadron of Bowtie Fighters streaked overhead. Oobie Doobie shook his fist at the fighters, "Blast yoor mangy hide, Dank Vaper!"

"Dank Vaper!" Froda's heart thrummed. *So! We meet again!!* Froda closed his eyes and visualized his old foe. Sensing the Bowtie fighters returning for a second strafing run, Froda activated his lightslasher and sprang skyward.

Oobie Doobie screamed, "Noooo, Frooda! Vaper will toost ya' like a marshmallooo...!"

Heedless, Froda whirled his lightslasher like a turboprop. The moon's light gravity and the Juju Master's thick thighs enabled Froda to spring much higher than expected.

When he soared above the excavation pit's rim Froda was astounded by what he saw. The cuddly old warrior, cried, "Oliphants!"

While the little Juju Master was thus distracted, Dank Vaper saw his chance. The Silt Lord locked Froda in his crosshairs and blazed away. Tasting victory, Vaper pumped his fist, but then an unforeseeable sequence of events spoiled his fun.

Bowtie laser blasts travel at the speed of light. So, it's hard to imagine anything that moves faster. Just think how surprised Dank Vaper was when something—for a moment, it looked like a mischievous woman with an angelic smile—streaked in front of Froda and shielded him from Vaper's blasts. Dank Vaper's jaw was still in his lap when a confuzer grenade struck his port thrusters and sent him cartwheeling into an endless series of sequels.

From his perch in Star Truck's gun turret WONK-E cheered, "Freebiii-Jeebie-Doo!!" Then he continued blazing away at the remaining Fighters. Astride WONK-E's shoulder, Froot slingshotted his multi-colored loops while screaming, "I am Froot! I am Froooooot!!"

"Good shot, WONK-E!" Ubie cheered. Powered by jetboots, Ubie streaked above Star Truck and snagged a Bowtie Fighter by its tail. Spotting an oliphant in the distance, Ubie flung the bowtie like a frisbee. Ubie scored a direct hit on the oliphant's noggin and knocked it sideways into one of its companions. Their legs tangled and then they toppled in super slow-mo to the lunar surface. "Ploo-ooofff!"

Ubie sighed, "Two down and... Let's see. 1-2-3-4-... Ugh, forget it!" There were far too many oliphants to count. In addition to the oliphants, innumerable ground and flying vehicles zipped this way and that in a desperate race to vaporize the Funtastic Five. As she hovered above Star Truck, storm trippers peppered Ubie with laser pellets. She deflected the energy bursts as casually as picnickers shoo gnats. Having seen all she needed, Ubie dove back to her comrades at the obelisk.

Seeing Ubie alight, Sian shouted, "What's it look like?"

The storm of laser pops and cannon fire carried on unabated. Ubie shook her head, "There are way too many. We've gotta get out of here."

"Alright," Sian nodded, "That's what I figured." Speaking to the tightly-clustered group, Sian announced, "Lady G and I have a plan to get us out of here."

"Well...: Galahadriel quibbled, "...we have a plan to get *you* out of here."

Sian squinted at Lady G, "What do you mean?"

"Captain," Galahadriel explained, "This is your quest. Not ours."

Muddle puffed out his cheeks, "Fate decrees that we must part at the Crossroads, eh?"

"Something like that," Galahadriel allowed, "Now you must do exactly as I say..."

Moments later Lady G had arranged the Funtastic Five like a ring of luminous Easter Eggs around the base of the obelisk. Galahadriel informed them that the One Watch would transport them to the next Time Cheater, but only if they followed her instructions to the letter. The FF would have to begin by joining hands. Once they were linked, Muddle would have to press the face of his watch against the obelisk. The moment he did so, *Hey, presto!*, the One Watch would transport them to their next destination. The dicey part was that the FF would have to deactivate their life support bubbles in order to join hands. No one relished the thought of being exposed to the

stark lunar environment.

As Lady G ran through a few more final instructions a Lectrosassin in the form of an enormous humanoid boxer marched up to Star Truck and started bashing its force shield with whitehot fists.

WONK-E and Froot concentrated fire on the Lectrosassin until the robot imploded into a gluey blob of magnetoplasma. WONK-E barely had a moment to breathe before six more Electrosassin's began hammering on Star Truck's shields.

"They can't last!" Sian roared, "I've got to...!"

"No, Captain!" Lady G countered, "We will see to your friends." Each Council member nodded. "You must pursue your quest."

"Alright! You're right," Sian gritted her teeth, "Is everyone ready?"

At that moment, a Lectrosassin appeared at the top of the excavation site. Sensing the group clustered around the obelisk, the Lectrosassin activated its attack lights and leaped into the pit.

Lady G drew her sword and roared, "Go! Now!!"

Without hesitation, King Idler's most fearless knight confronted the Lectrosassin. The robot raised its fists with the intention of squishing Lady G as flat as a British beer. But Galahadrielle surprised the Electrosassin by darting between its legs and slicing through both of its knees.

Detached from its lower legs the mechanoid belly-flopped ungracefully. As it keeled over the disabled murderbot switched on its distress signal. Froda and Oobie Doobie quickly silenced the Lectrosassin with their lightslashers. Unfortunately, the Lectrosassin's back-up units were already en route. Every imaginable type of battlebot—some flying, some wheeling, some marching—converged on the excavation site.

Galahadrielle called to Shatspeare, "William, will you protect the FF until they transport?"

"Happy to oblige," Shatspeare flipped his skull to his left hand and in the same motion snatched a nifty little phraser from his belt. One might guess that, through force of habit, Shatspeare would set his phraser on stun, but not this time. For this job, Shatspeare selected the power setting at the very opposite end of the spectrum. In a flash, the phraser dissolved into a cloud of nanobots and then reconstituted into a long-barreled Extermazookah. The Zooka looked like a souped up M16 with a satellite-dish nozzle. With the Zooka in hand Shatspeare sauntered High Noon-style in front of the Lectrosassin.

Extermazookahs are among the most feared weapons in the galaxy for good reason. At a glance, Extermazookah shells appeared no more dangerous than a cluster of fireflies. However, everything changed when the fireflies hit their target. Then Shat got real.

Shatspeare aimed at the Electrosassin and soliloquized, "To be or not to be..." Then he pulled the trigger and transformed the murderbot into something he liked to describe as "Dark Matter."

Outnumbered as they were, Sian was astonished at how well the Ozlanders were faring. All four mowed through opponents by the dozen. Even at the rate they were going, there were far more enemies than the Ozlanders could vanquish in a lifetime.

Lady G and Co. were merely holding off the enemy until the Funtastic Five could transport away.

Sian shouted to her crew, "On the count of three..." Hearing herself, Sian glared at Muddle, "Meaning when I count UP to three, Eisbein! Ya' got it?"

"Yes, of course," Muddle answered, "It couldn't be simpler."

Solu curled a fist, but, for the sake of time, let the matter slide. "When I say three, deactivate your life-support belts and lock hands. Am I clear?" Nods all around. Sian continued, "After you deactivate, close your eyes and hold your breath. If Mudd does his job correctly, we should be gone in a flash. Do you understand?"

More nods.

"Alright!" Sian took a deep breath, "On the count of three deactivate your belts, hold hands, and pray Muddle doesn't screw this up. Got it?" Sian looked each of her crew in the eye. All four were rock steady, "Okay, here we go! ONE..."

A cannon blast streaked overhead and vaporized the top third of the obelisk. Everyone ducked, but held fast.

Solu roared, "...TWO!" In the distance, a new squadron of Bowtie Fighters formed up for a strafing run. Sian could dawdle no longer.

"THREE!!"

Each member of the landing party hit their deactivation buttons. One by one, the protective bubbles went dark. Pop, pop, pop. Each pair of hands clasped their neighbors' until...

Nothing happened.

Something was wrong. Sian opened her eyes a crack. Much to her surprise Muddle was not the source of the delay. Instead, Muddle was banging his fist on Rudyard's still-active life support bubble.

Rudyard groaned, "It's jammed!"

Sian felt faint. She was on the verge of reactivating her belt when Ubie lifted a fist and brought it crashing down on Rudyard's bubble. The force of the blow shattered the bubble into trillions of liberated photons.

Using the last particles of O2 in their lungs, Muddle and Ubie grabbed Rudyard's hands. Muddle pressed his chest against the obelisk at the same instant that a laser cannon shell vaporized the remainder of the slab.

Had the Funtastic Five escaped in time? The Ozlanders could only wonder. And hope...

In a flash, the Funtastic Five found themselves crammed inside an old-style phone booth.

Swarms of strange, iridescent lights streaked past the booth's windows. Now and then, one of the fireflights would collide with a window and squish into a luminous smear of spacebug juice.

Ubie was the first to find her voice, "What is this thing?"

An unfamiliar voice answered, "It's a TARDIE."

All heads snapped toward the voice. The speaker was a smallish, fair-haired Brit

who was standing next to the TARDIE's navigational controls. It's a pleasure to meet you..." The young woman smiled, "...my name is Dr. Whozit."

Before anyone could return the introduction, Dr. Whozit consulted an unintelligible readout above the TARDIE's door and announced, "Prepare for departure."

Boing-oing-oing!!

In the blink of an eye, the Funtastic Five blipped from the TARDIE to a mountaintop in a dessicated wilderness. Stark deserts stretched to the horizon in every direction. There was no evidence of anything resembling human civilization.

But they could breath! The FF suddenly realized how oxygen-starved they were. As one they heaved long, noisy sighs of relief, "Aaaaahhh!! That's better!! Oh, my aching lungs!!"

In the midst of their celebration, a man wearing a '70's-style leisure suit popped out from behind a boulder and barked, "Hey! Will you hold it down!? I'm trying to shoot a movie over here!"

3.06

Spacetime: 96147.2.902

“That’s right, I said, ‘Stan Lee Kubrick,’ but everyone calls me Stanny Baby. Why do you ask?” Stanny Baby was one of those uptown sophisticates who smoked cigarettes in long-stemmed holders. Whenever he spoke the cig’s ember waggled menacingly in his confrère’s face.

It turns out that Stanny was a big-time movie director who was shooting a colossal(!) film about the eternal tragedy of the human condition. “You’ve never seen anything like it!” Stanny rhapsodized, “It’s got love and loss. Joy and sadness. Anger and regret. It is without a doubt this is the most important movie since Spiderboy reunited the Scavengers!”

Keen as he was about the film, Stanny was distressed to learn that the FF had not brought lunch. He crowded close to Sian, “You have no idea what these actors are like when they get hungry. They’re like a pack of wolves!!”

Sian had dealt with enough hangry crewmembers to sympathize, “Look...uhh...Stanny. I’m sorry about lunch. Had we known, we would have grabbed something on the way.”

“Okay, listen up...” Stanny snapped his fingers bossily, “Here’s what we’re gonna do. I’ll pretend I’ve been bitten by a snake while you pop back and find the caterer. With any luck, we’ll be neck-deep in clam dip before you can say, Goodnight Irene.”

Sian smiled. She had no idea what Stanny was talking about. Discreetly, Solu solicited input from her crew, but they were more lost than she was. Seeing no alternative, Sian was compelled to ask, “Sooo...Stanny? When you say ‘pop back’ what exactly do you mean?”

“I mean...” Stanny eyed Sian, “...pop back to the studio. Where else would you pop?”

This was progress. “Ah, so...” Sian surveyed the surrounding landscape. Spying nothing that looked remotely like a studio, she tried a new tack, “You know what, Stanny? I got a bit turned around on the way here. You wouldn’t mind pointing me toward the studio, would you?”

“Point you to-...?” Again the suspicious scrutiny, and then a lightbulb switched on above Stanny’s head. “Ah, now I get it.” The veteran director chuckled, “You stopped for a liquid lunch on the way, didn’t you?” Having had more than his share of three-martini lunches, Stanny kicked himself for failing to spot the telltales. Wagging a thumb upslope, he explained, “You’ll find the obelisk up yonder...”

“Okay, gotcha,” Sian scanned the hillside. “Hmmm...Just to be clear, Stanny, do you mean it’s waaaay up yonder, or...?”

“No, no.” Stanny chortled, “Jeepers. You really got a snootful, didn’t ya!” He directed Sian’s attention to a concave depression in the dirt about ten meters upslope and then his jaw dropped, “Hey...! Where’d it go?” Stanny removed his sunglasses and

gawked at what he could no longer see, "I-...I could have sworn the obelisk was right there!"

Sian broke out in a sweat. It appeared that until quite recently, the obelisk had occupied the same space where she and her team had just materialized.

"Hey?" Rudyard must have been on the same wavelength, "Isn't that where we ...Mppffff..."

Sensing that Rudyard was on the verge of divulging an acutely inconvenient truth, Gellie clapped a hand over his mouth and frogmarched the PI up the slope. She called over her shoulder, "Sian! I think I spotted an obelisk up yonder. Rudyard and I are going investigate."

"Mmmbbbffff...bbfthh...!" Rudyard tried to pry Gellie's hand away, but she held tight.

"Gellie!" Muddle scolded, "Why are you dragooning Rud-...Mmnpfftht...?"

Fearing that Muddle might duplicate Rudyard's miscue, Ubie whapped a hand over his mouth and strong-armed the professor up the hillside.

Impressed by Gellie and Ubie's assertiveness, Stanny whooped, "Yeehaww! Now, that's what I call roping the bull by the begonias! I could use a couple of expediters like you on my production team!" Then, recalling his dire staffing problems of late, Stanny cautioned, "Mind where you plant your piggies, amigas! The snakes in these parts are cold-blooded assassins!"

When they were well beyond Stanny's hearing range, Ubie halted and removed her hand from Muddle's mouth. The professor erupted, "How dare you...!!!"

"Keep your voice down," Ubie snapped, "I had no choice. You were about to divulge..."

"NOTHING!!" Muddle thundered. Wrangling his voice to a whisper he explained, "I wasn't going to say anything. I know exactly what happened to the obelisk and Stanny's the last person I plan to tell."

"You know?" Ubie looked perplexed, "What do you know?"

"Look!" Muddle tapped the One Watch's face. He angled the watch for Ubie to get a better view.

Ubie had never previously examined the One Watch, so she doubted... "Hey!" Ubie yanked the watch closer, "There it is! That's the obelisk."

Right below the number 'XII' there was a miniature version of the black obelisk affixed to the watchface.

"Easy does it, Ubie! That's a delicate instrument you're mauling." Muddle tugged the watch out of Ubie's hands, "I saw the obelisk as soon as we got here. The One Watch couldn't wait to tell me."

"Hang on." Ubie arched an eyebrow, "Did you say the watch talked to you?"

"Ach...!" Muddle brushed the question aside, "Maybe 'talk' isn't the right word. Who cares? The point is..." Muddle snuggled the watch with parental affection, "...our precious little One Watch is playing its part to perfection."

"It is?"

"Of course it is," Muddle snarled, "Or have you already forgotten that it was the One Watch that led us to the Crossroads of Humanity? Eh?"

"Well..." Ubie quibbled, "...the watch was more of a stowaway..."

"Stowaway!?" Muddle gaped, "Then answer me this O' Voice of Eternal Skepticism. Would we be hot on the trail of the second Time Cheater if not for this stowaway?" Muddle patted the watch like a beloved house pet.

"The second Time Cheater?" Ubie seized the opportunity to change the subject, "Is it nearby?"

"I think so." Muddle closed his eyes to get more in tune with the One Watch's sens-a-cheater field, "Oooo...aahhh...there it is! The One Watch detects the Time Cheater's presence..." Muddle waved vaguely toward the hilltop, "...up yonder..."

"You don't say?" Ubie fought an urge to spit. *Who was crazier? The nutjob who whispers to watches, or the ninnies who follow his lead?* If she wasn't so desperate to find the Time Cheaters, Ubie would have DQ-ed Muddle for the duration. But that wasn't an option. The only path to the Time Cheaters led through Muddle. Resigned to her fate, Ubie whacked Muddle on the back, "Okay, Dr. Lovestrangle, let's go get that Time Cheater!"

Fired up as Ubie was, she and Muddle made slow progress. Every few meters, Muddle paused to refresh his psychic bond to the sens-a-cheater field. During one of those interludes, a ruckus broke out above. Searching for the source of the commotion, Ubie and Muddle spied the PI arriving at the hilltop. When Rudyard beheld the wonders that lay before him he screamed, "Australopithecines! I see Australopthh-..."

Rudyard's cries were cut short by a homicidal pebble that smacked him right between the eyes, Kaa-Rack!! Knocked senseless, the PI flopped back like a lasagna noodle.

Gellie cried, "Rudyard!"

Seeing the attack, Sian drew her phraser. She commanded, "Stanny, take cover!" and then raced up the slope.

Stanny ignored Sian. He had no intention of being sidelined during what he hoped would be the most photogenic fracas he had ever staged. Stanny hastened to a cache of equipment that he had stashed near the vanished obelisk. He flung aside a scatter of rocks to reveal a canvas-covered hoard. Tugging the canvas out of the way, Stanny sifted through the cache until he located a bullhorn, camera, tripod, bow and arrows, and backpack. Satisfied that all were in good working order, Stanny stood tall, raised the bullhorn to his lips and bellowed, "SCAVENGERS ASSEMBLE!!!"

The pioneering director listened intently to the echoes of his summons. Following an interval, Stanny heard the faint thunder of a tide of humanity on the rise. Rejoicing in the moment, Stanny gave himself a pep talk, "This is it, Stanny Baby! Today, you'll either make history or die trying! Now *get moving* you adorable old cuss!!" With that, Stanny hoisted the backpack over his shoulders and galloped upslope like a rheumatic mountain goat.

Before Gellie could reach Rudyard a hailstorm of pebbles began sailing over the hilltop. Gellie dashed to Rudyard, activated his life support belt and then energized hers. Moments later, Ubie, Sian and Muddle arrived at Gellie's side. They too had taken the precaution of activating their life support belts. Standing shoulder-to-shoulder they observed the scene playing out before them.

The slope before them descended into a narrow gulch that contained a small, unremarkable basin. The basin held a mucky pool of what was, very likely, the most precious resource in the region: water.

On the far side of the cruddy pool, an agitated group of apes were slingshotting volleys of pebbles. The prehumans screamed, beat their chests and hammered the earth with raw anthropoid fury. Remarkably, the antiquity of the cocksure simians was not their most striking characteristic. Not by half. For reasons unknown, each of the primates was outfitted in a BC superhero costume.

There was every BC superhero that you could ever hope to see. Bratman and Rueben were toasting chunks of meat over a campfire. Wonkerwoman was hogtying Shazbot with her golden rope. Stuporman was sucking lustily from a well-stocked beer helmet. And Aqua Dude, the Red Flush and the Green Latrine were vying for supremacy of the mud puddle.

While that was going on, Stanny scuttled to a perch roughly one hundred meters south of the FF. There the patriarch shed his backpack and set up his camera. Next, Stanny wriggled a bongo drum out of the pack and positioned it within easy reach of the camera. Returning to his backpack Stanny fished out an herbivore femur that was festooned with a cobweb of intricate tracings. Stanny propped the bone against the drum and then paused to see how the battle was progressing.

"Ugh..." Rudyard's eyes fluttered. The PI fussed at the ache between his eyes. When his fingers brushed the wound he exploded, "Aaaarrgh! Australopithecines are a-holes!!"

Gellie scooped an arm under Rudyard's envirobubble and hoisted him to his feet. "There you go, Rudyard. I've got you. Nothing to worry about, buddy."

Rudyard fanned a hand before his eyes, "Where did all these pink elephants come from?"

"There, there." Gelli hugged both arms around the PI, "Don't worry about the elephants, Rudyard. I will protect you."

"I'm not worried about the elephants..." Rudyard grumbled, "...I was hoping they'd agree to stomp a certain gang of Australopithecines into grease smudges."

Gellie rocked the PI's bubble, "Try not to think about the elephants, Rudyard."

"Hey," Ubie squinted into the distance, "Is that Stanny?"

The sun was sinking fast. Stanny dipped an arrowhead into a flaming can of Sterno. Aiming at a cluster of bushes behind the BC suprehumans, Stanny drew back the bow and let the flaming arrow fly, "Twwanggg!!" As the arrow arced through the darkling sky Stanny checked his camera to be sure that it was poised to capture all of the ensuing action.

Squinting through the lens, Stanny grinned, "Perfect." Then he plucked another arrow from his quiver.

The BC suprehumans gazed at Stanny's arrow as it arced toward them. They had never seen anything quite like it. As the arrow sailed nearer an awed hush settled over the BC Justice League. Awe quickly transformed to anxiety as the arrow plummeted toward its flat-footed quarry.

As planned, Stanny's arrow overflowed the superehumans and struck its intended target: a heap of fuel-soaked scrub brush. With a wind-sucking, "Whoooosh!" a towering column of flame erupted behind the Justice Leaguers.

Being unused to pyrotechnics, the superehumans screamed bloody murder and pelted headlong in the opposite direction.

Seeing the costumed superehumans charging toward she and her Star Truckers, Sian announced, "All hands, prepare for combat."

"Aye-aye, Captain," Ubie deactivated her forcefield and struck a defensive pose, "Bring it on!"

Unbeknownst to anyone, Stanny was marking the progress of another group of costumed characters who were approaching the Funtastic Five from behind. In contrast with the BC superehumans, the new arrivals were decked out like celebrated Mudville superheroes: *The Mighty Scavengers!!*

There was every Scavenger you could ever hope to see. The Iron Maiden led the charge. Close on her heels pounded the green-skinned Big Hurt. To his right streaked the Black Panda and her web-slinging beau, Spiderboy. Further behind, Thud lay prostrate in the dirt after braining himself with his own hammer. Last but not least, Captain Patriotic struggled to catch up after taking an ill-timed pee break.

When the Scavengers closed to within fifty meters of the hilltop Stanny sprang his next surprise. He set a second arrow alight and aimed it at another clump of fuel-soaked brush that lay a short distance behind the Mudville heroes.

"Twanggg!!" Stanny released his bowstring and, once again, his aim was true. Moments later a second pile of brush exploded. Just like their BC counterparts, the Scavengers stampeded away from the flames in a state of abject terror.

Caught between two charging squads of superehumans Sian shook her fist at Stanny, "What are you doing, you conniving old buzzard?"

As luck would have it, the illustrious director chose that very moment to lay down his bow and reveal the details of his diabolical scheme, "Welcome dear friends and enemies to the War to End All Wars!! Tonight's battle will decide which super-universe will earn the right to claim sole possession of the future!"

A split second later both companies of costumed superehumans crashed headlong into the Funtastic Five. Safely inside their envirobubbles, Rudyard, and Muddle were kicked high in the air like a pair of luminescent rugby balls.

Gellie responded to the assault by growing twice as large as the Big Hurt. She plucked Muddle and Rudyard out of the air, and in the same motion booted the pea-green superbruiser into the next timezone. Holding tight to the guys, Gellie proposed, "How 'bout I keep hold of you guys until the fight's over?"

Both embraced her offer gratefully.

Down below, the brawl grew fiercer with each fresh kick in the teeth. Wonkerwoman and the Iron Maiden went after each other like a couple of NHL prospects. Elsewhere, Captain Patriotic body-slammed the Green Latrine, while Stuporman drove a fist into the Black Panda's belly, "Oooooffffff!!"

"Wahoo!" Stanny cheered as he filmed the epic rumble, "Go, Mudville! Show those BC swamp rats how real superheroes throw down!"

Raring for a fight, Ubie was crestfallen when the combatants steered well clear of her. She threw up her hands, "What gives?"

Ubie's objections were soon drowned out by a new sound, "BOOM-badda-BOOM, BOOM-badda-BOOM!" Tracing the sound, Ubie discovered that Stanny had begun striking the bongo with his engraved femur, "BOOM-badda-BOOM, BOOM-badda-BOOOOM!"

Muddle paid no heed to the drumbeats because at the same time the One Watch began to chime. Surprised by this previously unknown feature, Muddle held the watch to his ear and trilled, "Hello? What is it, my precious?" Muddle gave the watch his undivided concentration, "Yes, my precious. Sure, my precious. Y-... *You want what, my precious?!*"

Gellie felt Muddle squiggling around inside his envirobubble. Before she could get a better grip, Muddle deactivated his bubble and wriggled out of Gellie's grasp.

"No, Max!" Gellie cried, "You'll get killed..."

Muddle paid no heed. With his cape theatrically aflutter Muddle floated to the ground like thistledown. His voice boomed, "Nay, good lady! My foes shant dispatch me, for..."

The nutty professor flung back his robe and cracked his wrists together overhead. Instead of crunching bone on bone, Muddle's sleeves slid back to expose two golden wristbands. The bands collided with a resonating, "KA-TAAannggg!!" Then a bolt of lightning erupted from the sky and smote Muddle square on the noggin.

The lightning flattened everyone within ten meters of the strike...with one exception. Rather than showing signs of injury, the lightning kindled a dazzling aura around Muddle. The electrified professor boomed, "**Hear me friends and foes! For I am Dr. Stephen Strangelove! Sorcerer Supreme and Rightful Bearer of the One Watch!**" As he spake, ornate disks of fiery energy erupted from Strangelove's palms.

Peeved at being upstaged by a second-tier superhero, Bratman attempted to blindside the Sorcerer Supreme. Sensing the attack, Strangelove created a flaming incantation circle between he and Bratman. Unable to arrest his momentum, Bratman lurched through the flaming circle and blundered headlong into an alternate universe.

"Nooooo!!" Reuben wailed, "Don't worry Bratman, I'll save you!" Before Strangelove could seal the portal, Reuben lunged through to rejoin his mentor in a parallel universe all their own.

Quick as he could Strangelove collapsed the incantation circle into a cascade of dying embers.

"Wow, Max!" Gellie shrank to Muddle's size and clapped him on the back, "How did you do that?"

"**Max?**" Strangelove peered at Gellie, "**Why dust thou address me thus?**"

"Why dust I...?" Gellie pulled a face, "Because that's your name you weirdo."

"**Nay,**" Strangelove thundered, "**I am the Sorcerer Supreme! I have journeyed from The Great Beyond to prevent lowlifes like Uranus Blowhard from destroying the infiniverse.**"

That said, Strangelove summoned a beam of green light from the One Watch and directed it toward Stanny's femur. Kubrick roared, "Hey!! What are you doing,

Strangelove?" Stanny struggled with the trixter beam over possession of the femur, "This is not in the script!"

Strangelove ignored Kubrick. He snapped his fingers and the trixter beam yanked the bone out of Stanny's hands. The conjuror caught the bone and then summoned his comrades, "***Come, friends, attend me!***"

The rival suprehuman clans tried to sneak in for a peek. Seeing this, Strangelove whirled an arm overhead and scattered the suprehumans with a mini bomb-cyclone.

The Funtastic Five gathered close. Strangelove tapped the bone against the One Watch and the tracings came alive with trillions of dazzling smarticles. "***If you have never seen technitrons at work, here's your chance.***" Strangelove marveled at the bone, "***The technitron etchings in this bone contain the complete blueprint for an orbital space station.***" There were gasps all around. "***This single artifact contains enough technitrons to destabilize human civilization from here to eternity.***"

Having utterly lost patience, Stanny roared, "Strangelove! You are ruining my film! You have ten sekkents to clear out, or I will have you and your fake Amerriican accent deported by dawn tomorrow!"

Strangelove was only too happy to accept Stanny's invitation. "***You heard the man.***" Strangelove tucked the femur under his arm and extended two open palms, "***Shall we?***"

The Funtastic Five joined hands. Strangelove maneuvered the technitron-laden femur into contact with the One Watch and, in a twinkling, the FF transported to the next destination in their journey.

Meanwhile...

"The Big Moment is nearly upon us." Blowhard gazed out of his Oval Office window. "Have you completed our preparations?"

"Da." Like a director staging a play, Lutin's eyes darted about the office and imagined every move the players would make. "Da." The cunning little rodent confirmed, "Eez feex."

"Imagine the power!" Blowhard shivered, "To command an empire of roach motels on every planet in the infiniverse..." The orange blob's chin quivered, "...it's more than I ever imagined, and..." Blowhard bowed to Lutin, "...I owe it all to you, little buddy."

"Heh-heh," Lutin bared his wicked little teeth, "Ees nathink. I scritch you beck, you scritch my..."

Blowhard sighed, "That's what makes the world go round."

3.07

Spacetime: 97217.8.331

A river raged at the base of basalt cliffs. The torrent thundered through parched hinterlands before emptying into a cold northern sea. Salmon thrashed upstream heeding the age-old call of the wild.

Suddenly, a circle of fire erupted out of thin air. The firework expanded until it grew large enough to disgorge five interdimensional travelers. The travelers screamed, “Aaaagggghhh!!!!” as they fell through the portal and plunged into the river.

Fortunately, four of the five were properly attired for bathing. Their unitards sliced through the torrent as sleekly as the salmon that slipped upstream. Unfortunately, the fifth traveler was outfitted in the type of clunky attire that is the bane of unwary bathers. It distressed Sian to see Muddle sink like a stone, but when she saw Gellie and Ubie dive after him her worries abated. Sian hooked an arm around Rudyard and towed him to shore.

Gellie and Ubie streaked after Muddle like jet-powered seals. Just as his toes touched the riverbottom Ubie and Gellie each snagged a wrist and hauled Muddle back to the surface. As they whisked him upward the nymphs noticed that the Sorcerer Supreme was no longer wearing golden wristbands. *How curious...*

When they broke the surface Gellie and Ubie wasted no time resuscitating Muddle. The lifeguards punched and pounded the Sorcerer Supreme until Muddle howled that being rescued should not be more lethal than drowning. Satisfied that Muddle's lungs were back online, the nymphs towed the curmudgeon to shore.

Gellie and Ubie were so quick in their work that they managed to beach their catch before Sian finished hauling Rudyard out of the river. The PI was in a sorry state. Rudyard had not been designed for aquatic maneuvers. Consequently, the moment he hit the water the PI had abandoned all hope of survival. In truth, Rudyard's components were so buoyant that he could easily have served as a makeshift life raft. Still, the PI insisted that few had cavorted so intimately with La Morte and lived to tell the tale.

Muddle was a mess too. He was wet, cold, and annoyed. On the upside, since Muddle was usually annoyed about something, his comrades viewed his foul mood as evidence of a whirlwind recovery.

After Muddle crawled out of the water, Ubie tossed a ratty clump of hair into his lap. She deadpanned, “I think that belongs to you, Strangelove.”

“Uhh...” Muddle's nose wrinkled, “...thanks, Ubie.” He inspected the wig and decided to “lose” the horsehair mop as he could do so unmarked. Then for a scary moment, Muddle feared that he had also lost his goatee. A quick spot-check revealed (to Muddle's lasting relief) that the goatee was still clinging like a barnacle to his upper lip.

Ubie lingered next to Muddle. Eventually, he took notice and asked, “Sooo, Ubie...How's it going?”

“Pretty good, but...” Ubie drove straight to the point, “...I’d be much better if I could take another look at the One Watch.”

Muddle’s first instinct was to keep the watch tucked inside his robes. He wavered, “Er...sure, Ubie. You can look, but remember...” Muddle clambered to his feet, “...please don’t touch. The watch is far too delicate for any rough treatment.”

Ubie rolled her eyes, “Sure, Max. Whatever you say.”

“Okay, just a sekkent...” Muddle fumbled through his sodden costume. At length he produced the watch and angled it so that Ubie could get a good look.

“Thanks, Max.” Ubie examined the watch and then whistled under her breath, “I’ll be darned...” Her eyes met Muddle’s, “...did you see this?”

Before Muddle could answer, Gellie cut in, “Did he see what?” Gellie was famous on five continents for her uncanny ability to detect juicy secrets. She demanded, “What are you talking about, Ubie?”

Ubie checked with Muddle. After a moment’s hesitation, he said, “Sure. I guess it’s time they knew.”

Eagerly, Ubie beckoned to Gellie, Sian, and Rudyard, “Hey, you guys! Check this out.” Being careful not to touch the watch, Ubie drew her colleagues’ attention to its face, “Remember Stanny’s missing obelisk? Well, somehow the One Watch, umm...” She fumbled for the right word, “...it seems to have ‘absorbed’ the obelisk.” Ubie pointed at the miniature obelisk.

The FF exchanged doubtful glances.

Next, Ubie drew attention to the lower half of the watch face, “And there, just above the number ‘VI,’ you can see that the watch has also absorbed Stanny’s femur.”

There was a moment of shocked silence, then Sian, Gellie, and Rudyard unleashed a blizzard of questions. Ubie and Muddle did their best to connect sensible answers to the firestorm of questions.

“No, Ubie and Muddle had not been keeping secrets.”

“Yes, they had withheld information—but to keep Stanny, not the FF, in the dark.”

“No, they had no control over the One Watch’s kleptomania.”

“Yes, they felt bad about skiving off with Stanny’s Time Cheaters.”

“No, they couldn’t have managed the situation any differently.”

When the gale of questions finally died down, Sian leaned in for a closer look at the watch, “Hmmm...” She cupped a hand to her chin, “I don’t know what this means. Should we be ecstatic, or terrified?” Sian splayed her hands, “Any thoughts?”

Though it agonized her to do so, Ubie raised a hand, “I, uhh...don’t know what to say about the Time Cheaters, Sian, but...” She flicked her eyes at Muddle and then added gingerly, “...I do believe the One Watch is gaining strength...”

“Gaining strength?” Sian raised her eyebrows, “What makes you say that?”

Ubie sagged, “I don’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings, but...” She patted Muddle’s shoulder, “...Max has started treating the watch like it’s, umm...” Ubie trailed off, “...a person...”

All eyes shifted to Muddle.

“Awww...” The crabby professor groaned, “...I wouldn’t say that...”

“Yes, you have!” Ubie shot back, “And you’ve been cuddling it too!”

Gasps all around.

“No, no,” Muddle squirmed, “You’re misinterpreting...”

“I’ve seen it too!” Gellie blurted, “At first, I thought you were weirdly kissing up to Rudyard, but then I saw you ogling the watch. It really creeped me out.” She shivered illustratively.

“Oh, that’s nothing!” Eager to join the fun, Rudyard cried, “I’ve heard him call the watch ‘my precious!’”

“No, you haven’t!” Muddle stormed, “Froda called it that you bubble brain, not me!”

“Easy, Max...” Sian signaled for all concerned parties to simmer down, “No one’s accusing you of anything. Okay? We’re just trying to figure out what’s going on. That’s all.”

“But there’s more!” Gellie blabbed, “Max isn’t wearing gold wristbands anymore either.”

“Gold wristbands?” Muddle goggled at Gellie, “I don’t have gold wristbands. You know that.” He exposed both arms, “See? No wristbands.”

“I know, Max...” Gellie fired back, “That’s what I said.”

Gellie and Muddle glared at each other while trying to fathom how agreeing could somehow intensify their disagreement.

Before Gellie and Muddle could lob any more non-sequiturs at each other, Sian spoke up, “Hey, let’s change the subject, okay?” She patted a small compartment on her utility belt, “I have a surprise that I’ve been saving for a special moment just like this.” With all eyes on her, Sian unclipped the pouch and drew out a silver flask. She unscrewed the container’s tiny cap and then handed it to Muddle. With a twinkle in her eye, Sian teased, “Have a blast of that, Mudd. It’ll put a spring in your mattress.”

Muddle accepted the flask, “What is it?”

Sian shook her head, “Don’t talk. Just drink.” Then she nudged the jug toward Muddle’s mouth.

Too curious to dawdle any longer, Muddle took a swig. The liquid was rich, smokey and blazingly stimulating. As promised, Muddle literally sprang to his tiptoes. Hoarsely, he croaked, “Wow...!”

Before he could take another slug Sian whisked the flask from Muddle’s hand and offered it to Rudyard.

“Uhh...” Rudyard’s eyes flitted from the flask to Muddle and back again. He quavered, “No thanks, Sian. I never touch the stuff.”

“Trust me,” Sian persisted, “You want to touch this stuff.”

“Sian’s right,” Muddle wheezed, “You’ve gotta try it, Rudd. It’s out of this world.” Still resonating from his electrified tippie, Muddle grew curious, “Hey, Sian? What is it?”

“I thought you guys were supposed to be Star Techies.” Sian scoffed, “I’ve heard bona fide Techies can detect the aroma of Saurian Brandy through the vacuum of space.”

“*Saurian Brandy!!*” Rudyard and Muddle both lunged for the flask. Already being within arm’s reach, Rudyard snagged the grog before Muddle could get off the dime. Triumphant, the PI raised the liquor to his lips, but before he could take a sip, Rudyard pointed at the river and howled, “Hey! Is that *Shatspeare?!?*” The PI was so distracted that he dropped the brandy on the beach.

“Nooooo!” Muddle wailed as the precious liquid glugged onto the sand. While Muddle dove to preserve what remained of the brandy, his crewmates gathered around Rudyard.

Sure enough, about fifty meters from shore a bald man with a goatee and a beaded buckskin outfit was swooshing down the river.

“Hmm, I don’t know...” Ubie observed, “...he looks familiar, but... Shatspeare? I don’t think so.”

“Yeah...” Sian added under her breath, “...if anything the goatee makes him look like Shatspeare’s evil twin.”

“Hmm...” Gellie squinted at the floater, “...he looks beaten up. Do you think he needs help?”

“Nah...” Rudyard pshawed, “...he’ll never survive without help.”

“So!” Muddle was apoplectic, “Being ‘helpful’ is suddenly a priority for you?!” The professor shook the empty flask in Rudyard’s face, “You should have thought of that a little sooner, pal!”

No one paid any attention.

Instead, Sian, Ubie, and Gellie locked eyes. Without a word, they formulated a complex plan of attack and set it in motion. Gellie and Ubie dove into the river, while Sian beckoned to Rudyard and Muddle, “Hey, guys. Follow me!!”

“Wait...” Rudyard’s brow furrowed, “...where are they going?” He pointed at Ubie and Gellie.

Sian responded by feigning deafness.

“Hey?” Muddle nudged Rudyard, “Where’s she going?” Muddle’s eyes followed Sian as she raced down the beach.

“I don’t know, Kyptin...” Rudyard scratched his chin, “...but I think she might be searching for more brandy.”

It took a long moment for the PI’s comment to register. When it did, Muddle shrilled, “*What!?*”

Gellie and Ubie torpedoed through the water. It took no more than a dozen strokes to draw abreast of Shatspeare. As Gellie suspected, the old boy looked like he had been severely beaten. There were two nasty knocks on his pate. “Dash it...” Shatspeare protested, “...you musn’t bother. Honestly!” Protest though he might, it was obvious that Shatspeare wouldn’t last another minute on his own.

To ease the bard’s mind, Gellie responded with her best Medieval accent, “Never ye mindeth, good sir. We are bloomin’ fond of the odd noontide ablution. T’were it not so, oh Ubie the Merwench?”

Less keen on the dopey accent game, Ubie grumbled, “M-...me sister speaketh true, oh Shatspeare the soggy. Just pipeth down and leave the sculling to us. Ay, what?”

Whatever the nymphs lacked in syntax, they made up for in aquatic virtuosity. Ubie and Gellie took hold of Shatspeare’s jerkin and side-stroked him to shore.

The torrent surged so swiftly that Sian had trouble keeping up. As she raced around a riverbend an extraordinary sight hove into view. Atop a cliff on the river’s north bank an intact copy of Stonehedge, the famous Druidic ruin, was under attack by horse-mounted warriors.

"Ubie!" Gellie shouted, "Do you see that?"

"Yeah!" Ubie answered, "What's going on up there?"

Gellie shook her head..

As Ubie and Gellie approached the riverbank, Sian was on hand to help them beach their latest catch. Shatspeare was in much worse shape than Rudd and Mudd had been following their swim. The bard coughed up nearly a bucket of water, flopped on his back and fell unconscious.

Once he was asleep, Gellie took a closer look at the Bard's injuries. She clucked her tongue, "He's taken one heck of a beating, but..." Gellie grimaced at the ugly knocks on Shatspeare's skull, "...lucky for him, none of the wounds are life-threatening." Gellie concluded, "He's not suffering from anything that a six-month hospital stay wouldn't fix."

"Yeah right," Sian snorted, "That ain't gonna happen." Her attention was focused on the battle that was raging around Stonehedge. "Something tells me that Shatspeare's injuries are related to whatever's happening up there."

"And something tells me..." Ubie pointed at a star-shaped insignia on Shatspeare's chest, "...this guy's name isn't Shatspeare." Beneath the insignia, the name "Kennewick" was beaded onto his jerkin.

"Well, well, well..." Sian sank to one knee for a closer look. She read the name aloud, "Kennewick...hmm, I wonder...?"

When Sian uttered the unconscious man's name, his eyes flew wide, "No...not Kennewick! The...Human Beings can't pronounce it. Y-...you must call me..." Tapped out by the effort, the old boy fell back, "Kir-ok..."

"What did he say?" Ubie asked, "I didn't catch the last part."

Just then Rudyard and Muddle charged into their midst. Panting heavily, Muddle pestered Rudyard, "See?" He pointed at their companions, "All we had to do was stay by the river. Why complicate things?"

"Yes, but..." Rudyard huffed, "...we would have spotted them much sooner if we had scaled that cliff..."

"Scaled the cliff!" Muddle scoffed, "Give me a break, Sir Edmund. You're the one who's afraid of..."

"Guys!" Sian snapped, "Will you pipe down? We're in the midst of reviving Kirok, so if you wouldn't mind..."

"What?" Rudyard blanched, "D-, did you just say..."

"...Kirok?" Muddle cupped a hand over his mouth, "You're reviving *Kirok*!"

"Yes..." Sian glared at both men, "What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing!" Muddle elbowed Rudyard, but the PI missed the signal.

"Kirok...?" Rudyard gabbled, "...but he's in the episode where an asteroid...*gulp* ...destroys a defenseless planet..."

"Let me guess..." Sian sighed, "...you think we're living out a Star Tech episode in real life, don't you?"

"No!" Muddle rattled his head, "Not even close."

"Whoa!" Rudyard gasped, "It's like you can read my mind!"

Just then Kirok began screaming, "Sacagawanee! I'm coming. Never fear my love! I'm coming as fast as I can!"

“Easy, Kirok.” Gellie held him in place, “I don’t think you’re quite ready...”

Kirok discarded her advice and struggled to his feet. Once upright, he gazed at the raging hilltop battle and cried, “You fools! Can’t you see we’re here to help!” Gellie and Sian hovered nearby but, to their surprise, Kirok did not lose balance and collapse. Instead, Kirok whapped the insignia on his chest, “Kirok to the Sanctum of Secrets. Do you read? Over.”

Gellie nudged Sian and whirled a forefinger around her left temple.

Kirok tapped the insignia again, but before he could speak, a voice crackled out of it, “Captain? Is that you? I, uhh... thought you were dead!”

“No...” Kirok chuckled and then winced at the pain in his head, “No such luck, Sacaga. I had the good fortune...” Here Kirok smiled at the FF, “...of bumping into some friends.”

“Friends?” There was a ring of doubt in the woman’s voice, “You mean the Nez Percé?”

“No,” Kirok shook his head, “Not that kind of friend Lieutenant, but we’ll have to save the chi-chat for later. For now...” Kirok scrutinized the battle at Stonehedge, “...how are you holding up?”

The Human Beings fired volley after volley of arrows at Stonehedge, while someone inside the structure answered with streams of laser pellets. The FF was relieved to learn that the pellets stunned, but did not kill the Human Beings. Nonetheless, stray pellets were sparking fires all over the scrubby hilltop.

“Sacaga...” Kirok probed, “...have you managed to get the Cosmic Rock Blocker back online?”

“Not yet, sir. I’m doing my best, but this is a job for Commander Spork. He’d be able to translate these glyphs in a flash.”

“Glyphs?” Ubie touched Kirok’s arm, “Hey, I think we can help with those.” She pointed at Rudyard, “Decoding complex symbols happens to be Rudyard’s ‘thing’.”

“You don’t say?” Kirok gazed at Rudyard with renewed interest, “With the battle raging, it will be tricky to get inside the Sanctum of Secrets. Are you sure you can...” He flicked his eyes at the PI, “...handle that kind of heat?”

Ubie smiled, “That won’t be a problem.”

“You know what?” The PI interjected, “Why don’t you text me some images when you get there and I’ll decipher the glyphs right here.”

“Kirok...” Sian announced, “We’re a team, so we’ll all accompany you.”

“Is that so?” Kirok appraised the FF with a commander’s eye. He looked impressed except for one nagging concern, “So, uhh...what’s with the Count of Monte Cristo over there? Is he with you?”

“Oh, him...?” Sian massaged her temples, “Yeah, he’s with us.”

Deaf to the implied insults, Muddle extended his right hand. Before he could exchange pleasantries with Kirok, however, Muddle halted and sneezed explosively, “Haaa-chooo!!”

A moment later, Ubie shrieked, “Oh, my gaaawwwdd, Max!! You just sneezed your goatee on my foot!”

To pass the time during their uphill trudge, Gellie and Ubie quizzed Kirok about his conflict with the Human Beings.

“Oh, that!” Kirok pulled a face, “Sacaga and I came here to stimulate the Human Beings’ pace of social evolution. Unfortunately...” Kirok pointed at the cracks in his skull, “...they’ve been unwilling to abandon their pointless way of life without a fight.”

Ubie peered at Kirok, “You’re joking...aren’t you?”

“Young lady...” Kirok condescended, “...someday you will understand that people can’t fill their bellies with ideals. If these savages are ever going to make Progress, they’ll have to start producing things of value. We’ve come here to jumpstart that process.”

“But...” Gellie was aghast, “...what about the Prime Directive?”

“Oh, that!” Kirok sniggered, “Profits were stagnating, so Star Fleece dumped the Prime Directive for the Prime *Elective*.”

“The Prime Elective...?” Ubie groaned, “I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Not to worry, my child. Both policies are identical except for one tiny detail. The Prime Elective permits Star Fleece operatives to ‘elect’...” Here Kirok used air quotes to emphasize the significance of the term, ‘elect’, “...to use any means necessary to achieve desired outcomes.”

Ubie and Gellie were speechless.

The hikers arrived at the hilltop. Before them, the battle of the Sanctum of Secrets raged on. Wildfires scorched the land and smoke choked the heavens. The more soft-hearted onlookers—Kirok preferred to say, “soft-headed”—felt like they had arrived at the prelude to Armageddon.

Gazing out upon the hellish nightmare, Kirok flung his arms wide and then hugged them to his chest. With a maniacal gleam in his eyes, Kirok cried, “A wise man once said, ‘Everything which is not forbidden is compulsory!’ That is the lesson the Human Beings are learning today!”

At that instant, a Human Being with an impeccable sense of timing flung a tri-weighted bola around Kirok’s neck. Gellie managed to swat the bola before it crushed Kirok’s head into pomegranate jelly. Though she saved his life, Gellie could not prevent one of the stones from cracking another ugly dent in Kirok’s pate.

Ubie had to fight an overpowering urge to cheer.

Gellie caught Kirok and held him upright. Once she confirmed that he was still alive, Gellie whapped Kirok’s insignia, “Hey, Sacaga! We’re making a dash for the Sanctum. See you in a hot blippet!”

Sian gave Gellie a fist bump and then addressed the FF. “Attention please! We’re going to make a dash for the Sanctum.” Sian drew her phraser, checked its settings and then said, “On the count of three...”

Pause!

The moment she uttered those words Sian recalled that three-counts and Muddle were a toxic cocktail, but that was not the main reason for her timeout. Unexpectedly, the landscape became bathed in an eerie light. The effect was far too unearthly to be a result of the wildfires. Something else was afoot.

“Oh, no...!” Rudyard wilted, “I was right...”

Too busy to play games, Sian snapped, "Right about what?"

"...right..." Rudyard faltered, "...about the asteroid..."

Sian's eyes shot skyward. Sure enough, a streak of fire that was brighter and spookier than the sun had begun scorching through the earth's atmosphere. Sensing there was not a moment to lose, Sian roared, "Run!! Make for the Sanctum! It's our only hope!"

Helpfully, the strange celestial event had brought the battle to a screeching halt. While the Human Beings gazed at the asteroid in disbelief, the Funtastic Five raced across the battlefield. As they approached the Sanctum a faint dome of repulsive energy became visible. Heaps of half-scorched arrows lay smoldering at the base of the energy shield.

Gellie howled, "Here we come, Sacaga! Drop that shield or Kirok will go out as a cloud of cheap perfume!"

Instantly, a portal whisked open in front of the FF. The heroes charged through the opening like their cabooses were ablaze. The moment they cleared the Sanctum's protective perimeter, the portal snapped closed behind them.

"Kirok!" Exclaimed a woman wearing a beaded buckskin dress.

Gellie shouted, "Don't worry, Sacaga! He won't be playing 3D chess for a while, but Kirok's fine."

The FF raced to a glyph-crust ed altar at the center of the Sanctum. While Gellie stretched Kirok out on a bench-sized plinth, Sian demanded, "What's your status, Sacaga?"

Sacaga shook her head, "This Sanctum was constructed by an ancient civilization. The secrets contained in the glyphs..." She gestured at the intricate carvings, "...remain just that. Secrets."

Hearing this, Sian snapped her fingers at the PI, "Did you hear that Rudyard? There's no time to lose!"

"Okay, okay..." Rudyard responded testily, "If you wanted speed, you should have brought an AI." The PI continued grumbling as he strolled around the altar.

Sian snatched a glance at the asteroid. The space rock had grown larger and more fearsome. Sian nearly lost it when she saw that Rudyard had paused to clean his glasses, "Rudyard!! This is no time for putzing around!"

"Sian!" Rudyard sighed, "How am I supposed to examine the glyphs with dirty glasses?"

"*Rudyard...*!" Sian suppressed the ungentle words that were leaping to mind. Through clenched teeth she said, "We don't have time..."

"I agree," The PI interrupted, "We simply don't have enough time. It would take a supercomputer eons to decipher those glyphs."

"Ugh!" Rudd's assessment hit Sian like a gut punch, "Now, what do we do?"

As if on cue, a cyclone of dazzling quantro particles appeared next to the altar. The multihued spartickles began to sizzle and pop like subatomic popcorn. The pops grew louder and more numerous until—*Hey, Presto!*—the spartickles reconstituted the form of an alien humanoid.

The humanoid had Frankenstein green skin, a poker face and he was outfitted in a classic black and blue Star Fleece uniform. The renowned science officer also had the hippest cornrow hairdo that anybody had ever seen.

"Commander Spork!" Sacaga gasped, "What brings you here?"

Spork glanced at the asteroid and responded, "Necessity, Lieutenant."

"Commander Spork!" Muddle and Rudyard could not believe their eyes. But before they could say another word, the Vulcan declared, "No autographs!" and then focused solely on Sacaga.

"Grasshopper..." The Vulcan tweaked an eyebrow halfway up his forehead, "... have you forgotten your training? Always remember! When the answer is invisible, you must seek the truth..." T'Pring's better half placed both hands on the altar and fell into a trance, "...within."

For a few agonizing moments, Spork remained still and silent. But then he *transformed!!* "Aaaaiieeee!" The Vulcan screamed as pent up emotion ripped his soul to shreds. Overwrought, Spork sobbed, "The paaaiiin...The PAAAIINNN!!!"

Then, as abruptly as it began, Spork broke off the mind meld. In a twinkling, he was right as rain, "That should do the trick." Shushing everyone away from the altar, Spork advised, "Better shade your eyes."

A pair of thick rabbit-ear antennas telescoped out of the altar. Kicking out sour puffs of ozone, the antennas fired jagged beams of energy at each other. Where the beams met, they created a crackling ball of fire. The fireball sizzled and frizzled until it exploded like an indoor firework. As the smoke cleared, the fireball assumed the form of a ghoulish eyeball. The slitted eyeball glared accusingly at each of the individual's standing around the altar. Those who hadn't followed Spork's advice scrambled away as fast as they could.

When the evil eye fixed on Spork, the old science officer remarked, "Fascinating." Without another word, Spork directed the Cosmic Rock Blocker's gaze skyward. Spotting the asteroid, the Rock Blocker roared, "Not on my watch!!" Then the Blocker fired a meter-wide DisTracto Beam at the incoming space rock.

The immovable object and the irresistible force collided head on. For a few scary moments, it looked like the DisTracto Beam might be losing the battle. Refusing to lose, the Cosmic Rock Blocker redoubled its intensity and muscled the unwelcome asteroid back from whence it came. Once the asteroid was good and gone, the Cosmic Rock Blocker dialed back its intensity, winked at Commander Spork and then shut itself down. The rabbit ears telescoped back into the altar and commenced the long, lonely wait for the next trouble-making intruder.

Sacaga exclaimed, "Wow! That was amazing. I wish Kirok could have seen it."

"Indeed, Lieutenant?" Spork raised an eyebrow, "I suspect Kirok will be much happier in repose. For when he wakes, the aspiring Star Fleece Captain will have to face the bitter truth that he has, once again, failed the Kobayashi Maru."

Sacaga's face fell.

"Perhaps one day..." The Vulcan gazed at Kirok's dented skull, "...Kirok will learn that lying, cheating, stealing and...ahem...are all fast tracks to misfortune. Until that happy day..." Spork motioned for Sacaga to stand next to him, "...Kirok will learn an indelible lesson in humility by spit-shining boots for Star Fleece cadets."

Once they were in transporter beam formation, Spork tapped the star-shaped insignia on his chest and said, "Energize."

As they shimmered out of existence, the venerable science officer flashed the FF a Vulcan peace sign, "Live long and perspire."

When the FF was alone again, a weight seemed to lift from Sian's shoulders, "Attention all Star Truckers. The next time I complain about any of you, please remind me that Spork could have left Kirok with us."

Ubie elbowed Muddle, "So, Strangelove, which of these rocks contains the Time Cheater?"

"Aghh..." Muddle shrugged, "I think any will do."

"Well," Gellie smirked, "I know which one gets my vote."

The FF gathered around the Cosmic Rock Blocker. They joined hands and Sian proposed, "What's say we do the Human Beings a favor and remove this eyesore from their skyline."

And so they did.

A Wrinkle in Spacetime ~

"We are here to ring in a new day. Orange Supremacy now, Orange Supremacy tomorrow, Orange Supremacy forever!!"

Uranus Blowhard and a horde of supervillains buzzed around the Statue of Liberty. In his current guise, Blowhard was Herculean. He towered meters over his supervillain posse, and he was as ripped as a prizefighter in his prime.

"We have gathered here today to right a terrible wrong! For too long..." the Orange Titan bellowed, "...this dastardly woman has opened her arms to the poor, the tired..." Blowhard spat the words as if they befouled his tongue, "...the huddled masses!"

The supervillains gnashed their teeth and shouted imprecations. How dare this francophile bimbo invite no-hopers to crowd America's shores, invade its borders and defile its communities?

It had to stop, and today was the day!

"This ends today!" Blowhard thundered, "I have called you here to join me in tearing down this tribute to mediocrity. This beacon to the weak and worthless."

Blowhard's mob of super-xenophobes took up their favorite chant, "Tear her down! Tear her down!! Tear her down!!!"

Exulting in the uncivil disobedience that he was fomenting, Blowhard cried, "On the count of three, I want you to rip this obscenity down and fling it into the sea. Let not a scrap of copper, nor slab of marble from this abomination ever see the light of day again!"

The clamor that Blowhard inspired among his confederates was deafening. Lady Liberty was in for a whoopin'.

The Orange Colossus roared, "One!"

The thugs answered, "ONE!"

Blowhard held two fingers aloft.

The crowd raged, "TWO!!"

Before Blowhard could raise a third finger, however, a woman astride a winged horse swooped low and dropped a sack of soap powder on his head. As Blowhard sputtered, another dive-bomber—this one wearing jet boots—streaked by and shouted, "You stink, Blowie! Do us a favor and take a long, cold bath at the bottom of the ocean."

Both women circled around the lonely green statue and then perched protectively on her shoulder. Flight-equipped supervillains buzzed around the statue like angry bees.

Incensed by their audacity, Blowhard boomed, "Who do you wretches think you are?"

Gellie cupped two hands around her mouth, "We are the Guardians of Liberty you stupid orange Julius!"

Ubie added, "Anyone who wants to harm Lady Liberty has to go through us first!" Then she balled a fist and thumped her chest. The sonic boom from her chest thump literally shook the earth.

Blowhard, who was still spitting soap flakes, regarded the superheroines with a tremor of doubt. It took cojones for two lone heroes to stand up against he and his supervillain army. *Who were those women?*

As he contemplated his next move, Blowhard felt the earth quake again. He studied the sisters. Thistime they were not the source of the temblor. Following a moment of doubt, Blowhard signaled for his troops to assume attack formation. Before he could launch his attack the ground began shaking again. This time, however, the temblors did not cease.

Blowhard's flying troops spotted a strange phenomenon in the distance. Outside New York Harbor the ocean began to boil. Two vast whirlpools became visible and, oddly, began moving toward the Statue of Liberty. As the whirlpools drew nearer, the ocean surface became rougher and rougher until...

Two enormous stone domes broke through the ocean's surface. Soon the domes cleared the surface far enough to begin looking like helmets. Below the helmets rose the grim faces of two titanic knights. The knights continued their march until, bit by bit, their necks, shoulders, torsos, waists and, ultimately, their entire bodies emerged from the surf.

When they were finally visible from head to toe, Blowhard judged that the knights stood at least two hundred meters tall. Roughly twice the height of the Statue of Liberty. The soldiers stopped marching when they spotted the Guardians of Liberty. One of the knights who had the name, "Iaragorn," carved into his helmet waved at the Guardians and thundered, "How's it going cousins?"

Ubie smiled, "Pretty good, larry, except these guys..." She pointed at Blowhard and his army of super insects, "...want to destroy Lady Liberty."

The second knight who had the name "Kyrage" chiseled into his helmet bellowed, "You mean, those guys?" Kyrage kicked a clod of dirt that buried half of Blowhard's supervillain army. Blowhard's bullies chose that moment to cut and run. By air, land, and sea, the supervillains hightailed it to the four corners of the earth.

Left alone, Blowhard gazed up at the knights and quavered, "Wh-...Who are you guys?"

Iaragorn whapped Kyrage's chest, "We're the Argonaut Brothers, dude."

"And..." Kyrage added for good measure, "...I'm the guy who's gonna dropkick your butt to Sardinia if you mess with my cousins."

"And..." Blowhard put on a faltering display of bravado, "...I-...I'm the guy who's gonna...make you eat those words!" Blowhard whacked a silver

pocket watch that was draped around his neck. The watch emitted a paltry fiber of laser light that Blowhard aimed at Iaragorn's toes.

"Yaaahh!" Iaragorn hopped around on one foot, "Stop that! It tickles!"

When Blowhard realized that his Doomsday weapon was not quite living up to the hype, he decided that this was not his day. Shaking a fist at the knights, Blowhard whined, "Just wait till I collect the other Time Cheaters. Then I'll teach you the meaning of a hot foot!"

"Sure..." Kyrage chuckled, "...you do that. But, until then..." He lifted one of his booted feet, "...I s'pose I'll have to warm my toes on your fat, little fanny."

"Noooo!" Blowhard wailed, "I'm too young and good-looking to die!" And then the lily-livered Titan fled as fast as his little piggies could carry him.

"Ky!" Iaragorn punched his brother, "Why'd you do that? Now he's going to think we're a couple of bullies."

"Aaahh!" Kyrage snorted, "I was only trying to scare him. Anyway..." Kyrage resettled his foot on the ground, "...he had it coming."

"Hey, guys!" Gellie and her pegasus took wing and swirled around the Argonauts' heads, "How would you like to be members of the Guardians of Liberty?"

"Awesome!" Iaragorn pumped a fist, "I've always wanted to be a superhero. Can I choose my own super-name?"

"Of course!" Ubie hovered between the Argonauts, "What name would you like?"

Iaragorn gave it a thought and then ventured, "...how 'bout Rocky?"

"Ugghh!!" Kyrage doubled over, "That's a stupid name, Larry! Superheroes need badass names like the Black Viper or the Restless Wanderer..."

"The Restless Wanderer?" Iaragorn gaped at his brother, "Do you want to be a superhero or a soap opera personality?"

"The Restless Wanderer is a way cooler name than Rocky!"

"No it isn't!"

"Yes it is!"

The sisters hugged the Argonauts thick necks.

Just like old times!

3.08

Spacetime: 97341.5.602

Spinning, spinning, spinning...Darkness.

Rain pattering on a glass ceiling.

"Max!"

"Yes?"

"Where are we?"

"No idea."

"Where is everyone!"

Muddle opened his eyes. Sian sat next to him, propped against a marble statue.

She asked, "What happened?"

"What do you mean?" Muddle's thoughts were foggy.

"Uhh..." Sian fumbled, "...I think the time jump...went wrong..."

Muddle sensed something similar, but thought it must have been a dream.

Surely.

Suddenly fearing the worst, Muddle scrambled to find the One Watch. His panic only subsided only when he confirmed that the watch had not gone missing and, in fact, had not even been scratched. Muddle also noted that true to form, the One Watch had absorbed another Time Cheater. The watch displayed a miniature of the Sanctum of Secrets right next to the number III.

Muddle was about to reveal this discovery to Sian when they heard voices.

Sian touched a finger to her lips. Two men entered the echoey hall. Their shoes click-clacked on the tiles. One was carrying a flashlight. Lightning flashed and Muddle realized that he and Sian were in an expansive hall and there were things...*no, not things*...exhibits. Yes, that's the word. There were dozens of exhibits scattered throughout the hall: gems, jewels, weapons, art. You name it.

Muddle guessed that he and Sian were in an annex of a large museum. The air smelled old, but clean-old. Whisper-quiet ventilators dispatched the mustiness that can damage delicate, hmmm....*what was the word?* Antiquities! That's it. Sian and Muddle were in an antiquities museum. But which one? And where? The sooner they knew, the sooner they could begin tracking down the next Time Cheater.

The men came closer. Sian strained to get a better look, but the flashlight glare prevented it.

It occurred to Muddle that he was not as scared as he would normally be. Perhaps he had encountered so many freakish oddities of late that, short of swallowing flaming swords, his brain refused to get worked up about trivialities. But there was something else. Muddle guessed he might be feeling blasé because one of the voices sounded familiar. Non-threatening.

"There you are!" It was Rudyard, "Did you guys move? I could have sworn I left you in a different part of the museum."

“Things like that happen around here.” The man accompanying Rudyard switched off his flashlight and clipped it to his belt. “This museum is full of surprises.” It took a few moments for Muddle’s eyes to adjust. When they did Muddle discovered that Rudyard’s companion was a man with a cheery smile, dark hair and a taste for poofy togas. Atop the toga, the man wore a dark tie, a black utility belt and a name tag that read, “Nightwatch: Lawrence P. Diog”. Lawrence extended his right hand, “My name is Diogenes. Lawrence Diogenes. But you can call me Larry.”

Rudyard attempted to introduce Sian, but she spoke first. “Where are Gellie and Ubie?”

“Oh, sorry,” Rudyard snapped his fingers, “I should have told you right away.” He handed Sian a folded note. “I found that in your hand after we arrived.”

“Thank you, Rudyard,” Sian opened the note. She frowned and re-read the message before handing it to Muddle.

“What does it say?” Sian’s stony reaction made Muddle nervous.

Sian fluttered the paper, “Just read it.”

With misgivings, Muddle accepted the note. He strained to see the writing in the dim hall. The message said:

Dear SM&R,

*Sorry. We had to bail out of the time jump. Our Employer
needed help. Don't wait for us. We'll catch up.
Stay safe!*

*Love,
G&U*

Muddle scratched his head, “Gellie and Ubie have an Employer?” He returned the note to Sian. “Did you know that?”

“No,” Sian looked uneasy, “It’s news to me, and makes me wonder what else I don’t know.”

“This is an unexpected development, but...” Rudyard reasoned, “...I don’t think there’s cause for alarm.”

Sian scrutinized the PI, “What makes you say that?”

“Well...” Rudyard speculated, “...if Gellie and Ubie’s Employer can pluck them out of an interdimensional spacetime jump, that Employer could just as easily—so to speak—pull our plugs. So...” The PI waved at their surroundings, “...if we’re still plugging, that means we have a powerful ally.”

“That sounds about right,” Larry spoke up, “A lot of demigods pass through the museum. If they don’t have keen supporters on Olympus, they generally don’t get very far. ”

“I see...” Sian responded, “...but we aren’t demigods...”

“Oh, sure...” Larry chuckled, “...that’s what they all say. Anyway, ...” He fine-tuned his point, “...it’s not who you are that matters, it’s what you’re doing. Take my word for it...” The nightwatchman jingled his keys, “...you’re on a quest.”

“How do you know what we’re doing?” Muddle asked.

“Rudyard told me.” Larry nodded at the PI. Before Sian and Muddle could light into Rudyard, Larry added, “Plus, I’ve had your visit on my calendar for the past three moonths.”

“What?” Sian gasped, “Three moonths?! How can that be?”

“Well...” Larry spluttered, “...I need at least three moonths to optimize a VIP museum tour. You wouldn’t want your first visit to the Athens Museum to be a waste of time, would you?”

“Well no...” Sian conceded, “...but...”

“And, before you say anything else...” Larry pushed on, “...thanks to my advance planning, I already know where to find your next Time Cheater.

“WHAT!” Sian and Muddle shouted.

“Yikes!” The volume of their combined shouts knocked Larry back a step. Through force of habit, he scanned the museum to see if his guests had disturbed any other VIPs. Seeing nothing amiss, Larry lowered his voice instructively, “As soon as I heard that you were scouring spacetime for abnormal technology leaps, I knew exactly which exhibit you needed to see.”

“Really!?” Sian crossed her arms, “I thought Athenians were great philosophers, but iffy technicians. At best.”

“That’s a common misconception,” Larry nodded, “...and that’s why I’m taking you to the Pyrotheus exhibit?”

“Pyrotheus?” Rudyard combed his memory, “You mean the guy who stole fire from the gods?”

“He’s the one...” Larry confirmed, “...if anyone understands the hazards of tech-...” Before Larry could finish he was interrupted by three toga-clad men. Instead of breezing through the doorway one by one, all three slammed into it at once. A dictionary-sized bronze box that they were carrying flew into the exhibit hall and skittered across the floor.

“Oh, no,” Larry covered his face, “Not these guys.”

Following their collision, the trio’s leader growled, “Spread out!” Then he started slapping faces, pulling hair and poking eyes.

Sian was aghast, “That’s horrible!”

“That’s hilarious!” Rudyard hooted, “What are the Three Stooges doing in the Athens Museum?”

Larry bristled, “Where else would they be?” The nightwatchman seemed simultaneously elated and mortified that this troupe of clueless comedians would call the Athens Museum home. “Of course...” He added, “...most people know them by their other names: Playdoh, Socrazee, and Aristipple.”

Rudyard’s jaw dropped.

The Stooges yowled, “Woo-woo-woo!!” and “Nyuck-nyuck-nyuck!” before making another dash for the door. Though no one could have seen it coming, the Stooges once again jammed shoulder-to-shoulder in the doorframe. Instead of ricocheting backward this time, the Stooges popped through like three whiny corks from a bottle.

The reason for the Stooges’ extra momentum became clear when a cyclops poked his gigantic head through the door, “Now, I seez ya’ nawdy liddle nobodies! C’mere so’z I can squish ya’ like pancakes!” Being far too large to squeeze through the

doorway, the cyclops thrust an arm into the hall and tried to swat the Stooges like bugs, “Whack! Whack!! Whack!!!” The cyclops’ pounding caused exhibits throughout the hall to shake, rattle and roll.

When the Stooges realized that they were beyond the cyclops’ reach, they grew emboldened and began taunting him, “Nya-nya, Polyphemus! Your breath smells worse than your mama’s army boots.”

“Waaah!!” The cyclops wailed, “Quit talkin’ ‘bout my mommy!”

“Oh, no...” Sian groaned, “That’s not good.”

“Back up! Back up!” Larry hissed, “If we can sneak out before the cyclops smells us, we’ll be fine!”

“Okay!” Sian motioned for Rudyard and Muddle to follow Larry, “We’re right behind you.” Quieter than mice, they backed through the maze of artifacts.

Still, the Stooges were having a fine old time. They stuck out their tongues, swatted their fannies and capered about like fools—all the while tossing their bronze box from one idiotic goofball to the next. Predictably, Polyphemus soon grew so enraged that he tore through the intervening wall like a stack of styrofoam cups. As the homicidal cyclops towered over them, the Stooges had the audacity to look surprised.

Obscured by a plume of plaster dust, Larry whispered, “Stay calm! We’re almost there.”

Sian examined the rear wall. She saw nothing but a smooth expanse of white plaster. If they were closing in on a doorway, she had no idea where it was.

“Ha!” The cyclops roared, “You stupid nobodies tawt ya’ could run away! Din’t cha!” The cyclops hoisted a tree-size club over his head. So focused was he on the Stooges that Polyphemus failed to realize how low—on a cyclopean scale—the ceiling was. The club shattered a huge swath of the glass ceiling and, luckily for the Stooges, became entangled in a roof beam.

The Stooges were imbeciles, but they were smart enough to spot a stay of execution when they saw one. While Polyphemus struggled to free his club, the Stooges turned and hightailed it directly toward Larry and his tour group.

Seeing them pelting toward him, Larry howled, “Nooooo, you idiots! Run the other way!!”

“Eyyy!!” Polyphemus fumed, “I tawt I smelted sumpin’ else.” The cyclops wagged a torpedo-sized finger at the nobodies, “Stay put ya’ stinky liddle meeces. I’m comin’ jus’ soon’s...” Polyphemus tugged and twisted, but his club would not come free. At length, the cyclops decided to put his whole back into the job. On the count of, “Wuuun! Toooo!! Freeee!!!” Polyphemus yanked with all of his might.

The good news was that Polyphemus managed to free his club. The bad news was that, in doing so, he brought the roof down on his head. Most creatures would cash their chips if a largish building fell on their heads, but cyclopians are not typical by any measure. The cyclops roared, “Eyyy! Kin sumdie help mee? I’m stuck unner a pile o’ stoopid rox!”

Seeing that the cyclops was once again at a disadvantage, the Stooges spun on their heels and raced back to the rubble pile.

“You idiots!” Larry excoriated, “Now might be a good time to escape don’t you think?”

True to form, the Stooges mocked Larry for being a killjoy.

“And to think...” Muddle gaped at the Stooges reprising the idiocy that they had sorely regretted only moments ago, “...no one has had a larger impact on modern civilization than those dipsticks.”

“Yeah...” Rudyard opined, “...it’s shocking, but then again...”

“...it sure explains a lot. Doesn't it?” Sian QED'd.

Still playing hot potato with the bronze box, the Stooges clambered up the rubble pile and resumed bad-mouthing Polyphemus.

“Hey, Larry,” Sian proposed, “I think we’d better get out of here, don’t you?”

Larry had his ear pressed to the rear wall and was so deep in concentration that he didn’t hear Sian. When he failed to respond Sian tapped his shoulder.

“Aaagghh!” Larry jumped like a spider had landed on him. When he saw it was Sian he apologized, “Sorry, I thought it was those idiots coming back for help.”

“Funny you should mention that...” Sian pointed at the Stooges, “We need to scam before those nincompoops resurrect Polyphemus.”

No sooner had Sian said it, than the rubble pile began to move.

“Yikes!” Larry’s eyes popped, “I’m going as fast as I can.”

There was a roar from beneath the rubble and then a gigantic fist punched through the debris. Once again, the Stooges had the audacity to look surprised. They wailed, “Woo-woo-woo!” and “Nyaah, nyaah, nyaah!” as Polyphemus freed one appendage after another.

Muddle shook his head, “...those idiots...!!”

“It’s gotta be here!” Like a plaster pianist, Larry’s fingers danced across the wall, “...it’s gotta be...right here!”

Suddenly, the debris pile erupted like a geyser. Polyphemus sat up and roared, “Hah-hah!! So dere yuz are!” The Stooges hugged each other while the cyclops dug through the rubble for his club.

“Oh, no...” Rudyard covered his eyes, “...this is gonna get ugly.”

Sure enough. Polyphemus found his club and flung the weapon at his enemies. The Stooges hit the dirt and the club missed them by millimeters. Sensing their lives were hanging by a thread, the Stooges leaped to their feet and, once again, sprinted away from the only visible exit.

Seeing the Stooges race toward them, Sian vented her fury on the only thing that at that moment she hated more than the Stooges: the rear wall. Sian kicked the wall so forcefully that she smashed a sizable hole in the plaster. Her kick also jarred loose the mechanism that Larry had been searching for. A small metallic cylinder, about the size and shape of a motorcycle handle, popped out of the wall.

Larry hurrahed, “Way to go, Sian!” He grasped the cylinder and, in doing so, activated a camouflaged turbolift. Larry pressed a button on the base of the cylinder and the lift’s doors obediently whisked open. The doors made a kitschy whooshing sound that any Star Tech fan would instantly recognize. Muddle could feel Rudyard’s eyes burning the back of his head, but he refused to make eye contact—doing so would only lead to trouble.

The moment the doors flew open, Larry and the F3 charged into the turbolift. As they raced across the exhibit hall, the Stooges yowled, "Wait for us! Hold that elevator!! You can't go without us!!"

Socrazee held the bronze box aloft and shouted, "See, I've got it! Nyuck-yuck-yuck!"

Larry plugged the portable controller into a housing on the lift's inner wall. The cylinder blinked yellow as it activated the lights, controls and bio-comfort systems in the lift. Following a lightspeed sequence of safety checks Larry's controller switched to an inviting shade of green. The moment it shone green, Larry clutched the cylinder and shouted, "You can shove your stupid box where th-...!!"

The turbolift doors snapped shut right in front of Socrazee's stunned face.

"That wasn't very nice," Sian frowned.

Larry's eyes were glued to readouts streaming above the turbolift's double doors. In response to twists and tweaks from Larry's practiced wrist, the turbolift could fly up, down, sideways, or carve pretty much any inertial trajectory that was permissible in four-dimensional spacetime.

"Aaagghh!" Larry groused as the turbolift hit a computational speed bump and diverted to a track named the Westworld Spur. "Trust me..." Larry appeared troubled by the unexpected detour, "Those clowns don't need help. All they want is an audience."

Rudyard studied the innumerable inertial controls that Larry was monitoring, "How can you make sense of all those readouts?"

"No kidding," Muddle chimed in, "I can barely keep up with the GPS in my car."

It wasn't easy, but Sian managed to keep a straight face.

"It's all down to skill..." Larry bragged, "I've been doing VIP tours for an eternity, so..." The nightwatchman eased back on the throttle as the turbolift approached its destination, "...I've learned pretty much everything there is to know about these babies."

The turbolift came to rest. Before Larry could open the doors, the turbolift displayed a mandatory safety presentation. A hologram that looked remarkably like Larry's paternal grandpa winked to life beneath the doors. Sounding like a train station conductor, Grampy laid down the law, "ATTENTION ALL PASSENGERS: To provide a full immersion experience, all Athens Museum Backstage Exhibits operate on a 2Real2Sim retrologic platform. Not only will VIP Tour Guests witness history in the making but, thanks to the magic of +99.95% RealDeal facticity, VIP Tourists will literally participate in the making of history."

"Hey..." Muddle pointed accusingly at the hologram, "...that sounds a lot like my..."

"Sorry professor..." Larry deactivated the hologram, "...we don't have time for academic digressions..."

Sian and Rudyard gave Muddle a dirty look for wasting everyone's precious time.

“Ahem...” Larry smoothed his ruffled feathers, “...as I was saying, we have arrived at the Pyrotheus Backstage Exhibit. This exhibit contains scenes of extreme torture that may not be suitable for all audiences. If you are under the age of seventeen or find the sight of human entrails disturbing...” Larry leveled a prescient eye on Rudyard, “...you may wish to remain in the turbolift during this portion of the tour.” Larry signed off, “Are there any questions?”

“Uh, yeah...” Muddle raised a hand, “...I’d like to get back to...”

“Please be advised...” Larry ignored Muddle, “...the weather in this exhibit tends to be windy and wet. If you don’t have an umbrella, you are welcome to borrow one of mine.” With that, Larry unlocked the turbolift’s safety seals and retracted its doors.

When the doors opened Larry looked confused. He expected to gaze out upon Pyrotheus, the hero who had stolen fire from the gods and, for his trouble, had been sentenced to having his liver pecked out by a giant eagle, but nothing remotely along those lines was on display. Instead, the tour group had ringside seats to a night raid by Greek soldiers. The soldiers were wheeling a large wooden horse toward an imposing enemy fortress.

Larry mumbled as he re-examined the turbolift’s navigational controls, “This is...crazy...I...could have sworn...”

While Larry struggled to figure out where things had gone wrong, there was a shout in the distance, “Hey, Larry! Thank Zoots I found you!”

One of the Greek soldiers began waving at the turbolift. The other soldiers tried to strangle their noisy colleague, but he fought out of their clutches and sprinted toward the turbolift. “Hold on, Larry,” the soldier shouted, “I’m coming!” It was difficult to see in the dark, but it looked like the soldier was carrying a smallish, metallic box.

“How strange...” Rudyard squinted at the soldier, “...do you know that guy, Larry?”

“Wha-...?” Larry answered dizzily. Seeing that the soldier was mere sekents from reaching the turbolift, Larry shouted, “No! None of this is right! We have to get out of here!” Larry’s hands were so shaky that he couldn’t reactivate the turbolift.

“Easy, Larry,” Sian reached for the control, “Why don’t you let me fly this bird?”

“Hey, wait! With each stride the soldier’s shouts grew more urgent, “I’ve got it, Larry! Look!” He waved the metallic box over his head.

“I don’t get it,” Larry shook his head, “This was not part of the itinerary.”

“Not to worry, Larry.” Cool as a cuke, Sian shut the turbolift doors, “We’ll get this bird back on course in no time.”

The soldier pounded on the turbolift. His voice was muffled, “Hey, Larry, let me in! I’m here to help. Trust me!”

Larry’s complexion had turned pasty. He looked at Sian and croaked, “Let’s get out of here.”

Larry was at a loss. Following their unprecedented navigational glitch, Larry rebooted the turbolift’s retrotravel controls and then set the lift on autopilot. Larry explained that traveling on autopilot was like riding in a log flume. Every move that the

turbolift made would be confined by rigid navigational parameters. Foolproof as that sounded, the turbolift continued to malfunction.

The lift's next default destination was supposed to be the ancient Olympic Games. Instead of basking in the grandeur of the first Olympiad, the turbolift delivered the tour group to a creepy labyrinth. The moment that Sian opened the doors, a massive minotaur tried to force its way into the turbolift. Sian had to practically empty her phraser to drive the bull-man back far enough to escape.

The turbolift's next preset destination was supposed to be the moment when Odysseus discovered the Golden Fleets. But instead of witnessing that glorious spectacle, the turbolift deposited the tour group at the climactic moment of the war between the Titans and Olympians. Just as Zoots was preparing to hack Cronuts into a heap of fish bait, old man time shouted, "Hey, Larry! I hear you're looking for this!" Then Cronuts flung one of those confounded bronze boxes toward the turbolift.

The box would have hit Larry right on the numbers if Sian had not slammed the doors shut. As the turbolift departed from the scene the bronze box struck the lift with a brassy klunk and then clattered to the ground.

Larry was at a loss. Never had one of his tours been plagued by so much mishap. The nightwatchman's last hope was to reboot the entire VIP Tour. Doing so would involve journeying back to the moment that Larry had received the FF's tour request from a mysterious party named, "The Mightiest of 'Em All."

"It's our only hope," Larry explained, "If we can find a way to reconnect with an undisturbed spacetime corridor, we should be able to breach this spacetime floop."

"What..." Rudyard looked lost, "...in blazes are you talking about?"

"No need to answer." Muddle advised, "Explanations only increase the number of things he'll never understand."

Deaf to the catfight, Sian said, "Let's make that jump, Larry."

Larry pointed at a glass-covered 'Reset' button above the turbolift control box, "In the interest of full disclosure, I have never done this before." He took hold of a little hammer that dangled from the emergency box, "The Reset button is programmed to restore the turbolift's original 2Real2Sim factory settings."

Sian nodded, "Sounds good to me."

Larry didn't seek input from Muddle or Rudyard. Instead, he began pecking at the glass. After a blippet of fruitless pecking, Sian nudged Larry aside and smashed the glass with her fist. She swept away the stray shards and urged Larry to proceed.

"Okay, thanks..." Larry reached for the Reset button and offered one final word of advice, "...2Real2Sim resets can make passengers feel a bit queasy, so..."

"Wait! What?" The word 'queasy' caught Muddle's attention, "I have a very delicate stomach..."

"So do I!" Rudyard quailed, "Do you have any Dramaquine tablets? I can't even ride an escalator without a dose of Dramaquine!"

Sian closed her eyes, "Just push the button, Larry."

Larry did as he was told. The moment he hit the button everyone realized that Larry had wildly understated the rigors of the Reset. Throughout the Reset Muddle felt like he was being kneaded from head to toe by a barbaric dough hook. Time and space churned this way and that without rhyme, reason or respite. Until...

“Here we are!” Larry sang out. Somehow, the nightwatchman had come through the Reset like a sunbather at Club Med.

Muddle checked with Sian and Rudyard. Both looked precisely as dreadful as the history-lover felt. The word “queasy” did not begin to capture their thoroughgoing misery.

Annoyingly, Larry was so chipper that he performed a peppy cha-cha dance. Eager to make a fresh start on their trouble-plagued VIP Tour, Larry unsealed the turbolift doors and...

All hell broke loose!!

Instead of stepping into the VIP Tour HQ, Larry and his luckless guests were greeted by none other than...the Three Stooges!

Larry screamed, “Nooo, not agaiiiiiinnn!!” Like a nightmare from which they could not wake, the Reset had returned the tour group to the moment when Larry had slammed the turbolift doors in the Three Stooges’ faces.

The Three Stooges whooped “Woo-woo-woo!!” and “Nyuk, nyuk, nyuk!” as they bounded into the turbolift. Polyphemus was still hot on their heels. But before the cyclops could claw the Stooges out of the lift, Sian slammed the doors and whisked the lift to safety.

With the Stooges crammed into the turbolift, there was hardly enough room to breathe. Larry screamed, “You idiots!!”

“Hey! What the hey!” The Three Stooges screamed back, “Who are you calling idiots?”

“You!” Larry sniped, “I’m calling you idiots!!”

“Well, if that’s true...” Playdoh shoved the bronze box into Larry’s hands, “...then you’re an even bigger idiot...”

The Stooges sang out in unison, “...any fool knows you can’t travel through ancient Greece without an Antikythera Mechanism!!”

Larry’s eyes fell to the bronze box. He turned greener than Commander Spork and moaned, “...whoops...”

“Wow!” Rudyard whisted, “It doesn’t look like much.”

Sian, Muddle and Rudyard were standing around a deceptively modest exhibit. The artifact they were examining looked like nothing more than a crumbling lump of corrosion--but looks can be deceiving. In this case, upon closer examination, the corrosion transformed into a wondrously complex mechanism containing innumerable gears, wheels and readouts.

“Yeah...” Larry chuckled, “...looks can be deceiving. That mechanism...” He smiled lovingly at the crumbling lump of bronze, “...is the most extraordinary navigational instrument ever built by humans.”

“Amazing...” Sian breathed.

“No kidding...” Muddle scratched his head, “...how could something so extraordinary become entirely lost to history?”

Larry tapped his nametag, "It's what I call job security. Sometimes we have to preserve wonders for eons until people learn their true value."

"You mean..." Rudyard couldn't resist the opportunity, "...until people accumulate enough poetic intelligence to use their brains properly?"

Larry ignored the PI. Instead, he backed away from the exhibit and flashed a Vulcan peace sign, "Live long and perspire."

"You too, Larry," Muddle clasped Sian and Rudyard's hands, pressed the One Watch against the exhibit and transvaporated flawlessly.

Meanwhile...

Uranus Blowhard was standing on the fifty-yard line at Super FoosBowl LVII. Having paid enough to bring Elvis back from the dead, the attendees booed lustily at the disappointing halftime show.

"That's right! Get it all out." Clueless as ever, Uranus Blowhard fell in with the boo-birds, "You have every reason to be disgusted. Shillary Claptrap is the worst! And I mean THE WORST!!" Just for fun, Blowhard started chanting, "Lock her up! Lock her up!"

When no one took up the chant, Blowhard tried another old favorite, "Four more years! Four more years! Four more..." When that chant belly-flopped as well, Blowhard pulled out his iPhony and sent Igor an urgent text message, "HELP!! My best material is bombing!"

Lurking in the shadows beneath the stage, Lutin responded, "Don' vorry, I feex!"

Moments later, Blowhard's banged-up wheel ship descended from the heavens. Fearing for their lives, the FoosBowl fans were mighty relieved when the wheelship assaulted them with nothing more dangerous than Blowhard's MAGA chant.

The chant started off low and slow.

MAGA! MAGA! MAGA!

With each beat, the hypnotic chant became faster and louder.

MAGA!! MAGA!! MAGA!!

Fans tried to resist, but the chant killed so many brain cells that they were soon overwhelmed.

MAGA!!! MAGA!!! MAGA!!!

Before you knew it, sports fans the world over were cheering.

MAGA!!! MAGA!!! MAGA!!!

MAGA!!! MAGA!!! MAGA!!!

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“old tight, professuh! We’re a’most there!”

The wind screamed in Muddle’s ears. He clung tightly to the plucky kid who was piloting their broomstick. Larry Punter, known to billions as “the Chosen One,” skillfully dodged the spells that the Deadbeaters on their tail were casting at he and Muddle.

Punter yanked his broom to the right and nearly collided with Shelioney Grandeur. Shelioney was transporting Sian. Instead of clinging to her pilot in terror, Sian had drawn her phraser and was, Annie Oakley-style, picking off Deadbeaters one by one, “Get! A life! You! Dopey! Yobbos!”

Shelioney shouted, “Oi, Larry!” and then zipped above Punter to avoid a Cruciatus air mine. Sian blasted the air mine and took out three Deadbeaters when it detonated in their path.

Zooming to Punter’s left, Shelioney cried, “Larry! Sian and I are going to draw off as many Deadbeaters as we can. Will you and the professor be okay?”

“No problem!” Punter scanned the surrounding airspace, “Any sign of Ron?”

Before Shelioney could answer, Ron Weirdly streaked by. Ron was unable to maintain a steady course because Rudyard had wrapped both arms tightly around his head. Ron yowled, “Grab me waist ya’ silly cow, not me bleedin’ ‘ead!”

Shelioney’s and Punter’s eyes met. Each barked, “Ron’s wi’ you!!”

Without further comment, Shelioney peeled off toward St. Phil’s Cathedral. As she hoped a squad of Deadbeaters clung tight to her vapor trail. Punter cursed. Ron and Rudyard lurched in front of him like a plane without a flight plan. Punter called to Muddle, “Professor! Snag Ron’s sleeve as we fly by and I’ll guide him to the Observatree.”

Larry sped forward and Muddle caught hold of Ron’s forearm. Weirdly bawled, “Aww, buggler! Not you, too!” Muddle shouted Punter’s plan at Ron who, having little alternative, assented. “If this silly sod...” He elbowed Rudyard’s ribs, “...would leave off we’d be all bangers and mash, wouldn’t we?”

Ron’s elbow made Rudyard’s eyes flutter. Seeing what lay ahead, the PI cried, “Aaaagghhh!! Just when I think it can’t get any worse...!!” The PI thrust a finger toward a scene that was straight out of a Boschian nightmare.

Dead ahead, a battle was raging next to a large brick building. The building was topped by an array of old-style observatory domes. Three fire-breathing dragons circled above, while astride a magnificent pegasus, Gellie held them at bay. The dragons were doing their best to incinerate the Observatory, but Gellie would have none of it. Each time one of the firedrakes drew breath, Gellie would clout their snouts with a bloody great shillelagh and, thereby, drive the flames up and away from the Observatory. As one might expect, the dragons grew hotter and angrier with each embarrassing misfire.

Down below, Ubie was locked in a deathmatch with the creepiest critter Muddle had ever seen. Ubie’s opponent was bald and wore a long, black wizard’s cloak over

his luminous green skin. By far, Mr. Green's freakiest feature was a snub nose that was better suited for a puff adder than a person.

"Hey!" Rudyard shouted as they drew near, "Is that Shatspeare?"

"Shatspeare!? You mean the snake charmer?" Muddle squawked, "Are you nuts? That guy looks more like a homicidal glowstick than Shatspeare."

"'is name's not Shatspeare," Punter clawed at a jagged scar on his forehead, "...it's Moldibarf! The darkest dark wizard oo's ever lived."

"Mind yer tongue, Larry!" Weirdly snapped, "You musn't say 'is name! 'Ow many times must I....?"

"Dark wizard...?" Rudyard frowned, "...then why's he so pale?"

"Ach..." Punter snorted, "...yer missin' the point..."

"So..." Muddle shouted into Punter's ear, "...what's the plan?"

Before he could answer, Punter dived to the right. A searing spout of flame scorched the air behind them.

"Hey!" Gellie whisked over their heads, "You guys are just in time!" Keeping one eye on the dragons, Gellie circled back, "Ubie could use a hand. That creep she's fighting..." Gellie jerked her chin at Moldibarf, "...doesn't play fair. He's got a watch that's even more powerful than yours, Max!"

"What...!?" Muddle choked, "...a watch...like *mine*...?"

Moldibarf was locked in a standoff with Ubie. Sure enough, Muddle spotted the pocket watch draped around Moldibarf's neck. The wizard was hurling every incantation in his repertoire at Ubie. The combined energy of the watch and the wizard's wand were sapping the last of Ubie's stamina.

"There!" Muddle roared, "Take me over there!"

Having no better plan in mind, Punter swooped low over the combatants. As he tugged his broom out of its dive, Punter felt Muddle slip off the back. He cried, "No, professor!" Fearing for the frail old professor Larry yanked his broom into an inertia-defying U-turn. As Punter came around, instead of seeing Muddle fall like a stone, The Chosen One was astounded to see a supercharged version of his former passenger.

As he plummeted toward certain death, Muddle's mind went blank. Without consciously controlling the process, Muddle raised both arms above his head. For reasons unknown, Muddle's golden wristbands had reappeared. The professor cracked his wrists together and, as before, Muddle transformed from a mild-mannered history prof into the baddest Sorcerer Supreme in the Mudville Universe. With eyes aflame, Dr. Strangelove arrested his freefall and conjured a pair of flaming orange battle shields.

Pummeled by the combined power of Moldibarf's One Watch and the Eldar Wand, Ubie finally cracked. Her reserves of energy exhausted, Ubie sank to one knee.

"Hiss-iss," Moldibarf sissed, "Thankss for the target practice, missy. I needed to knock the dusst off of thiss..." He caressed Eldar Wand, "...lovely...old inssstrument. Hiss-iss!"

"Heh-heh..." Ubie swiped a trickle of blood from her mouth, "Sure, Barfie...go ahead and play with your toys...while I..."

Bracing herself for the deathblow, Ubie decided that, if this was to be her swansong, she would go out like a warrior. Uber Woman pounded a fist on her sternum

and then, through sheer force of will, rose to her feet. Ubie spat a gout of blood on the scorched grass and then invited Moldibarf to come and get her.

If he had eyebrows to raise, they would have leaped off of Moldibarf's forehead. *Who was this woman?* No one in their right mind would taunt Moldibarf. No one!! The dark wizard hissed, "You will pay for your insolence, missy!" Moldibarf decided that Ubie's punishment should be incineration. The dark lord would hit her with a double-dose of mystical energy from the Elder Wand and his One Watch. That, Moldibarf figured, should be enough to fire-roast every organic particle in Ubie's superhuman body. *Hisss-iss!* *This was going to be fun!!*

The dark lord closed his eyes and summoned the full power of his combined weapons. The One Watch and Elder Wand erupted into flame. It was a blue flame that intensified the heft and potency of both weapons.

So convinced was Moldibarf of his own supremacy that he never imagined the combined power of the weapons he wielded might be more than he, the GOAT of dark wizards, could control. For the second time in as many blippets, Moldibarf made a fateful miscalculation.

Moldibarf's moment of triumph began to sour when the blue flames raging through the Elder Wand began to scorch his own flesh. The jubilant words, "Nah-vada Kadabra!" were ripped from the Dark Lord's throat and replaced with a strangling noise, "Aaacggghh!!" Instead of emitting a murderous curse, the Elder Wand's blue flames raced up Moldibarf's arm and surged into the One Watch.

Moldibarf screamed as he erupted into a pillar of blue flame. Without being told to do so, Moldie's One Watch directed a crackling, blue laser beam at Ubie. The beam would have vaporized Ubie if Strangelove had not dropped in front of her and commanded the One Watch to absorb the laser.

Although it did not vaporize Strangelove, the beam of hyper-charged laser light overwhelmed the Sorcerer Supreme just as it had Moldibarf. Unable to resist, the watches began dragging the senseless combatants toward each other.

"Oh, no!! Larry Punter whizzed by overhead, "It's a horcrux!!" He signaled to Gellie, Ron, and Ruyard, "We've got to destroy it!!" Then, without another thought, Potter dive-bombed Moldibarf. Hoping that he might break the connection between Moldibarf and Strangelove, the brave young wizard aimed his broom directly at Moldibarf. Potter collided with Moldibarf head on and, for one hopeful moment, the energy link connecting the wizards sputtered like a bug zapper after roasting a June bug. But then Punter was thrown clear and the energy link redoubled in intensity.

"Larry!!" Ron screamed as he and Ruyard landed next to Punter. Weirdly checked on Punter while Ruyard raced to Ubie's side. Uber Woman was battered and bruised, but she had gotten the reprieve she needed and was eager to get back in the fight.

"Oh, Larry! Oh, no, no!!" The report from Ron was not so optimistic.

Hearing the distress in Ron's voice, Gellie broke off her battle with the dragons and streaked down to Punter's side. When she hit the ground, Gellie hopped off the pegasus and shouted to Ubie, "Keep an eye on the dragons while I check on Larry. Okay?" Then she took hold of the fallen wizard's hand.

Ubie lifted her eyes. Expecting to see three angry dragons bearing down on her, she was pleasantly surprised to see a squadron of Deadbeaters filling the airspace overhead.

“Yay! It’s Shelioney and Sian!” Rudyard cheered, “Just in the nick of time.”

Shelioney twisted and twirled a complex series of figure eights in the sky above the Observatory. When the Deadbeaters and dragons were knotted in hopelessly confused flight patterns, Shelioney dove down to the battle scene. Sian fired a few more phraser blasts into the Deadbeaters demolition derby for good measure.

There was no time for greetings when Sian and Shelioney hit the ground. All were relieved to see Larry’s eyes flutter in response to Gellie’s charmed healing techniques. Acting on the same impulse as Potter, Sian’s first thought was to yank Strangelove free from the energy vortex in which he and Moldibarf were caught.

“No!” Ubie held Sian back, “I know what to do.”

Quick as she could, Ubie explained that she believed Moldibarf’s pocket watch was a Time Cheater. “Instead of pulling Strangelove free, we need to help him connect with Barfie’s watch. The moment he touches the Time Cheater, we should be able to transport safely away.”

“But...!” Shelioney warned, “...if it’s a Horcrux, contacting Moldibarf’s One Watch could kill you!”

Sian dismissed the danger, “It’s a risk I’ll have to take.”

Ubie frowned, “What do you mean, it’s a risk *you’ll* have to take?”

“I agree, Captain!” Before Sian could pull rank, Rudyard reminded her, “We’re a team, so we’ll all go together.”

“Okay!” There was no time to argue. Sian addressed Shelioney, “You and the guys stand clear. If our plan backfires, we’ll need someone here to deal with the mess we leave behind. Okay?”

Shelioney nodded, “No problem.”

Screaming to be heard above the crackling energy field, Sian huddled with her team, “We need to remain in contact each step of the way. We’re strongest when we stick together. Okay?” Nods all around. “On the count of three, I-, uhh...” A flicker of annoyance flashed across Sian’s features, but she pushed it aside, “...I’ll grab Muddle and we’ll guide him to the Time Cheater. Got it?”

Nods.

The FF bid adieu to their comrades from the Hogwash School of Bewitchery, locked arms and awaited Sian’s countdown.

Three...two...one...!

The FF locked together and then Sian clutched Muddle’s shoulders. Instantly, a torrent of blue energy transformed every nerve ending in each member of the Funtastic Five into a screaming cauldron of agony. Their goal was to muscle Muddle toward Moldibarf’s Time Cheater, but there was no way. The pain was too overwhelming. They hurt too much to think or move. It was impossible.

But then, against all expectations, something happened. There was movement. It was...impossible...and yet it was happening. Little by little, the FF were moving.

Somehow, when all hope was lost, Ruyard... *YES, RUDYARD!!*...found a way. He could never have done it on his own, and he would never have tried it for himself. But when his friends needed him most, Ruyard rose to the challenge.

Millimeter by millimeter, Ruyard nudged his friends forward. One herculean effort after another, the PI forged ahead relentlessly.

Though it seemed to take an eternity, after one final excruciating thrust, Ruyard heard something happen. It was a noise like the soft ping of contact between one watch face and another. *Could it be?!*

Then suddenly, the interdimensional transition started to happen. Ruyard felt a moment of bliss that was shattered by the sound of a wicked disengaged laugh.

"Hiss-iss!! Fooooss! You have ssealed your doom! Hiss-iss!! That watch was not a Horcrux...Hiss-iss!! *It was a portkey!!!*"

Meanwhile...

"Well, I'll be darned!" Uranus Blowhard gaped at the team of superheroes who had just port-keyed into the Oval Office, "As usual, Igor, you were right..." Blowhard patted the weasel's head, "*They have come to us!!*"

3.07

Spacetime: 97341.7.678

“Did you fools really think...” Blowhard cackled, “...that you were running anywhere except straight into my arms?”

The Funtastic Five glared at Uranus Blowhard across his Oval Office desk.

Acting as if he wasn't being overheard, Blowhard spoke to Igor, “These Earthlings slay me. They boast of being intelligent, but when they encounter a truly superior intellect...”

“Like Yoo-anuz?” Lutin offered.

“Exactly...” Blowhard sighed, “...they are like rats in a maze. But that's how it goes. You see? It is the orange man's burden to...”

“...to be a bloated, self-serving jackass?” Ubie could no longer contain herself, “Well, I have news for you, U-Anus. Gellie and I happen to work for the smartest, most powerful being in the infiniverse and *SHE*...” Ubie savored the moment, “...asked us to deliver a message.”

“What?” Blowhard seemed genuinely mystified, “*SHE*? Bah! There is no woman who is stronger than me!”

“Hold that thought, you Anus!” As if by magic, Gellie produced a postcard and skimmed it across Blowhard's desk.

Huffily, Blowhard snatched up the postcard. The picture was a closeup of the Statue of Liberty that contained the greeting, “A special message from America's First Lady!”

Being a serial adulterer, Blowhard found the reference to a ‘First Lady’ confusing. Seeking enlightenment, Blowhard flipped the card over and examined its handwritten message.

It was a brief message, but Blowhard's jowls began to shake even before he read the signoff. The orange splodge erupted from his chair and roared, “What is the meaning of this!?!”

“Vat ees problem...?” Lutin had rarely seen Blowhard get so angry. When the rodent reached for the postcard, Blowhard backhanded him savagely. The blow literally knocked the weasel off of his feet. When Lutin hit the floor, he squeaked like a guinea pig and then scuttled under an armchair.

Blowhard flung the postcard back at Gellie, “Who is responsible for this outrage?” Since Blowhard wasn't much of an athlete the postcard fluttered halfway across his desk and then landed face down.

Bold handwritten letters conveyed the card's brief, but momentous message,

Dear Uranus,

YOU'RE FIRED!

- LL

“Here’s what I think of your postcard,” Blowhard spat on the floor. Then he extended a hand toward Muddle and snarled, “Gimme those watches.”

“I’m afraid...” As ever, Muddle wore the One Watch around his neck and held Moldibarf’s portkey in his hands, “...it isn’t going to be that simple.”

“Oh, really? Is that what you think?” Without changing expression, Blowhard pushed a buzzer on his desk and said, “Send in my armed guard.”

A moment later the Oval Office door swung wide and in marched Edward Snowjob toting his trusty toilet plunger. “Don’t worry boss...” Snowjob saluted, “...I’ll have your toidy unclogged in no time...”

“About face, soldier,” Blowhard barked, “You can plunge the toidy later. Right now, I need you to relieve this man of his watches...” Blowhard pointed at Muddle, “...and bring them to me.”

Snowjob had grown accustomed to ignoring the menageries of bizarre characters who dropped in on Blowhard. *Hear no evil, see no evil...ain’t that right Edfart?* Snowjob took his first look at today’s visitors and he turned an even whiter shade of coward, “You...want me to...to...?” Snowjob gulped audibly.

“Before we go there...” Ubie motioned for Snowjob to stay where he was, “...Gellie and I have another message from our Employer.”

“Who do you mean?” Blowhard sneered, “The wench who’s sending me love letters from Ellis Island?”

“Believe it or not...” Ubie refused to take Blowhard’s bait, “...everything we’re doing today has happened countless times before, and it has always ended badly, but today it doesn’t have to.”

“So, I guess that means...” Blowhard pursed his lips and made repulsive kissing sounds, “...you’re hoping I won’t dump you this time?”

“No, you lummo!” Rudyard was feeling his oats ever since he had single-handedly defeated Moldibarf, “It means that when you try to replace all life in the cosmos with cockroaches, you will destroy the infiniverse because the One Watch is too powerful...”

“What do you take me for?” Blowhard gestured at Muddle, “That dope’s wearing the One Watch and he’s no prizefighter.”

“That’s because...” Sian broke in, “...the One Watch has chosen Muddle to be its bearer. Max carries the Watch, but he hasn’t claimed it. If he did, we would all be in trouble.”

“Fascin-...!” Rudyard bit his tongue.

“So that poor slob...” Blowhard sneered at Muddle, “...has the most powerful weapon in the infiniverse, but refuses to wield it.” Blowhard appealed to the heavens, “Billions of years of evolution, and this is the best they can do.” His patience at an end, Blowhard gestured to Snowjob, “Edfart! Get the watches and bring them to me. Now!”

Before Snowjob could take a step, Muddle spoke up, “There’s another problem.” Muddle tried to lift the One Watch over his head. As usual, the watch chain snaked tightly around Muddle’s neck, “The One Watch has a mind of its own. If I try to remove it, the watch won’t allow it.”

There was a flash of movement behind Muddle. Brandishing the glaive, Igor cried, "Den I feex!!!"

Muddle did not see the attack coming, but someone else did. Before the little weasel could plunge the disemboweling blade into Muddle's back, Sian threw herself in front of Lutin. Sian never had a chance. The laser-edged glaive sliced right through Sian's heart and then continued its journey until it exited Muddle's sternum.

Exuberant about skewering two victims for the price of one, Lutin emitted a squeaky scream of triumph, "Tek zett, en zett yoo trettters uff Yoo-Anus!!"

Shocked to the core, Gellie and Ubie blanched. Reflexively, they both moved toward their wounded comrades, but Rudyard held them back. "Remember!" The PI quavered, "This is how it has to end. By striking them down Blowhard has made them stronger than he could possibly imagine!"

Lutin prepared to withdraw the glaive from his victims, but before he could, Sian and Muddle evaporated. Emptied of content, Sian and Muddle's garments fluttered to the ground. The watches hit the floor with a weighty CLUNK.

Suspiciously, Lutin trod on the garments to be sure that no trace of his enemies remained.

Blowhard barked at Lutin, "Bring me the dratted watches, Igor! Quickly!!"

Lutin reached for the watches. But before he could snag them, two small bumps began to hop and flutter beneath Sian's unitard. Startled, Lutin yanked the garment aside only to discover two little lovebirds huddling together. One of the birds had gorgeous multi-hued plumage. The other's feathers were dull blue, and they were a bit sparse atop his head. In spite of those superficial differences, the lovebirds were a match made in heaven. The birds chittered, chattered and then, after a couple of experimental flaps, took flight.

The lovebirds' first destination was Lutin. They swirled around his head and squawked angrily. The more colorful lovebird pecked a deep gouge in his nose. Try as he might, Lutin could not swat the pesky birds away. When they finished teaching Lutin a lesson, the lovebirds made a beeline for Gellie and Ubie. The birds hopped back and forth between the sisters and showered them with gentle pecks on their cheeks.

When the birds took wing again, they hovered next to Rudyard's ears and chattered gleefully about the happy roads they had traveled and where, perhaps, their paths might meet again.

Having said their farewells, the Lovebirds made two full circuits of the Oval office before strafing Blowhard. Comically, one of the birds pooped in Blowhard's coffee mug, which made the bloated germophobe furious.

Blowhard yowled, "Snowjob! What do I pay you for? Grab a gun and shoot those confounded birds."

"Sir!" Snowjob bleated, "Yes, sir!" He dashed for the door, but as he opened it, the lovebirds seized the opportunity to chase him out the door.

As soon as the birds were good and gone, Lutin collected the watches and delivered them to Blowhard. The blob exulted in the heft and power that the watches possessed. He chortled evilly, "Finally! The infiniverse is mine. ALL MINE!!"

Ubie shook her head, "You are pathetic!"

"It's hopeless," Gellie shook her head, "You can lead a buffoon to water, but he'll still drink battery acid instead."

Blowhard was too lost in his own fantasy to hear any of it. Swept away by delusions of grandeur, Blowhard gabbled, "So...all I have to do is to bring the One Watch into contact with Harrison's prototype, and...and..."

"Da," Lutin slavered, "Zen ze yooniverze ees yooz."

"Theoretically," Rudyard qualified, "There's also a quantro dynamical possibility that connecting the watches will create a singularity that destroys the entire infiniverse."

"So..." the blob blinked, "...I'll either become the most powerful roach motel tycoon in the infiniverse, or..."

"Or..." The PI painted a pretty picture for the selfish blob, "...you'll destroy everyone and everything in existence."

"Hmm..." Blowhard weighed his options and concluded, "...I'd say It's worth the risk, wouldn't you, Igor?"

"Da," the rodent answered, "Ees feex."

Blowhard brought the watches together, "Click..."

...Kaboom.....

...Kaaaaaa-rrruunncch.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....Rebooting.....

.....

1.01

A corsair closed in on a remote island. Grubby swabs eyed the beach, while rats peered from their lairs. Landing parties assembled, received orders and, bristling with steel, swarmed into rowboats.

Alarmed by the strange vessel the islanders melted into the foliage.

Storm waves washed the rowboats ashore. Sailors leaped into the surf and, clashing and cursing, hauled their crafts onto the sand.

Through a spyglass, the skipper studied the brigands as they clustered landward of the boats.

A woman wearing a black unitard emerged from the foliage. She held her right hand high as if in a gesture of greeting. Eyeing the woman, the pirates drew their swords. At the same instant, an ear-splitting explosion rent the air. Spouts of flame burst from the ship's cannons and shuddering impacts rocked the beach.

The woman did not flinch. She waited for the smoke to clear and then dropped her arm. In response to her command hellfire exploded from dozens of emplacements hidden in the foliage. The fusillade destroyed every weapon larger than a butter knife on the ship. As the corsair's masts toppled into the sea, the swabs eyed each other and then tossed their weapons on the sand.

As one, they fell to their knees and begged, "Please don't hurt us! We come in peace!"

About the Author



William Shatspeare is famous throughout the Murky Way as the greatest Bard who's ever been beamed up by Scotty. When he's not taking names and kicking Romulan butts, Starbard likes to sip Saurian Brandy and thrash Commander Spork at 3D chess. In the coming jahrs, Starbard is planning to hang up his phraser so that he can write his memoirs and settle scores with old friends from the Academy.

If you're ever in the mood for an argument, drop Starbard a line at shatspeare@gmail.com

