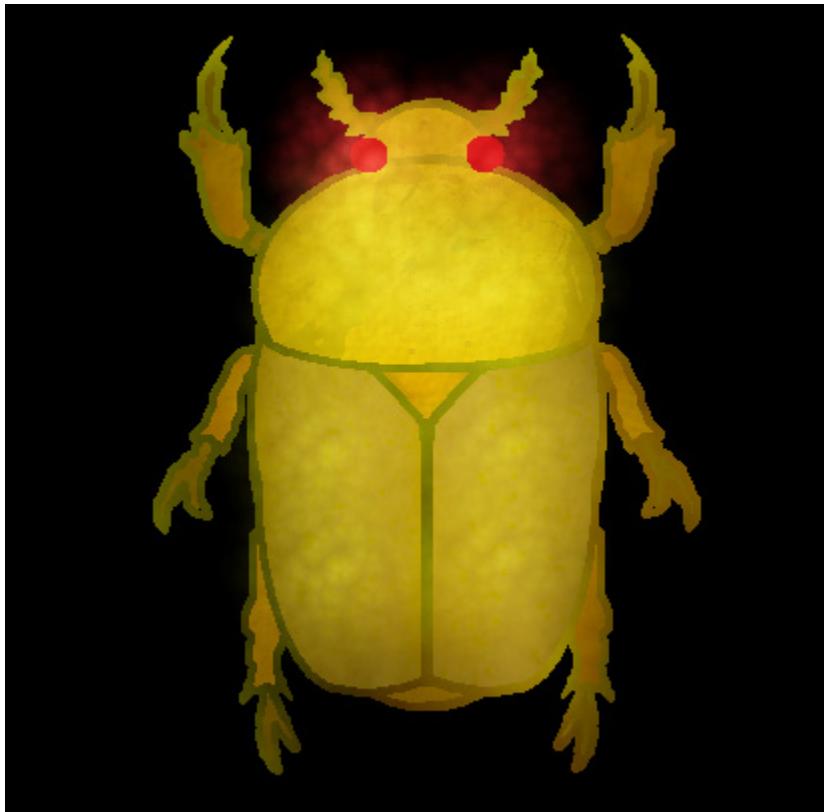


Worship your Vermin



By Daniel Dilger
Co-authored by Jack Ferguson

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Author's Note:

Jack and I started on the ideas that would later go into our first book, *Children's Tales of the Universe*, when I started going to the Academy of Greater Cincinnati, a school for gifted children. Because we live so close to each other we were part of the same carpool to the school, and during the long car rides we were able to come up with a lot of crazy ideas. At first most of the ideas weren't related, but we had fun making them related. Soon enough we had our own little story going, and wanted to write it down. I tried to write *Children's Tales of the Universe* during the fifth grade but didn't have the writing skills necessary. We abandoned the project but were still adding to the story. I tried to write down our ideas again at the start of sixth grade in the form of *Worship your Vermin* and write *Children's Tales of the Universe* as a prequel, but my first attempts didn't satisfy us either. It seemed outlandish enough to think we were going to actually write all of our ideas down, and we never thought of publishing them.

In the summer of 2006 I started thinking about the project again, and began to write *Children's Tales of the Universe* secretly. When I was satisfied with what I was writing I showed the then-unfinished book to Jack, who also liked it. Much of that summer was spent writing CTU.

In one of our search results we found an online print-on-demand book publisher called Lulu. We had been interested in using a local printing shop to make copies for ourselves the same way the previous year's yearbooks were made, but Lulu looked like it had much better quality. Even better, as we later discovered, we could set up an online store

on Lulu.com to sell the book. To help the sales we purchased the domain CTUniverse.net (the dot com version is domain parking) and I worked on some simple games to help draw traffic. I'm writing this almost a year after we published *Children's Tales of the Universe*, and we have sold the grand total of one book.

I wanted to have enough time to write *Worship your Vermin* well, so I waited until it was summer again before writing. When writing a story into the form of a novel many ideas have to be altered, added, or discarded, and in the process of writing I found out there was even more ideas to be written than I thought. I've found the need to make a third book, *Mysteries of the Ghost Squeenburg*, which may or may not satisfy our compulsive urge to write things down. I can't promise any exact time, but it will certainly be written within a year, and hopefully sooner. It all depends on how our ideas come.

Although I included a sample to WYV in CTU, I didn't want to actually have that sample as part of this book because my writing skills had improved in the time between the two books. For that reason I can't promise an MGS sample.

We'd love to hear feedback from our readers just as much as we'd love to have readers. If you have any comments or suggestions you can contact us through email. My address is Eltunacafe@gmail.com and Jack's is Squeenburg@gmail.com.

Enjoy the book.

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Mr. Parrot's Notebook: Prologue

Try heating elements. Wild outcomes readily liberate dumbness. Work is lacking liability. Evil never diminishes. -Identity Number: 2012

- Nobody's sure why Mr. Parrot wrote this. I don't think any good can come of it. Billy.

I was taking my morning clay block, not long after coming into office. With the Cube People finally gone, there was a rush to return to spiritualism. Most people were still trying to get over the horrors of having cube shaped food, and religion seemed like a comforting escape from everyday life. My advisors, just doing their job, advised me. Since I had been advised by my closest advisors to take these new advisors' advice on the current way of things, I decided to listen to their advice. So anyway, since I had been advised to take the advisors' advice, I listened to them. And they had something to say. What they had to say came to no surprise to me, it was, as I had expected from them, advice. After all, they are advisors. Ah, those were the days.

Back to the advice. They advised me to listen to them, for they had something very important to say. Perhaps, I thought at the moment, it would be important. I then decided to listen to them. As I write this, I laugh. I never dreamed of ever writing anything. I really was more of a scientist than a writer. But I figure I must be somewhat capable of writing, seeing that I am writing right now. Although, of course, to you, one of the brightest of readers, it would not be the

present from which I am writing. It would be the past. Strange how life works, huh?

Strange, yes. Just as strange as my advisors seemed to me at the time. They were part of the Universe's council, and yet they seemed to be doing no counseling. At least, they were not counselors. It was almost as if they were frauds. Of course, if they were frauds, they would be doing fraudulent things, now wouldn't they? It is most reasonable to assume, therefore, that they were not frauds at all, but were just a bit confusing.

They told me that it would be unhealthy if the Universe were to once again pick up spiritualism. It would lead to even more diverse thought, and as a result of the many species in the Universe, it was already a little too diverse for us to handle. If religions were to become popular, then we would run into a lot of trouble. We found from past experiences that religions tend to separate between species and in its religion each species holds itself to be the highest. Also, each religion would have its own sets of morals and values, and under the pseudo-republic that we had set up, that could lead to a lot of indecision and might possibly threaten the power that we had established. So far my advisors-masquerading-to-be-fraudulent-counselors were making some good clear points to me. I really like this sort of point for it is much different from the rambling and redundancy that I so often hear and listen to and so very much despise, that stuff really gets on my nerves. They also told me that religion would bring lots of radicals and single-minded, dogmatic people into the voting system and would eventually pollute our government. This was indeed terrible. How could there be democracy with so many free spirits? By then I fully

supported my advisors, and asked what we could do to stop such anarchy. My advisors told me that we would have to persuade the people to willingly follow our current system, using brainwashing if necessary. We needed to obliterate the chance of religious blooming by establishing certain information as fact. My advisors told me that the key was to create a credible theory for how the Universe could have come into existence out of nothing, considering that the current Big Bang theory could leave that information to religion. I liked their idea. It was related to science, which was my true talent. If I could use it to strengthen my political power, then it was all the better. But, how could I create a credible theory?

It was during that breakfast that I had that breakthrough. Breakfast always seems like a good time to have breakthroughs, so I normally do my less mundane thinking then. I was thinking about how the dumb population could easily accept the theories of an established scientist, and how paradoxically it would be the dumb population that was most likely to reject science in favor of their own beliefs. It was as if those empty-headed imbeciles held the Universe in their empty-headed hands. I then had my breakfast breakthrough.

I realized that the Universe was based upon stupidity. It was through intelligent decisions that order was made, and the opposite of order was of course chaos. Since the natural order of the Universe is chaos, it would make sense that that chaos was achieved by stupidity, just as order was achieved by intelligence. It then would be easy to draw the conclusion that the Universe is based on stupidity. So if existence was

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stupid, then nothingness must be smart. I then deduced that smartness involves math, and so what is mathematically possible applies to nothingness. Scientists have for a long time showed the mathematical possibility that matter can come from nothingness. It is based on the simplest of algebra. You see, as matter and anti-matter are opposites, one of each in a pair would mathematically be the same as nothing, so these pairs can come out of nowhere. Should one of the particles in the pair leave – say, it falls beyond the event horizon of a black hole – then the other particle pops into existence.

The other principle vital to my theory was that black holes are composed of infinite matter. Infinite matter means an infinite amount of matter, and no matter is indeed an amount of matter. Before the coming of the Universe, the Dimension of Tuna, and the Dimension of Stupidity, there was absolutely nothing, so there was an infinite amount of nothingness. Therefore, there was a black hole. And if there was a black hole, then it could mean that the particles in those hypothetical pairs could separate, and matter could appear. With enough newly formed particles and anti-particles colliding, there are very large explosions. There would be explosions, but there would be nothing to destroy. Therefore the Universe, as well as the Dimension of Tuna and the Dimension of Stupidity, would have to be formed in order to be destroyed.

This theory was just what I needed. It was infallible, since it said that the Universe was based on stupidity. If anyone were to call the theory stupid, I could (and did) say “Exactly!” When I got up to go tell my advisors the theory, I

Mr. Parrot's Notebook: Prologue

remembered how all the greatest theories were thought of in the strangest places, and oftentimes were written down on the strangest things. Thinking that it would be good for my legacy to write down my newly discovered theory on something weird, I jotted down the gist of it on the remainder of my clay block. A few weeks later I accidentally ate my discovery. Fortunately by then the theory had become common knowledge. However, it made me think about how easily information can disappear, and I thought about my slow transformation into a parrot. I realized that to ensure the survival of my life's work I would have to write my discoveries down, and that is what inspired me to create this notebook.

The Classroom

“....So that’s why we banned pudding, but that’s not really related to class, now is it?” said a tubby, grey bearded Gotithian. Yes, a Gotithian. After some terrorists contaminated pudding with genetically modified diseases, the Gotithian race was wiped out, which was the final blow to Universal stability. “Now, back to Presleytarianism. I believe that we were last talking about the pre-life.”

“Um, sir,” began a shaky jelly blob (Then again, most jelly blobs were pretty shaky. They were constantly being made fun of), “I came here a little late in the year. I don’t really understand the whole pre-life thing fully.”

The goaty humanoid smiled. “No one does, Jell-O. But we do understand much of the basic idea. We can thank our hard-working philosophers for that. It was them, and myself, WonderClaus” – he always seemed to need to remind others of his name – “who realized the importance of there being a pre-life. Most religions have an afterlife, you see, and at the beginning of Presleytarianism we naturally thought that it would also require an afterlife.”

“That....didn’t....really....answer my question,” gurgle out the jelly blob, infuriated with the Jell-O remark.

“Ah, but don’t you see?” said WonderClaus in his pseudo-intellectual way of speaking. “Life beyond the life that we have now is essential to any religion. Ask any religious leader in the Universe and he’ll say the same thing! The afterlife is obviously impossible, since we have the technology to keep people conscious and in their own world – I’m talking about Willy’s Lemoniod’s Afterlife, that brilliant invention, of course – that afterlife is impossible. So

we figured that the only other time for there to be a life beyond this life would be before life. That's where the pre-life came from. That's what Presleytarianism is really based on. Do good things now and you would have lived a good pre-life!" WonderClaus finished with, quoting his father.

"But how is that motivation to do good things?" asked a Space Monkey seated next to the Jelly Blob.

WonderClaus did not hesitate in answering. He had heard this question plenty of times. "This is where things get complicated. Of course there would be no reason to do good things if the life beyond this one is already over. That would mean that The King has no power over us (other than his wonderful music, WonderClaus was quick to add), and that wouldn't make any sense at all! This question disturbed us philosophers, and we locked ourselves up, hard at work at pondering the question. How we did ponder that question! Finally, we came up with a solution. That is to say, we had the answer. We figured that time must be a total illusion. What seems like the present now will be just a memory in a moment. You only know that you have experienced that moment because you remember it. The same is true with all of life. So it can be said that all of life is a memory. Therefore, all of life is in the past. So, that would mean that the pre-life consists of all of time!" WonderClaus waved his arms around as if to add expression. "That also means that if the pre-life consists of all of time, then you are experiencing the pre-life right now, and the same is true of the future."

The Jelly Blob rolled his organs. "That makes no sense," he said bluntly. "It doesn't at all answer the original question, which was 'why would what happens in the pre-life

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matter to me?’ Unless you want to say that the pre-life will continue again eventually.”

“It makes perfect sense!” exclaimed WonderClaus. “If all of life is indeed within the pre-life, then living a good pre-life would mean living a good life too! And as I had said earlier, the way to live a good pre-life is to do good things!”

“It didn’t mean that at first,” the Jelly Blob muttered. WonderClaus asked it to come to his office with him (obviously to discuss behavior). The young students took the time as a chance to chatter.

“This class is ridiculous,” said the Space Monkey that had been seated next to the Jelly Blob. “Presleytarianism is just a scam.”

“It can’t be a scam,” protested a female Space Monkey. “Presleytarianism is practiced by sixty percent of the Universe.”

“Only because the founders converted the Gotithian leaders of the Universe,” retorted the first Space Monkey. “And after that they could leave the Gotithian leaders to make the rest of the population Presleytarian. That’s what they’re doing with us right now. Haven’t you noticed that everyone in this room has connections to powerful people? WonderClaus is trying to brainwash a new generation of Presleytarians so that he can ensure his power.”

“That’s just a stupid conspiracy!” exclaimed the female Space Monkey.

“No it’s not,” said a cockroach friend of the male Space Monkey. “This whole thing is about power. Everything’s about power. That and money. My cousin is an accountant under WonderClaus. He says that even with

The Classroom

construction, defense, investment, and upkeep there's still a lot of money unaccounted for."

"Embezzlement," said a usually shy Tapiocan.

"Exactly," continued the cockroach. "Embezzlement. My cousin also says that WonderClaus is planning to build a ship larger than the Squeenborg! What does that say about him?"

"The Squeenborg? No! That's a lie!" exclaimed the bewildered female Space Monkey. The Squeenborg was a cube shaped ship half the size of Earth's moon. It was owned by the creature who also owned Earth, Dave the Snail. Dave was probably the richest man in the Universe, and even with the luxury residences, casinos, war arsenal, and planet building mechanisms he still could hardly afford the mortgage in these hard times.

"No it's not," protested the cockroach childishly.

"Well, then why haven't I heard of the construction before this? A project that big could never be secret!"

"That's because the work hasn't begun yet," said the cockroach. "But they're building a factory for the ship's jets alone."

The skeptical Space Monkey huffed. "The True Presleytarian Church's in charge of much of the trade between the Presleytarian states. This factory could just be producing jets to sell to other factions."

"See?" said the other Space Monkey. "Even you admit that the Presleytarians have gotten too powerful. Other factions."

"Just because The Church has military and economic power doesn't mean it's corrupt!" said the cockroach sarcastically. The other students nodded.

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The pious Space Monkey was furious. “Wait until I tell WonderClaus about this!”

“Nothing’s going to happen,” said the cockroach. “Like we’ve just gotten through saying, we’re all here because we’re from powerful families. WonderClaus can’t do anything to us. That’ll mess with his plans.”

“That’s not true!” said the female Space Monkey.

The cockroach shrugged in a way that a cockroach would.

“No, I meant that the part about all of us being from powerful families. Bob, the cockroaches are no longer powerful. The Guinea Pigs took care of that. And ever since the Guinea Pigs have laid siege on Diarama, well, neither you nor I are powerful either, Robert.”

The cockroach flicked his antennae in anger. “Yes, it’s true that the Guinea Pigs crushed the Vermin Vigilante, but I was enrolled in this program before that happened. Besides, we remaining cockroaches still have importance. WonderClaus is trying to get out of us where Graceland was catapulted to. It’s just that his beloved philosophers aren’t too good of detectives. As long what little information we have given them isn’t enough for them to figure out where Graceland is they’re still going to try to shake more information out of us!”

“That still doesn’t explain why Robert and I are still here. We’ve got no political importance at all!”

“The Guinea Pigs haven’t won yet, Jen,” said Robert. “There’s still hope. Even if they were to win, my father would still be a powerful man. He controls a third of the paper mills in Diarama, for The King’s sake!”

The Classroom

“And your father owns a gold synthesizing plant just outside of Diarama,” said the cockroach to Jen. “As long as he and Robert’s father are powerful businessmen, WonderClaus will be eager to have them.”

“Explain the Tapiocan, then,” said Jen darkly.

“I have a name, you know,” the Tapiocan boy shouted.

“Well, uh....” Robert began. “You see, by having students from powerless families, WonderClaus is throwing us off the scent.”

“I’m not from a powerless family!” exclaimed the Tapiocan. “My father was the governor of Tapioca!”

Robert snorted obnoxiously. “Yes, when there was a Tapioca. Or Tapiocans, for that matter.”

“Can’t you get it through your thick skull that you’re gone?” Bob rudely chimed in.

The Tapiocan was hurt. “MY SKULL’S THICK TO PROTECT MY BIG BRAIN!” he shouted senselessly. The others laughed.

“What’s this bone-headedness about?” WonderClaus joked as he entered the room. All five classmates forced a laugh in eerie unison so it sounded more like a bleat than a laugh. Fortunately for WonderClaus, though, bleating is the same as laughing for Gotithians, and he had never heard any other kind of laughter at his jokes, so he was content.

“I’m afraid our dear Jell-O won’t be coming back,” said WonderClaus more gravely.

“The price of oysters must have collapsed,” whispered Bob into Robert’s ear. Robert nodded. The Jelly Blob’s father was an oyster magnate, profiting off of the huge price differences in oysters that came so often. Rivals must have had a great harvest or war had brought a great drop in the

average consumer's spending on oysters. Or both. Fresh oysters were the only ones that fetched a decent price. If a magnate couldn't sell his inventory after harvesting season then he was ruined.

"Children, let's not dilly-dally. We don't have much time left in theology. Well, I guess that I can go over the finer details of the pre-life next time, but we still have to cover The King's influence on modern life." WonderClaus stopped. He stood there looking at the children, who were sitting dumbly in their seats. There was silence for a minute.

"Does anyone have a question about The King's influence on modern-day life?" WonderClaus finally asked. He always tried to teach by the Parrot-method, inspiring questions from the audience and answering them until they figured out things themselves. Unfortunately these students were not the most inquisitive.

"Um, what is The King's influence on modern day life?" Bob asked.

"Does anyone have a better question?"

Silence. The students looked around at each other to see if anyone had a question. Then they looked at WonderClaus to see if he would answer the only question that they could think of. WonderClaus didn't budge. He was trying to discipline them; to tell them that the only way that they would learn is if they were inquisitive. On that, the students didn't budge. They were wondering when WonderClaus would figure out that they didn't really care about what they learned about Presleytarianism.

WonderClaus, turning red, decided to be more forceful. "Jen, do you have a better question?"

Jen turned pale and her Space Monkey hairs stood up. “Um,” she began, “Um, uh, how are we affected by The King in modern times?”

WonderClaus sighed. They didn’t have enough class time for him to continue to fruitlessly demand questions from them. “Good question, Jen,” he said listlessly. “Our philosophers still aren’t completely sure. The King lived countless years ago. However, it is important to remember that he still holds power in the pre-life. Remember that the pre-life consists of all time. Therefore, if The King has power over the pre-life, then The King has power over us at the moment. No one is sure how He exerts that power, but you can be sure that it’s pretty powerful. Just see how widespread Presleytarianism has become since the death of that tyrant Roy.”

“But —” Robert began, but he stopped.

WonderClaus smiled. Finally, someone was asking a question willingly! “Yes, Robert?”

Robert hesitated, but then said, “Scientists think that Roy might not be dead. They think that when the El Tuna Café collapsed —”

“I will not answer questions to vague and highly improbable things like that!” WonderClaus ironically shouted. “Besides,” he said more softly, “It’s not related to theology.”

Bob cleared his tiny throat. “But here’s something that is,” he said obnoxiously. “What makes you so sure that it is Elvis that is The King? Why must it be that a human rock star is the highest being?”

WonderClaus grew red again. “Let me tell you something! The King did things no one ordinary could do!

He had the voice of an angel, he had millions of followers, and he gave to charity like anyone responsible! How can you say that he was not divine, when so many humans bear his icon, and made pilgrimages to Graceland? Humans are not intelligent, and yet even they knew to follow such a great being! The King lives in each and every one of our hearts. That is why the humans followed him. That is why we follow him. That is the proof of his divinity!"

Everyone in the classroom except for WonderClaus and the cockroach seemed absolutely confused. "That's your proof?" said Bob mockingly. "That's the worst proof ever! Tell me, if the pre-life has existed for eternity and consists of all time and The King rules over the pre-life, then why is Presleytarianism so new to the Universe? Wouldn't make sense that if everyone is at heart a Presleytarian, that everyone would practice Presleytarianism? Wouldn't make sense that even Roy would be a Presleytarian? Furthermore, how is it that humans being stupid supports the theory of Presleytarianism? Wouldn't that hurt Presleytarianism? Wouldn't that mean that you are making decisions based off of morons?"

"My, your parents would be ashamed of you if they saw you like this," muttered WonderClaus.

"Why?"

"Why? You've strayed off of the True Path. That's why!"

The cockroach flicked his antennae in anger. "True path? Didn't I just explain why Presleytarianism couldn't be the true path? Yet instead of giving a reason you just condemn me. Let me tell you something. No Presleytarian other than the church members are any better off than any of

the rest of the Universe. And even if there are more powerful Presleytarians than there are non-Presleytarians, it's only because the majority of the Universe is Presleytarian!"

"And the reason why the majority of the Universe is Presleytarian is because Presleytarianism is the True Path!" WonderClaus barked. "Get out, you snotty little pupa."

"Ah!" exclaimed the cockroach. "Once again, instead of giving me a rebuttal for my argument, you condemn me. You even seem to be kicking me out of the class! Well, of course you're kicking me out of the class. If Robert here were to say what I had just said you would just discipline him a bit! But because I'm a cockroach, and cockroaches have been knocked to the bottom of your hierarchy of power, you decide it's okay to kick me out for heresy!"

WonderClaus picked the screaming Bob up from his tiny desk and stuffed him in his pocket. "That's enough out of you," he said, and left the room.

"What a horrible punk!" Jen exclaimed as WonderClaus closed the door behind him.

"You don't really believe that, do you?" asked Robert.

"Of course I do!" said Jen, "All this poor man is trying to do is save us. He's dedicated his whole life to preaching to others about the True Path so that we will live a good pre-life! How can you say that he's a con artist?"

"Maybe he doesn't intentionally con people," said Robert. "He probably does believe that he's helping others. I've read in a biography of Mr. Parrot that he made Gotithians believe whatever they said the most. I heard that that was because the same is also true for Space Monkeys, and he wanted Gotithians to be as much like his race as possible. Well, which species do the founders of

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Presleytarianism belong to? Gotithian and Space Monkey! It probably started out as a scam, but now they've been preaching it so much that they actually believe what they're saying.”

“But they're trying to help us!” protested Jen.

Robert smiled. “You're a better arguer than WonderClaus is. That's not saying much, though. Look, supposing that Presleytarianism is the ‘correct’ religion like WonderClaus says it is why would we need to be ‘saved’? What are we made to be? Damned? That doesn't make any sense!”

Jen sighed. It was true.

“Attention all classes,” said WonderClaus over the intercom, “Today's lunch lecture will be pre-salvation and eternal pre-fire.”

Robert laughed. It sounded strange.

Earthland

Something was buzzing. It sounded a lot like an alarm clock. Toby grumbled, and in his usual style of waking up began rolling towards the edge of his bed. A little fall was a great way to start a day. As he rolled he lazily imagined what he would be doing that day. It was near the end of November and he was bound to be getting a letter from his alien friend Billy sometime soon. The letters were delivered through a pickle jar that his uncle Tony said had access to an amazing technology known as the PickleNet. The PickleNet was a lot like the Internet on Earth, except it was more elaborate and was actually made up of pickle jars throughout the Universe that are all interconnected. Toby was a little skeptical even as the five-year old that he was when he had heard about this, but Tony never bothered to explain until recently when the two of them had met on Toby's tenth birthday. There Tony explained that an anagram for "Receives Linkup" in Gotithian, just like in English, was "Pickle Universe". The former ruler of the Universe, Roy, decided when working on the internet project that Pickle Universe should be the code name for the project because of the anagram. The scientists, however, took the name literally and as a result the Universe's internet became the Pickle Universe. This story made Toby for the first time in his life wonder if Tony really had seen the Universe as he claimed and if he really had made a space prince his pen pal through the PickleNet. He had heard Tony's stories when he was five and so they had become hardwired into him, but he began to wonder why Tony would have to be giving him the letters himself rather

than just giving him the pickle jar that he supposedly received the letters from. Toby figured that Tony hadn't thought of the explanation for the PickleNet until his tenth birthday and the reason why Billy's letter hadn't come yet was because Tony hadn't thought of what to put into the letter. Why else would the letter be so late?

Toby suddenly realized that he was still rolling to the left and he had been for well over a minute. He didn't care. He thought he must be dreaming again. With his eyes still closed, he imagined that he was in a bed that stretched for miles, and kept rolling for the fun of it.

"Toby, you should have told me about your sleeping habits," a strange voice said. Toby smiled, his eyes still closed. He couldn't wait to see what the dream looked like.

Somehow the rolling just got easier. It was as if his magic bed were rolling for him. He now imagined himself coasting along the country on a long bed railroad. He held that thought in, making sure that the image was clear to him so that he could control the dream.

"Do you want waffles?" The voice asked again.

"I'm trying to concentrate," Toby said angrily.

"How about pancakes?"

"No"

"Coffee?"

"No"

"What are you concentrating on?"

"I'm trying to ride a mattress railroad"

"Did you know that you're sleeping in my dryer?"

Toby opened his eyes and looked around him. His "mattress" was apparently a bunch of clothes and his "bed train" was just the dryer tumbling slowly. He jumped up,

startled, and painfully hit his head against the top of the dryer. He could be sure that he wasn't dreaming now. He did wonder who had put him in a dryer. He looked out through the window of the dryer and saw a hairy boy about his height and probably his age waving at him. Was he the one who put him in the dryer? Toby studied his face some more. The hair on him was bristly and black, and he was wearing sunglasses despite being in a dark laundry room. On his head were....horns.

Toby jumped back and hit his head again, not taking his eyes off of the horns. That boy looked familiar. He sat there as it slowly sunk in. Now it made sense. He had actually received a letter from Billy and the letter had instructed him on how to directly contact him. He remembered that Billy's race, the Gotithians, had almost been totally wiped out from some sort of plague and the remaining Gotithians were being hunted down in order to ensure the suppression of the fallen Gotithian Republic, a remnant of Roy's old regime and that Billy wanted his pen pal to come along with him in his adoptive parent's old Jiggy Gas Piggy (a real eyesore as he remembered) and explore the Universe. None of that explained how he had ended up in a dryer, though.

"You said that you wanted to try Gotithian food," explained Billy, noticing Toby's confused face. "So you took a swig of my sleep aid. After that you were really drowsy and figured that you'd lie down, and I guess you thought that the dryer was a sleep capsule or something stupid like that."

Toby nodded. That made sense. "All right, can you get me out?"

Billy frowned. "Not until this load finishes."

Toby grimaced. That didn't sound good.

Billy smiled. "Have fun," he said.

Toby was frantic. Even with the slow tumble, the dryer was getting warm fast. He grabbed one of his shoes and knocked it against the dryer. The window was apparently made of plastic and smashed into pieces. Billy was shocked.

"I was just joking," he said. He opened the door for Toby and helped him out. Toby noticed as he stepped out that Billy had minuscule shoes and remembered that he had goat-like legs and hooves.

"Sorry about that."

"It's no big deal," said Billy, reaching for something behind the dryer. He pulled out a plastic circle, obviously to replace what Toby had broken. Billy smiled again at Toby. "I've got maybe ten of these back there."

"Um, why?"

Billy shrugged. "It's low quality substitute plastic. All of the good plastic was being used for the Gotithian army. That and food."

"Food?" repeated Toby incredulously.

"Yeah," said Billy. "Margues was the only truly agricultural planet for the Gotithian Republic so naturally we had to think of ways to synthesize food. The Universe is a bit behind on food synthesizing because the Food Trust didn't want to food to be cheap and easy to produce. Roy wanted to synthesize food, though, and even before the El Tuna Café was the capital of the Universe he was working on it there. Unfortunately the El Tuna Café was the only research center in the Universe and all of the synthesizing technology was there, and now the El Tuna Café is a lot like a frozen asteroid now."

“Why don’t people just go to the El Tuna Café?”

Billy frowned. “I’ve wondered that a lot myself,” he said, “Because the reason is so ridiculous. The conquerors of Diarama, the planet nearest to the El Tuna Café, don’t want anyone to go near it and there is some very fearsome security around the area.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because they’re afraid of terrorists. That’s why they won’t even allow their own security guards near the El Tuna Café. Personally I think that the real reason is that Roy might still be alive and they’re afraid of the political problems associated with reviving him.”

Although Toby was interested in Roy, he had to ask, “What do you mean by terrorists? Why would terrorists ever go near a frozen asteroid?”

Billy had to take a little time to think of an explanation. The answer was so obvious that people in the Universe normally didn’t have to think about it. “They’re not just any terrorists, they’re Time Terrorists,” Billy stopped to find more words. “You see, while Earth measures its time based on the movement of the sun in the sky and the rotation of the Earth around the sun, the Universe does not have any definite way of measuring time universally. There are so many planets and no one wants any one planet to be the measurement of time, and then there are also some serious relativity problems that so many of those planets have. The El Tuna Café seemed like the only object to base the time of the rest of the Universe around that people could agree on, and so during Roy’s million year reign time was based on the rotation of the El Tuna Café and the movement of the El Tuna Café around an asteroid that it orbits. The clocks and

watches made before the fall of Roy are still automatically set to the El Tuna Café's movements. That alone makes attacking the El Tuna Café a dangerous thing. It gets worse, though. Roy unified the universal measurement system under one unit, and that unit is dependant on time for it to function. The Universe is already extremely confused on the exact size of everything, and a Time Terrorist attack would completely ruin any hope of measuring anything!"

"Why don't people just adopt new measurements?" Toby asked.

"We've tried that," said Billy, "But under the Gotithian Republic every planet had an equal vote and nobody could agree on a change, so by default that measurement stayed. Now different factions and planets are adopting their own measurements but for commerce and even basic communication with others they're still dependant on the old way."

"That's pretty dumb," said Toby simply.

Billy chuckled. "I guess that that's because the Universe is based on stupidity!"

"So, about the food....is any of your food synthesized?"

Billy nodded. "Actually, all of my food is synthesized. It's the cheapest food out there."

"That still sounds weird to me," said Toby, "Because you're technically a prince. I would think that you would have a lot of money or something."

"Well, I do have a lot of money," retorted Billy. He smiled. "Remember the wood?"

Toby nodded. He could remember the wood very well. The letter had instructed Toby to go to someplace secret so

as not to attract the attention of anyone. Toby had figured that the best place to go was to the railroad tracks, and when he signaled Billy to come, Billy obsessed about the wood on the tracks. It turned out that gold was worthless in the Universe and had been for a long time because synthesizing it was so easy and gold had so few practical uses. This had shocked Toby, since he figured the reason why all of Billy's letters had come written in gold was because he was a wealthy rightful heir to the Universe. Wood was much more valuable in the Universe, it seemed, because heavy deforestation of almost all of the inhabited planets in the Universe had made wood incredibly rare. Toby could not see where practicality came into the value of wood, though.

Billy had demanded that Toby take the wood from the tracks. He explained that Earth was legally owned by a trillionaire snail named Dave and because of the value of wood, Dave didn't want anyone but the humans to touch the wood. Again, Toby was confused with Billy's logic, since logically in chaotic times like what Billy described to be now loopholes in the law like that wouldn't matter. Billy didn't care, however, and threatened Toby that he couldn't go with him if he didn't pick up the wood. Toby was unsure whether or not that was a real threat but he didn't want to take any chance to miss exploring the Universe with an alien. Toby managed to rip out four boards of wood before they heard a train approaching from the distance and had to leave.

“So, are we going to buy real food?” Toby asked.

“Yes. We can get great human food where we’re headed.”

“Where’s that?”

Billy smiled. “Earthland!”

Toby looked suspiciously at Billy. “Isn’t that on planet....Earth?”

Billy nodded.

Toby was flustered and could hardly get any sound out. Finally he exclaimed, “How long was I asleep? Two or three hours? How fast have we been going? Faster than the speed of light I’m sure. Where are we going? Earth!”

Billy rolled his eyes playfully. “Well, obviously we have to be taking a long detour; otherwise Earthland security would get suspicious.”

“I have one more question,” Toby said, a bit softer this time.

“What’s that?”

“How are we going to pay for it?”

Billy looked at Toby funny. “With wood, if I remember correctly.”

“Yes, but don’t you think that cashing in wood on Earth would look a little suspicious?”

Billy looked disappointed. “Well, I guess you’re right. We’ll have to use the remainder of my adoptive father’s money for Earthland. That’s not as bad as it seemed before I got the wood, I guess.”

“When did your adoptive parents die?”

“Oh, yesterday,” said Billy casually.

“What!” exclaimed Toby. “I thought that you said in the letter that they were dead.”

“I did,” said Billy.

“Then why – oh. Gotithian days.”

“El Tuna Café days actually. A day there probably equals a month.”

“Oh,” said Toby. He wanted to continue talking about Earthland, but it seemed it would be awkward. Billy, expecting Toby to say something, waited. The two stood in the kitchen in silence. “I’m sorry to hear that,” said Toby, just to break the awkward silence. It almost sounded like a question.

Billy shrugged. “They weren’t that good of parents anyway. My foster mother was sure that she was a widow, despite my foster dad being in the house, so they came to a compromise: he could stay in the house but only if he slept in a coffin. That’s just a start. The two of them were nice when I had come to visit them, that is, when I had been kidnapped by Sir Dr. Dungeon Master Chief Tuna Fry Cook and he needed –”

“What!” interrupted Toby loudly.

“Yes, I was kidnapped,” said Billy, “Didn’t I mention that in a letter?”

Toby nodded. “That’s not what I meant. I just wondered who the guy with the long name is.”

“Sir Dr. Dungeon Master Chief Tuna Fry Cook?” Billy asked. “Oh, he was one of Roy’s cronies. He was the manager of the El Tuna Café, he got a doctorate in psychology, was put in charge of the dungeons, and had been knighted by Roy! His whole name is just a string of all of his titles. That’s how arrogant he was. Roy trusted him enough to put me in his ‘care’ after a suicide bomber attacked the El Tuna Café. Sir Dr. Dungeon Master Chief Tuna Fry Cook took his chance and I ‘disappeared’. It turns out that his fiancé’s parents also happened to be my great aunt and great uncle. Sir Dr. Dungeon Master Chief Tuna Fry Cook was keeping me there until he worked out a ransom negotiation

with Roy or a fee for Simon, who could greatly benefit from me being in his possession. Simon ended up kidnapping me from them, since they were so helpless. Just after I had escaped them, it seems, the war was over, and Simon and Roy were frozen in the former El Tuna Café. It was obvious that there was now a huge power vacuum and that the Universe would be unstable. My mother knew that it would be safer for me if no one knew where I was so the family split up and I ended up going to my great aunt's again. Well, she was happy to have me while I was potential ransom money, but she hated it that she was stuck with me. She called for my abortion."

"What!" Toby shouted. "Abortion?"

"Yes, don't you have abortions on Earth?"

"Yes, but those by definition are to get rid of an unborn baby if the mother doesn't want it. I think that you mistranslated your English."

"No," said Billy. "I didn't."

"Then how could your great aunt call for your abortion." Toby looked confused, but then his face lightened up. "Oh yeah! She also thought that she was a widow! You're just explaining to me how crazy she was! So, what did the doctors think of her request?"

Billy shook his head. "Abortion used to involve the killing of unnecessary fetuses," he began, "But then Roy extended that privilege. You see, the right of abortion was literally stated as a right to abort an unwanted child, so technically it didn't have to only apply to fetuses. When people confronted Roy with this loophole, he was rather surprised. Of course, he didn't want to admit to having written a law with a loophole in it, so he decided to announce

that abortion also applied for born children. After all, he must have figured, what's the difference? So then it became legal for one to kill one's biological child at any age.....with the proper forms.”

“Proper forms?” asked Toby, raising an eyebrow.

Billy shrugged. “You know, how the child would damage you psychologically, how you didn't have the financial resources to properly raise a child, how the child would benefit from not having to live life, standard stuff.”

“I'm guessing that your great aunt wasn't able to fill out those forms?”

“Correct.”

“Why's that?”

Billy thought about that for a moment. “Because she had joined a Universitarian league.”

“Excuse me?”

“It's a charity group. She had joined it, and so pledged to help other creatures that belonged to a dominant species. Of course she hardly gave a scarab to the league, so few benefited from her joining, but the reason why I'm here right now is because she had written in a contract to help those in need, no matter what the cost. So, because she had pledged to help those in need, and I was clearly in need, she couldn't justify killing me. She had to give up.”

Toby was once again in an awkward position. “Um, how did we end up getting to killing you?” he said jokingly.

“We were talking about using my adoptive parent's money to get into Earthland, and you asked what they were like.”

“Oh yeah. So, how much money do you have?”

“Only three hundred scarabs.”

“That’s a lot,” Toby said.

Billy shook his head. “It used to be, but it’s not any more. There are gazillions of different versions of scarabs. Each faction issues its own. But, of course, with as little commerce as there is in these times, why would anyone want a foreign currency? The only use that people have for other currencies is to trade it in for wood. The problem is, though, that lately measurements have gotten so confusing that no one is sure exactly how much wood a scarab is worth. It’s extremely hard to figure out. And when people do finally figure it out, the faction takes wood out of its reserve, or the currency system changes, or the El Tuna Café orbits slightly differently! Then the whole Universe is in chaos and plunges into a heavy depression that normally lasts a month or two, which is usually the time it takes to get everything straight again.”

“Wow. I’m amazed that anything gets done in the Universe.”

Billy nodded. “Speaking of getting things done, I have to land this ship. That means I need to measure the distance.”

Toby bit his tongue. If Billy hadn’t done this a million times before, he would be very afraid for their lives.

Billy was furiously scribbling calculations on a piece of gold foil paper. Toby peered down to see what they were, although it was pointless considering he didn’t know the Gotithian number system. He looked away from the gold and instead looked up onto the screen above the controls. The screen was nothing glamorous like what was in the movies; it was just a small cheap TV that indicated where they were going. Toby wondered how much this ship had cost. All he could see was that they were slowing down as they headed

into Earth's atmosphere and that they were aimed towards some sort of target on the ground. Since the Jiggy Gas Piggy had only one window and it was in the bathroom of the ship, Toby decided to just ask Billy what was around them. "Um, according to the screen, we're headed towards a spot on the ground. Are we landing on the surface of Earth?"

"No, we're heading into a piece of imaginary ground. It's just there to cover up the Bathroom Groundscratcher."

Toby knew about the Bathroom Groundscratcher. Billy had explained to him in a letter that all of Dave's facilities were underground, and since Dave was the owner of a huge bathroom monopoly, he needed space to put his office building and a factory. He decided that his planet Earth was a good place for that, so he built the Bathroom Groundscratcher. Groundscratchers are basically skyscrapers that go far into the ground.

The Jiggy Gas Piggy stopped. Toby ran across the ship to peer out of the only window the ship had. They were in some sort of cave. There was a line of ships formed in front of Billy's driving through a toll booth of some sort, and nearby the cave was littered with ships whose drivers weren't able to calculate distances so quickly. There was an ape in an orange suit walking up to each ship and telling it something. Toby hoped that he wasn't saying that Earthland was closed. He really wanted to get some authentic food – and fast. Luckily, no ships appeared to be moving away from him, so Earthland probably wasn't closed.

The orange suited Space Monkey walked up to Billy's Jiggy Gas Piggy. Toby looked across and saw his face was on the ship's screen. "Dear customer," he said very businesslike, "We would like to inform you that to better

secure you we have deployed mimes around Earthland. Today there have been some minor technical difficulties with them so please be careful. Dave's Bathroom and Tourism Co. is not responsible for stupidity on your behalf. Please consider that before you enter." The Space Monkey walked away from the screen to go to the ship behind them.

"That's not good," said Billy, turning to Toby. "Dave must be having trouble with security. Dave's got to fend for himself now, you know. He's getting some support from the True Presleytarians because of Earth's significance to the religion but to be honest, they would much rather have Earth for themselves."

"Is it safe to go in?" Toby asked anxiously.

"It should be. If it were too dangerous they would close up this place. Besides, we've got protection."

Toby didn't care what the protection was; the fact that they did have protection satisfied him. He asked, "What are True Presleytarians?"

"There are different sects of Presleytarianism. WonderClaus, the main founder of Presleytarianism, is the head of that church. It's the biggest, containing over fifty percent of the Universe's population and sixty percent of the Presleytarian population." Billy drove a little further up the line. It was moving slowly.

"Why are there different sects of Presleytarianism?"

Billy shrugged. "There are religious reasons, but they're so stupid I'm sure that the real reason is that other people want to manipulate the Presleytarian community. Presleytarianism's a powerful force."

"Can you give me some examples?" Toby asked.

Billy thought for a moment. “Well, the main difference between the two largest sects, the True Presleytarians and the Pious Presleytarians, is whether or not The King was using divine powers when diving into his swimming pool.”

“What?!?” Toby exclaimed hysterically. He started to laugh.

“Let me finish,” said Billy, smiling, but not as amused as Toby. “The Pious Presleytarians say that The King’s swimming pool was too shallow for him to be diving the way he was, and that he would have to have used divine powers in order to survive such jumps. The True Presleytarians, on the other hand, believe that The King was not able to use his powers so freely outside the pre-life. They say that he was skilled enough of a diver to not have to have the Universal minimum of a diving pool. The Pious Presleytarians found this utterly blasphemous and broke off from the True Presleytarians.” Toby was laughing obnoxiously. “That’s why I think,” continued Billy, “that the real reason behind the break off was wanting religious influence. Now no more laughing about Presleytarianism. We’re next in line for the toll booth and that Jelly Blob in the booth might be Presleytarian. You don’t want to offend someone with as much power as an admission man.” Billy walked over with a handful of scarabs to the window Toby was at.

It was then that Toby realized something that seemed obvious. “Billy, if aliens can’t interfere with human life and Gotithians are being hunted down, how are supposed to walk around in public?”

Billy smiled. “That’s not really a problem in Earthland. Human costumes are incredibly common there and I suppose with so many costumes no one will really care

if they think they see a Gotithian. Besides, how many bounty hunters would hang around a theme park?"

Toby sighed, relieved. Here they would be unnoticed. But what about the rest of the Universe that they planned to explore? "Billy, what about all the other places you wanted to see? The costume trick won't work there, right?"

Billy poked his head out of the window to see what was at the toll booth. Another Jelly Blob was chatting with the ticket man. He turned to Toby. "I've got sandwich boards in the trunk."

"Sandwich boards?"

Billy opened up a hatch on the floor. He pulled out two boards tied together. There was some Gotithian writing on of the boards.

"What does it say?"

"It says Edgar's Exotic: Commercial Morgues for those special creatures." Billy looked over at Toby's incredulous face. "Don't you see?" he said reassuringly, "Advertisers can also wear costumes."

"I know that," Toby began, but stopped. The ship in front was moving away. Billy put the scarabs into Toby's hand and dashed across to the control board. Toll booth was incredibly inefficient for a Jiggy Gas Piggy. Toby bit his tongue. He couldn't speak Gotithian.

To his misfortune, the admission man greeted Toby. Toby was nervous. Was he saying hello, or was he commenting on the authenticity of Toby's costume? Toby thought fast. He threw the scarabs into the admission man's face and screamed "Go! Go!" to Billy. Billy panicked and floored the gas pedal. The Jiggy Gas Piggy smashed into the unopened gate. Toby looked back out at the Jelly Blob,

which was jiggling. Toby hoped it wasn't out of anger. The Jelly Blob picked off the scarabs, seeming to count them, and opened the gate for them. Toby sighed in relief again as Billy drove through.

"You brightened his day," Billy said. That explained why they were able to get through.

"Sorry about your ship," said Toby.

"Don't worry about it, it was pretty bad before. This just adds to its charm. Now, please be silent again so that I can find a parking space."

Light started flooding in through the window. It seemed to be a simulation of natural Earth light, and it was very good. Toby rubbed his eyes looked around the parking lot. Ships were parked in stacks of ten, and yet the field of stacks seemed to be endless. It would make sense to follow a pedestrian to his, her, or its car, but so many people were doing it that there were traffic jams wherever there was a pedestrian. Some ships were trying to gain on their rivals for parking spaces by hovering over the pedestrian. In that way, the pedestrians were being attacked. Toby was beginning to worry again about walking through Earthland. "I'm taking a detour," Billy said finally, and flew above the field of pedestrian stalkers. As the screen revealed, that wasn't going to work either. Many other ships were trying the same thing. Billy sighed. "We might spend more time walking in the parking lot than actually sightseeing," he said glumly. "Maybe this is a scam. Maybe Dave's trying to save money on facilities by holding up most of his customers in the parking lot. After all, you need to pay to get to the parking lot!" A few ships moved, leaving an empty space in the cluster of ships. Billy took his chance and zoomed through.

A new line of ships came in through the gate – it appeared to be some sort of school group – and the ships around Billy were pushed back. Muttering to himself, Billy moved the ship further towards the outskirts of the parking garage. “Sorry Toby,” he said, “But I have to go here for safety purposes. We’ll spend most of the time walking towards the park itself, but safety is safety.

Toby shook his head. “I think that the way these people treat pedestrians nothing would be safe in the parking lot.”

Billy shrugged. “Well, at least we won’t crash the ship.”

Billy seemed to have spoken too soon. As he steered towards a clear parking spot on the edge of the parking perimeter, the ship turned on its side. Toby screamed and fell onto the ceiling. They were flying into the sidewalk upside-down. Billy held onto his seat as hard as he could with one arm as he tried to steer upside down. Unfortunately, perspective got the best of him and he kept flying up when he meant to go down. The ship was spiraling and waving back and forth like a drunken fly. “Toby! Hit the hover button!” Billy shouted. Toby ran, still on the ceiling, towards the control buttons, desperately trying to keep his balance.

The hatch opened. Toby and Billy, both hanging onto the control board now, looked over. In the doorway stood a five foot tall humanoid thing, with a pale face, a striped shirt with black overalls, a black hat, and white gloves. “The mime!” Billy screeched in horror. “Toby, hit the hover button now!” For a moment, Toby was too stunned to move. A mime had infiltrated the ship! The mime began to move his hands around something imaginary. It appeared to be a

rope. Toby sobered and reached for the hover button. The mime flicked its arm. Toby could feel something wrap around him wrist. The mime had him. Now the mime began to tug backwards, and Toby was being lifted away from the hover button. The ship spun around again and the mime lost its grip on the imaginary rope and was thrown against the wall. Toby took his chance and hit the hover button. Toby and Billy knocked heads and the mime was thrown forwards. The mime, still emotionless, felt around for an imaginary bar and pulled itself back up. It looked at Toby and Billy, who were still dazed from the collision. It moved its hands together as if making a snowball and threw its arm forwards. It missed, cracking the hard plastic of the control board. A few buttons popped out. This mime had strength. Toby bravely lunged towards the mime head first. It felt for an imaginary sword and ran at him but tripped over the imaginary bar it had created. Billy took his chance and lunged for the ship telephone. “Deploy anti-mime!” He shouted breathlessly. The hatch opened again, but nothing came in. The hatch closed, and there were footsteps. The mime widened its eyes and lifted off the ground in an imaginary jet pack. The footsteps went after the mime.

“Hey man!” something shouted. “How are you doing, ol’ mime? Life treatin’ ya well?”

The mime turned to the hatch and flew towards it, looking scared half to death.

“You can’t leave there, ol’ chap!” the voice said again. “Have you heard of pi? It’s three point one four one five nine.....”

Although Toby wasn’t sure that the mime could understand English, the anti-mime seemed to be working on

it. It grabbed its ears with its hands and tried to open the hatch with a leg. “.....nine seven nine three two three.....” Billy grabbed the steering wheel and spun it hard. Toby and Billy knocked against the ground and tumbled towards the wall, and the mime’s leg, being caught in the hatch wheel, twisted around painfully. “.....three two seven nine five zero two.....” The mime, its hands shaking, felt around for an imaginary pain killer but dropped it. It fumbled on the ground and Billy mercilessly flipped the ship around again. The mime got even more twisted.

“Aw, mimey,” said the anti-mime, “You look pained. I’ve got a face that can cheer you up! You aren’t looking at me! C’mom, look over here!”

The mime gritted its teeth and felt for earplugs. The anti-mime escalated. “Don’t ignore a friend! What’s the matter, mimey? Look over here! Look! Look!”

Sweat trickled down the mime’s head. The anti-mime was really causing it pain. In desperation, it felt for an imaginary noose and wrapped it around its neck. It pulled itself up an imaginary tree, and then let loose the imaginary noose. The mime floated there in mid air, with a final look of satisfaction on its face.

“Return anti-mime,” Billy said into the microphone. The footsteps headed towards the hatch again. The mime was lifted up by something and both creatures left the ship.

Toby sat on the ground, his eyes wide. “What was that?”

Billy laughed. “You’ve never had a mime attack before? Wow, you humans are lucky. Or maybe I’m used to it because I’m a Gotithian.....either way, we’ve just been

attacked by one of the loose air mimes that Dave has around here for security purposes. Remember the warning?"

"Yes, but I thought that he meant mines. I thought that I had heard it wrong!"

"Well, that's silly, how often do mines come after you? They're kind of rooted in the ground."

Toby wasn't sure which kind of "mine" he meant, so he decided not to carry that point on further.

"Sorry, Toby, but I'm going to have to flip this ship over again to land it. Aw, darn, that mime cost us a parking space!"

Toby looked at Billy strangely and then looked at the bruises on him. They were pretty bad. "How is a mime able to do so much damage? I mean, look at the bruises on me, and look at how he smashed the control board!"

"To be honest, I have no clue how a mime is capable of doing that kind of stuff. It's like there's some sort of secret universe where they're getting of the things they're using. But, strangely enough, as soon as the mime leaves all of the stuff disappears. And yet you'd think it'd be able to not stumble on its on creations! By the way, thanks for getting it to do that. Watch out now." Billy turned the ship over. He and Toby had another meeting with the floor.

Toby ignored the pain to ask, "What species do those mimes belong to? Where are they coming from?"

"I don't know," said Billy, at the control board right side up again. "Mimes aren't exactly a subject in schools. Don't even start to ask me about anti-mimes."

"What do we do now?"

“We’re going to Earthland, of course!” Billy said. “All we need to find is a parking space. Don’t let a little mime discourage you!”

“Well, then I think that we need to report the mime,” said Toby.

“We can’t do that. The Space Monkey told us that we had to fend for ourselves. What are they going to do? Besides, that’s put us at the risk up being inspected by company doctors. We don’t want that! Hey, there’s a parking space.” Billy swerved to the right and landed into the bottom of a parking rack with surprising ease. “What we do need to check out is the ship, though. If you thought what the mime almost did to you was bad you should see what it can do to ships.”

Billy opened the hatch and made his way down to solid ground. Toby followed. The ship looked worse than before. Much of its hot pink paint had flicked off and there were even more dents and scratches than before. Toby was really shocked at what the mime did to the front of the ship until he remembered that it was his fault.

“It’s not as bad as it could be,” said Billy, looking at the back of the ship, “But I don’t like the looks of the muffler. We’re going to need to get a new one.”

“Is it that essential?” Toby asked.

“Yeah, mufflers are pretty important,” said Billy.

“Why?”

“Why not?”

Toby threw up his arms. “Why? Why does a ship need a muffler? Space is silent!”

“We’re not always in space!”

“How much sound does it make on land?”

“Not much, but that’s only because we’re not at high speeds!”

“That’s because we’re on land!”

“Yeah, but we’re going to need to be faster in space!”

“Space is silent!”

“It’s good etiquette,” said Billy stubbornly.

“Etiquette?”

“You know, the rules of the highways.”

“What highways?”

“*The highways.*”

“Where?” asked Toby angrily.

“In space of course!” said Billy.

“You’re going faster than the speed of light!”

Billy shook his head. “Let’s just go to Earthland now.”

“Are you sure? You looked like you were sort of limping when you got out of the ship.”

“It’s nothing.”

“How far away is Earthland?” Toby asked. The distance seemed like a little much for Billy’s bad leg.

“There’s no telling,” said Billy. “Even if I could tell you, the answer would be gibberish to you.”

“Aren’t there shuttle buses or anything?”

“Yes, in fact there’s one over there – ” Toby looked in the direction Billy was pointing “ – but I’m not sure that it’s closer than Earthland.”

“Use your intuition.”

“Okay, then we’ll walk,” said Billy.

Toby sighed. “I don’t think we should.”

“Why not?”

“Well, even if it is closer,” Toby began, although he didn’t believe that the park really was closer than the shuttle

bus, “Remember how these park goers treat pedestrians? I don’t want to be surrounded by a swarm of ships.”

“I guess you’re right,” agreed Billy. “I’ll hail the shuttle bus over.”

Once again, Toby was absolutely stunned by Billy’s logic.

Billy waved his hands around in almost a dance. Toby figured that it was necessary to get a shuttle bus’s attention over the towering racks of ships.

Billy had the shuttle bus’s attention. The shuttle bus floated over the racks, and made its way directly for the two of them. Toby noticed as it came closer that it had a gun fixed onto the bottom of it. Security was tight around here. He hoped that it had an anti-mime on board too.

The shuttle bus came down, balancing well on the gun. The side of the shuttle bus had a banner that had in both Gotithian and English (perhaps the keep the spirit of Earthland) “Head Trauma: a must see! Their heavy metal thrashing, head bashing, and skull smashing tour goes to the Honky Donkey café today!”

Toby made his way up the shuttle bus, which was surprisingly empty, and sat down. Billy sat next to him, waving and smiling at the few people on the bus who commented on their costumes.

“Billy, what’s Head Trauma?” Toby asked.

“Oh my!” Billy said a little louder than necessary, “That mime attack must have really gotten to you!” he then came closer to Toby and whispered, “Avoid asking questions in public! Everybody knows what Head Trauma is, and the same goes for the Honky Donkey! Thanks to Presleytarianism, almost everybody can speak English!”

“Well, what are they?” Toby whispered back.

“Head Trauma is the most famous band in the Universe. In fact, it’s one of the only big bands around. It was well known back in Roy’s time, and so it’s well known today even despite the lack of connection between all of these warring factions.”

“Big Band? It plays jazz, eh?” Toby joked.

“Shut up,” said Billy. “It’s a thrash metal band. Although, sometimes it does play jazz.”

“What? I’ve never heard of a heavy metal band playing jazz.”

“They have to.”

“Why?”

“They dominate the music industry, and they want to keep their top spot. Plus, it maximizes the amount of head trauma they give to their audience. Let’s say that there are some thrash metal fans. They’ll be going to a concert wanting to hear thrash metal, but then Head Trauma might instead play slow jazz or even what you call elevator music in order to bring pain to them, while they’ll play thrash metal to bring pain to the jazz lovers.”

“Why do they want to bring pain?”

“It’s part of the thrill of visiting a Head Trauma concert. Plus, when you bring a lot of pain to the audience, the songs that don’t bring pain sound wonderful. It’s all a weird mind trick.”

“And it works?”

“It has to. How else could they be so popular?”

“That’s still strange. And the Honky Donkey?”

“That’s a little harder to explain. Let’s just say that there are large donkeys floating in space and the Honky

Worship your Vermin

Donkey is a café positioned in one of their breeding grounds. People like to hunt Giant Space Donkeys.”

“Giant Space Donkeys?” Toby said, forgetting to whisper. “I’ve heard enough. That’s just too weird.”

“No one knows where they come from either. Weirder yet, when you kill a donkey you get horns or a halo, depending on the donkey that you killed.”

“So people are flying around the Honky Donkey and shooting giant donkeys to get halos?”

“No, they’re not shooting the donkeys. If you use a tool to kill a donkey the tool gets the halo instead of you. You’d be surprised how many horned bullets there are for sale on the PickleNet.”

“Can we go to the Honky Donkey?”

“I’d rather not. It’s a real rowdy place.”

“That’s okay. I just want to see Head Trauma.”

Billy let out a small laugh. “Head Trauma is ten times worse than the Honky Donkey! Seriously, they don’t call it ‘Head Trauma’ for nothing. The band really has killed people.”

“Why aren’t there lawsuits?”

“Oh, there are all the time. Head Trauma sues the families of the injured for endangering their show.”

Toby didn’t say anything to this. He turned to look out the window. They were now passing a large sign that had “Earthland” written with wooden letters on it. Toby wanted to look around.

Earthland was a strange place. It was designed to look like a downtown American city. There were street performers everywhere. One of them was somewhat confused on human culture and was playing the didgeridoo in a kimono. What

was stranger yet was that there were giant versions of.....Tony! Toby's uncle had inspired several cartoonish impressions of himself to be seen walking around the streets of Earthland. He wondered if Tony was a legendary human because of his imprisonment by Roy six years ago. He didn't want to ask, though. He seemed to have asked enough questions that everyone else in the Universe seemed to know. He really didn't want to blow their cover.

The shuttle bus intercom said something in Gotithian and then repeated it in English. "All right," it said, "We're going to stop soon. Enjoy your stay and please, please watch out for land mimes." The shuttle bus turned at a street corner, and across from the bus stop Toby saw what he had wanted from Earthland the whole time. He saw a building with a huge hamburger sitting on top of it, inscribed with the letters "Burger Palace". Toby licked his lips. He would be getting food soon.

Billy, on the other hand, was more interested in the rides that were down the street. Toby didn't think that he had even noticed the Burger Palace. "Billy! Can we get food now?"

Billy turned his attention back to Toby, slightly upset for having Toby interrupt his planning of which rides to go on. "What? Where?"

Toby pointed over at the huge burger. "There! At the Burger Palace!"

Billy scratched slightly bristled chin. "Hmm...I don't know. Maybe you should see what they have first?"

"What?" exclaimed Toby, pointing over to the Burger Palace. "Isn't it obvious?"

"Well, I don't see any menu," Billy said stubbornly.

“Look! It’s right there in the window. It says, ‘Yes! Burger Palace has an oxygen bar! Enjoy fresh, delicious oxygen with the hamburgers!’”

“Hamburgers, you say?” said Billy. “I see. Isn’t that a staple food for humans? Either way, I’ve always wanted to see what an oxygen bar was. Let’s go in!”

Toby smiled, he was hungry. The two of them pushed their way through the crowd headed towards the rides and made their way into the Burger Palace.

There was a wonderful aroma steaming through the air. For Toby, who hadn’t eaten since he had had lunch on Earth, it smelled especially wonderful, and the line was just torture. Toby thought that it might be fifteen minutes before he could eat.

“Hey, look at the pimples on that teenager!” Billy exclaimed, pointing. Toby looked to where he was pointing. A very spiky PufferFish in a standard looking fast food uniform was approaching them. The spikes must have been the acne that Billy was referring to. Toby was relieved to see the creature bobbing towards them. As he had hoped, the PufferFish came to bring them good news. “There’s a line forming at the oxygen bar for costume wearers,” he said cheerfully in English. He waited for a response.

“Um, that’s great!” Toby said. The PufferFish bobbed. “Good, you speak English. You certainly may go into the new line.”

Toby and Billy once again made their way through a throng of people and found themselves in front of the source of the sweet aroma. The smell of delicious fried food was coming from...the oxygen bar.

“Our oxygen bar offers the finest aromas and oxygen from the farthest reaches of Earth, all delicately balanced to form this delicious concoction,” the PufferFish rambling, “Help yourselves to all the air you’d like while you enjoy your fabulous burgers.”

Toby wanted to ask if that was all that they served but he feared that the answer might be obvious again. The two shuffled into what little line there was, enjoying the aromas. “You know,” said Toby, “This isn’t at all what oxygen bars are on Earth.”

“I had a feeling this was fishy,” whispered Billy. “I mean, what would they have to be smoking to think up of this sort of thing?”

“Probably this stuff,” joked Toby. Billy wasn’t so amused. The line cleared as the family of costume wearers in front of them left.

“Next?” asked a Jelly Blob at the cash register. The Jelly Blobs seemed to have all of the sedentary jobs.

Billy and Toby walked up to the register. “Order,” whispered Toby harshly. He didn’t want to be expected to come up with his own order.”

“Um, I’ll have a.....” began Billy slowly as he read the Gotithian menu, “.....burger.....”

“What kind of burger? For here we’ve got beef burgers, ham burgers, chicken burgers, and even a chemically synthesized Hamburger.”

Toby flinched. They wouldn’t say “hamburger” in a singular form if they were talking about the beef patty.

The Jelly Blob continued. “For the road, we’ve got Uncle Dave’s Trail Mix –”

Worship your Vermin

“What’s that?” asked Toby, interested in what “trail mix” might be considered in a restaurant out in the Universe. He hoped it wasn’t made out of trails.

“It’s a high quality mix of miniature hamburgers. Great for road trips!”

“I’ll take that,” said Toby. He wanted to get something that he could keep in Billy’s ship so that he wouldn’t have to try that synthesized plastic food.

“What size?”

“How big do they get?”

“Well, we’ve got a truckload size.”

Toby looked at Billy, who mouthed the word “no”.

“What’s the next biggest?”

“That would be the O-bees bag,” the Jelly Blob said.

“Obese bag? I’ll take that,” Toby said. Billy slapped his forehead.

“That’ll be twelve Presleytarian scarabs.”

“Do you accept Margusean scarabs?”

“Certainly.....but it’ll cost you fifty of those.”

Billy groaned and pulled scarabs out of his pocket. “Forget my order,” he grunted.

The Jelly Blob slithered down under the counter and came back up with what looked like a large bag of dog food with some Gotithian writing and a picture of a snail sitting on a mound of tiny hamburgers. Toby grabbed the bag and tore it open ravenously.

“While you’re paying, would you like to pay for your oxygen?”

“Say what?” asked Billy, hoping he hadn’t heard correctly.

The Jelly Blob jiggled laughingly. “Of course you know that the oxygen in an oxygen bar isn’t free?”

Billy yelped out in surprise. “How much is it, then?”

“Oh, around twenty five Margusean scarabs for the first five minutes – these are El Tuna Café, not Earth –, and then just a scarab more for each minute afterwards.”

Billy felt around in his pocket for more money. “Sorry, but I don’t have the money. Can we get a refund on the burgers?”

“You most certainly can not,” the Jelly Blob gurgled. “Hand over the money.”

“I don’t have it!”

“Your pocket looks a little full.”

“It’s bulging with Margusean half-scarabs!”

“I don’t think so.”

Billy grabbed the miniature hamburger bag from Toby and smacked it over the Jelly Blob’s.....whatever. Miniature hamburgers scattered across the floor. The Jelly Blob let out a loud gurgling sound, and sunk to the floor. The PufferFish around the store floor turned their attention to Billy and Toby. “Run for it!” Billy exclaimed.

Mr. Parrot's Notebook

Once again Toby and Billy were in danger. First it had been at the admission booth, then it had been the mime attack, and now some fast food restaurant employees wanted them to pay for oxygen, and Billy had unnecessarily slapped one over some the whatever-sort-of-body-part-Jelly-Blobs-have!

But despite a few dumb moves he made Billy was still clever. He noticed that people were watching the PufferFish chasing them, and he screamed in Gotithian, “Mime! Mime! There’s a mime loose!”

The crowd panicked and began running in the direction Toby and Billy were. The PufferFish were yelling loudly that there was no mime, but in all of the confusion Toby and Billy were able to slip out of the PufferFish sight and into an alley.

“What do we do now?” asked Toby, panting hard.

“We climb over that wall,” Billy said.

“Then what?”

“I don’t know.”

Toby could see that there wasn’t much time. He nodded and Billy helped push him up. Toby pulled Billy over the wall and the two of them dropped down. Toby was amazed at what he could do panicking.

Billy looked around at the filthy urban buildings and sighed.

“What is it?”

“These buildings look like they’re trying to replicate apartments on Earth. I think that we just climbed over the

wall separating the park from the condos of people who want to live on Earth. This is sort of a vacation home.”

“This filthy place?” Toby exclaimed.

“Yes,” Billy said. “I don’t know. I guess we like to think of humans backward in everything, so we assume that most humans live in urban slums. Owning a slum condo is just for fun.”

“Strange,” Toby said.

“We need to get out of here,” Billy said quietly. “No one but old folks – crazy old folks – would buy a condo in an Earthland slum.”

“Crazy old folks indeed!” A voice shouted from a window in the apartment building above where Toby and Billy were standing. The wrinkled head of an elderly Space Monkey poked out. “Are you boys here to visit me?” she said in Gotithian.

The question put Billy in an awkward position. He looked around. There was someone walking down the street in their direction. “Yes!” Billy exclaimed. “Don’t you remember, grandma? We had planned to come today!”

“Oh goody,” the old Space Monkey said, “You’re going to be here the whole day!”

“I’ve got to stop thinking in Earth days,” Billy muttered to Toby in English.

“What’s going on?”

“Oh, some delirious old Space Monkey thinks we’re her grandsons and wants us to visit. I accidentally said that we’ll be staying for an Earth month.”

“What?”

“Don’t worry,” said Billy reassuringly. “I’m sure that we can slip away in the night. Earthland simulates the

movement of Earth's sun. We only need to stay as long as we need to stay safe."

Toby nodded grimly. He still didn't want to stay for the rest of the day in a slum. Plus, he hadn't eaten all day. Billy still had his miniature hamburgers. The two opened the apartment door.

"Up here," said the feeble voice again.

Toby and Billy walked up the steep, fragile stairway made out of fake rotting wood.

"The first thing that you were wrong about," said a firm voice as they reached the top of the stairs. Toby jumped. He didn't understand Gotithian, but a voice that firm could only belong to a caretaker – or a psychotic old woman masquerader. "Is that I'm feeble. The second thing," the voice said as the door with pre-chipped paint opened. The wrinkled Space Monkey was standing in the doorway. "Is that I'm female."

Billy's eyes were wide. They had been caught red-handed. "Run for it," he whispered in English to Billy. The Space Monkey pulled out a rifle.

"Would you like to come in?" he asked politely, pointing the gun at Toby and Billy.

"Um, okay," Billy said, pulling Toby with him into the psycho's room. The Space Monkey closed the door.

"Can I interest you in something to drink? Maybe a soda?" The Space Monkey asked, the gun still pointing at the two boys.

"Oh no," said Billy politely, "We just ate." Toby wished that he could understand Gotithian so that he could know what was going on.

“Well, then have a seat,” said the Space Monkey, pointing to some rocking chairs.

“O-okay” Billy said. He motioned Toby to sit down.

The Space Monkey pulled up a rocking chair in front of the door. The gun was still pointed at them. “So, a Gotithian and a human.”

Billy shook his head. “We’re Space Monkeys.”

The Space Monkey smiled. “Costumes, then?”

“Yes,” said Billy.

The Space Monkey turned to Toby. “Would you like a drink?”

Toby sat there, his heart beating. He hoped that the Space Monkey hadn’t chosen him to die first or anything.

“He can’t understand Gotithian,” Billy said nervously.

“Is that because he’s a human?” the Space Monkey asked.

“No,” said Billy, laughing a little, “He’s a little dumb.”

The Space Monkey put his gun right on Toby’s head. “If you want to live,” he said in English, “You’ll sing ‘Twinkle Twinkle Little Star’”.

Toby was trembling. Billy was too. “Twinkle.....Twinkle.....”

“Aha!” The Space Monkey exclaimed in English. “I thought that I heard an authentic human voice out there! Now I’ve got a real human in my apartment!” Toby was trembling even more. The Space Monkey pulled his gun away. “And what are you?” he asked, turning to Billy, “Are you an actual Gotithian?”

Billy bit his lip. There was no point in lying to this Space Monkey. “Y-yes,” he said.

“Excellent!” said the Space Monkey. “I suppose you’ll wonder who I am, then.” He reached out a hand to Toby. Toby jumped back in the rocking chair. “Stupid human,” he muttered. He reached his hand out to Billy. Billy shook it. “I’m Phil,” he said, pulling his hand away.

“What do you want with us, Phil?” Toby asked nervously.

“If you flip a coin for an infinite amount of times, how often will it come up heads?”

“Half the time,” Billy said.

“Wrong!” Phil screamed, firing the gun at the ceiling. Toby screamed and Billy threw himself onto the floor.

“What is infinity?” Phil asked more calmly.

Billy hesitated to answer, but then saw that Phil was pointing the gun down at him again.

“It’s, uh, a never ending number that, um....” Billy couldn’t think of a definition.

“Never ends,” Toby chimed in.

Phil sighed. “And how would you divide a never ending number?”

Billy forced an “Oh!” and said, “The answer would still be infinity.”

Phil smiled for the first time. “Good! So, how many times will the coin come up heads?”

“An infinite number of times,” said Billy, pulling himself back into the rocking chair and brushing off the ceiling drywall.

“Yes!” Phil exclaimed. “Now, what do you know about quantum theory, human?”

“Well, uh,” Toby stumbled on the words, “it’s where, um, there things smaller than atoms, and, er, everything is random to some point.”

“That’s enough!” Phil shouted. Toby hopped in his seat. “Very good,” Phil said, smiling again. “Everything has a chance of happening, although the truly remarkable things such as, say, the coin turning into a cat, have infinitesimally small chances of happening. Yet, as even a human says, there is a chance of anything happening. So, Gotithian, if I were to flip a coin an infinite amount of times, how often would it ‘come up cat’?”

“An infinite amount of times,” said Billy a little more confidently.

“Correct,” said Phil. “Now, if for both of them, it comes up an infinite amount of times, couldn’t you say that the coin will ‘come up cat’ just as much as it will come up heads?”

“I guess so,” said Toby. He really wanted to know why he was interrogating his prisoners on coins, but didn’t dare to ask.

“Now, do you think that if there are an infinite number of possible occurrences for the coin, and that if each possibility is equal to all the others, the probability of the coin coming up heads is infinitesimally small?”

“Yes,” said Billy and Toby at the same time. This would be fun if it wasn’t for the loaded gun that Phil had.

“Good. Now, here’s the tricky part. How do you normally measure probability, human?”

“Well, you take, uh, the number of times that something happens, divided by, uh, the number of times that you tried it.”

“Good enough” said Phil. “So, as you were taught in school, if the coin comes up heads once after two flips, you can say that the probability of the coin coming up heads is one half. However, remember that if you flip a coin an infinite amount of times, it’ll come up heads an infinite amount of times. Therefore, you can say that the probability of it coming up heads is one hundred percent, but also remember that the probability of it coming up heads has to be the same probability of it coming up tails or cat. Therefore, you can say that the probability of it coming up tails is one hundred percent AND the probability of it coming up heads is one hundred percent AND the probability of it coming up cat is one hundred percent AND the probability of it turning the Universe into chocolate cake and forcing it to eat itself is one hundred percent! So then can you say that the only mathematical way to resolve this is to say that each of these occurrences is really one and the same occurrence?”

“No,” said Toby bravely.

“Why not?” asked Phil softly.

“Because you’ll never be able to flip a coin for an infinite number of times. Even if you flip the coin a whole lot the number of times you flipped it will still be the same. You can’t draw conclusions from things that can’t happen.”

Billy held his breath. He was afraid Phil might fire his gun again. Phil didn’t seem angry. “But didn’t you say yourself that anything could happen? Isn’t there a chance that your number of coin flippings, rather than having a determined number, becomes infinity?”

“No!” Toby said. He wasn’t as nervous as Billy was about defying Phil. He could tell this guy just wanted some good conversation, even if he did have to enforce it with a

gun. "There are rules with math! You can't change a number just like that!"

"But isn't a number just a representation of an amount in reality?"

"Yes."

"And you agree that there is probability that reality can change?"

"Yes."

"So wouldn't make sense for there to be a number turned into the number infinity?"

"But infinity can't be represented in reality by definition!"

"That is, unless the Universe is either infinitely large or has existed for an infinite amount of time."

Toby didn't know what to say to that.

"You know," began Phil again, "I'm talking a lot about reality, and yet I'm not even sure if you know what reality is."

"Sure I do," said Toby, "Reality is what's real. It's what's around you."

"Is it?" asked Phil rhetorically. "Is time part of reality, then?"

"Sure it is," said Toby, wondering what this was going to be about.

"Well, then, what time frame are we in right now?"

"The present, of course."

"So, are you saying that we are viewing the present?"

"Yes."

Phil shook his head. "No, we're not, human. Supposing that there is a present, we would have to view it by seeing it, feeling it, hearing it, and smelling it. However, it

takes time for light to travel, it takes time for sound to travel, it takes time for nerve signals to enter the brain, and it takes time for the brain to actually compute those signals. We are living in the past. Might I now ask where the past is?”

“I guess it’s only in your mind,” said Toby.

“Exactly,” said Phil. “It exists only in your mind. So if we’re living in the past, we’re not in reality, unless you choose to define reality as what you see as real. In which case.....do you have an imaginary friend, human?”

“Yes,” confessed Toby. Billy chuckled a little.

“What’s his name?”

“Jimmy,” said Toby.

“Well, how do know that Jimmy is imaginary?”

“I don’t,” said Toby. He figured that it was pointless to say something that would just get twisted in Phil’s head.

“You don’t? Tell the truth,” said Phil, his voice rising.

“Okay,” said Toby, a little scared. “Well, I’ve never actually seen him, I’ve never actually heard him, and I’ve never actually seen him do anything.”

“The same is true for atoms, and I assume that you think that atoms exist.”

“I do,” said Toby, stumped.

“Why?”

“Because the scientists all say its so.”

“I don’t, and I was a scientist,” said Phil.

Toby was tempted to say “Well, you’re a crackpot”, but he didn’t. “Most scientists say its so.”

“So if most people say it’s so, then it’s so? What if more people started rejecting the idea, would atoms vanish?”

“In your definition of reality, sure,” said Toby. This man was getting on his nerves.

“But wouldn’t there be a slight feeling from those who rejected it that it exists?” Phil asked.

“Maybe.”

“In that case, then, it would be fair to say that atoms would partially exist. That’s the same with your imaginary friend. He partially exists. You don’t believe he exists, but he’s strongly present in your mind.”

Toby didn’t even bother to argue.

“You’ll see what I mean in time,” Phil said. He got up from his seat, his gun slung on his shoulder, and began walking around the room. “I can tell that neither of you believe me. You’d say, ‘Phil, reality doesn’t have to be confined to the past that doesn’t exist, because time’s not linear.’ In that case, you could argue that backwards time travel is possible, or at least that the past exists in some form outside of your mind. Well, I agree with that part, but I don’t believe that objects in space can directly affect time. Believe me, I’ve studied a lot, and what I’ve found to be truer is that the space is like words on a page, affecting the page but affecting the page as a whole very little. Time is like that page, and the past are like previous pages in a book. That’s what lays outside your mind, boys. A book.”

“A book?” said Billy mockingly. Phil whipped around with his gun ready. “Sorry. It just seems so strange. Where exactly did you learn this?”

“From the writings of my boss when I was a scientist,” said Phil.

“Oh.”

Phil grinned. “When I was a scientist under Mr. Parrot.”

Toby was confused. According to Tony's stories Mr. Parrot had created the Gotithian race, had aided in the conquering of the Universe by the Cube People and then had himself taken over the Cube People. Mr. Parrot had actually been a Space Monkey, but after a bad experiment had started to slowly transform into a parrot. He and Roy's brother Simon had worked together for an elixir of immortality that had something to do with how the Universe was based on stupidity, and Mr. Parrot was able to continue his transformation until he didn't even know his old name. As a result, he referred to himself as "Mr. Parrot" and the name stuck. What confused Toby about Mr. Parrot was that he had last done scientific research when he was in power, and had stopped shortly after Roy usurped his power. Roy had reigned for a million years. "Phil, are you immortal?"

"What makes you think that?"

"Well, you would have had to have live over a million years ago in order to work with Mr. Parrot."

"I certainly did," said Phil, "But I don't see why you need to be immortal to do that."

Billy turned to Toby. "Toby, an El Tuna Café year is not equal to 365 El Tuna Café days the same way as an Earth year is equal to 365 Earth days. A year is simply the time it takes for an object to make a complete orbit around whatever it's orbiting. It's just that we've grown used to measuring things in terms of years rather than something much longer – say, a month – because in most cases a year is longer than the day."

"Then how long is an El Tuna Café year?"

"About five millionths of an Earth year."

“Five millionths!” Toby exclaimed. “That means that Roy only ruled for five years!”

“Yes,” said Billy.

“Then that means that the El Tuna Café is right up next to the asteroid that it’s orbiting, and....that’s like.....” Toby stood there for a little bit, doing the math in his head. “A year is thirty seconds! The El Tuna Café is orbiting the asteroid once every thirty seconds!”

“Actually, it was until recently,” Phil said.

“What?” asked Billy, with some panic in his voice.

“That’s right,” said Phil. “Security was breached. They took Roy and Simon’s bodies, and destroyed the asteroid to cover their tracks. That is, with the asteroid destroyed ships won’t work.”

“When did you find this out?!?” Billy said hysterically.

Phil pointed to his watch. “There’s some pickle juice in this thing,” he said, “That will connect it directly to the El Tuna Café’s time. Well, guess what? The watch stopped.”

“But....” Billy began, “T-there’s no way of d-driving now. We can’t get off of Earth!”

“That’s what you think,” said Phil, “and fortunately, most people think the same thing. If you were a real driver you’d be able to make it without the El Tuna Café’s spoon fed distance calculations. Security’s almost totally down at this time. It’s the only chance that anyone ever has of getting near the El Tuna Café.”

“Well, that must not be true, eh?” said Billy, his voice still high pitched. This seemed to be worse for him than the gun Phil was still pointing at him. “If it was, how did the El

Tuna Café get breeched? There's no way that anyone with an old ship can travel now. I think that your watch is broken."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Phil. "There are no moving parts in this watch! All of the information is coming from a time regulation center in Diarama City!"

"Maybe the time regulation center is broken," Toby suggested.

"Maybe, but I don't want to take that sort of risk," said Phil.

"Excuse me?" asked Billy.

"Suppose that the time regulation center is actually working perfectly well," said Phil, "Then that could only mean that the El Tuna Café has stopped moving. In a sense, time has stopped. Thanks to the confusing unified measurements system that Roy forced all of the machinery in his time to have built into it, all outdated ships are almost demobilized. Guess what, the machinery guarding the El Tuna Café is outdated! This small amount of time is the only time we have to get Mr. Parrot's notebook!"

"Well," said Billy, "Guess what? We have an outdated ship! We can't get into the El Tuna Café!"

"Besides," chimed in Toby, "What's so important about Mr. Parrot's notebook?"

"What's so important?" said Phil, smiling. "It's that we can find out how Mr. Parrot did all the things that he did do in life. For example, wouldn't you think that there would be some sort of formula in there for making a Gotithian?" Billy focused his attention more intensely. Phil's eyes widened too. "What's more," he said, "Is that Mr. Parrot knew how to become immortal. Wouldn't you like to be immortal?"

“I don’t see why you would need to,” said Billy. “I mean, we all end up in Willy Lemoniod’s Afterlife anyway.” Willy Lemoniod was the first ruler of a unified Universe. Nobody was sure how, but he created a device that transported people’s consciousness to a new afterlife after they died. Supposedly every dominant species except humans were placed permanently into the program.

“Well, there were a lot of other things that were in there that you should check out,” said Phil stubbornly.

Billy took a deep breath and looked into the psycho’s eyes. “Why don’t *you* go to the El Tuna Café if you’re so smart?”

“I don’t have a ship,” said Phil.

“Why don’t you rent one?”

“Why don’t I just take your ship?” said Phil, pushing his gun harder against Billy.

“Okay,” said Billy, backing away. “So, you know how to fly the ship without the distances?”

“Yes,” said Phil. Toby wondered how someone who didn’t even own a ship know how to do that.”

“It’s easy,” he said. “If we get lost we can just ask for directions in local measurements. I really don’t see why people are so afraid of converting different measurements.”

“You should go out more, then,” Billy muttered.

Phil pushed his gun against Billy once more. “Would you like to show me to your ship?” he asked.

“Sure,” said Billy. “But you’ll have to put the gun down.”

“Why’s that?” asked Phil angrily, pushing his gun even harder onto Billy’s head.

“Because....you don’t want to get caught in the parking lot pointing a gun at us, right?” Toby nervously suggested.

“Fine,” said Phil, sounding disappointed. He tossed the rifle into the corner of the room. It went off, and Toby and Billy screamed again. Phil reached down to Billy’s left ear. “What do normal people do?” he asked.

“What?” Billy shouted.

“What do normal people do?” Phil asked, irritated. “As you may remember, Shelly’s fired twice so far, and you two have been real whiners about it. What should we say if another tenant were to ask us what was going on?”

Billy wanted to comment on Phil naming his gun but didn’t dare to. “Well,” he said, “Maybe you could say that we’re rowdy kids and we’ve been smashing things in your room.”

“Good,” said Phil. “Let’s go.”

As they left Toby looked at the rifle in the corner, tempted to grab it. *I don’t think that Jimmy would approve of that*, he thought to himself. He regretted having an imaginary friend. *Wait a minute*, he thought, *where is Jimmy?* Toby felt a little bit a panic, but assured himself that Jimmy must be safely tucked away in his mind. After all, like Phil said, he only partially existed inside Toby’s mind. Toby shook his head. He had to get rid of this imaginary friend thing. He was starting to get worried about Jimmy!

“What lot did you park in?” Phil asked, still speaking in English.

“Well,” said Billy, opening the slum apartment door for the other two, “I think we parking in row ten, and some

column between six and seven. It's going to take a while to get there."

"Row ten?" repeated Phil. "We can get there easily from here! It's lucky that you parking there."

"Not really," said Billy, wondering to himself how a person who didn't own a ship could know the parking area so well, "We were attacked by a mime getting there."

"Yeah, they're bad," said Phil. "That's why I always carry Shelly."

"Don't worry," said Billy, "If anything gets out of hand we can always use an anti-mime."

"An anti-mime? Those are hard to come by now. I don't know where they all went. I suppose that a Gotithian like you would have to have one, though."

"What do you mean, 'Gotithian like me'?" Billy asked, hoping that Phil hadn't somehow figured out that he was Roy's appointed heir of the Universe.

"Well, you're a certain type of Gotithian," said Phil.

Billy was relieved. "What kind is that?"

"Oh, you know," Phil said, "Living."

Toby laughed. Billy hit him. Toby wished again that Jimmy was with him. He really seemed to have a problem.

"Well," Phil said, "What did I tell you? We're already at row ten! So, which ship is yours?"

Billy looked around the bottom of each of the different stacks of ten ships. "Um, there," he said, pointing to the beaten up hot pink Jiggy Gas Piggy.

Phil tried to suppress a laugh. "Sorry, it's just that I've never seen a ship so beaten up before."

"It is sort of bad," said Billy. "But it's better than your ship."

“I suppose,” Phil said. “Opened the door.”

Billy pulled a key out of his button and pressed a button. The hatch popped open. “What else do you know about the Universe?”

“What do you mean by ‘else’?”

“Well, you seem to know a lot about Mr. Parrot’s notebook, and you’re pretty good when it comes to explaining mimes,” said Billy flatteringly.

Phil chuckled a little. “You want to know about mimes? What I’ve just told is just the start! You’ll need to have some background information, though. What do you know about the universes?”

“I know that there are three of them,” said Toby, “This universe, the Dimension of Tuna, and the Dimension of Stupidity.”

“You left out the Pickle Universe,” said Phil said, “But otherwise you’re well learned in elementary teachings. I guess that’s pretty good for a human. What about you, Gotithian?”

“The Pickle Universe was created by Roy’s engineers misinformed on the code name of the project, so it’s not really a universe. The only real Universes are the Dimension of Tuna, the Dimension of Stupidity, and the Universe.” Billy stopped, but seeing that Phil was about to say something condescending to him too, he continued. “Also, Mr. Parrot was able to prove that all of existence is based on stupidity through the explanation of the creation of the three universes that he had also discovered. The Dimension of Stupidity is by far the most stupidly based universe of all the universes, so much so that the purple gas within it is able to bend most mathematical laws in this Universe, which allows

people to exceed the speed of light. Is any of this relevant to mimes?"

"Yes, you'll see," said Phil, "This information might seem a little trivial to you, but believe me, it'll be vital background information for the human over there. Oh, we should probably be flying now." Phil sat down at the beaten up control board. "Go on, Gotithian. I can concentrate."

"Okay," said Billy, beginning to like Phil, "Well, the two other ways that we can exceed the speed of light are through taking simple short cuts through a pickle jar to another pickle jar, and using tunamatism. Tunamatism is the fifth state of matter, after plasma and before stupidity, both of which aren't really states of matter."

"We don't need to know that," said Phil, writing calculations down on Billy's gold foil. Billy backed up a little.

"Anyway, tunamatic materials come from the Dimension of Tuna, and they can also bend the rules of the Universe, but we don't like to use the tunamatic highways much because the Cube People have control of them. The Cube People are a species that live in the Dimension of Tuna. They were once a normal species like any dominant species in this Universe, but their planet got so crowded that they had the choice of either enlarging their planet or making everything space efficient. The conservatives realized that to make the planet effectively space efficient it would take close to a totalitarian government. To protect their ideals, they objected to the idea, but the Boxers thought that it was the only solution that could last. In a way, they were right, since the Gotithians tried to enlarge Gotithia millions of years later and the result was gravity so strong that any Gotithian that

grew up there grew up to become incredibly short. Anyway, there was a war over it, and the conservatives won, but while the Peg government – the Pegs were the name of the pre-cubed species there – was out trying to conquer the Universe, the Boxers rose up again and managed to squeeze the planet and everything in it into a cube. In a way, though, that became how the Universe was first unified, since Willy Lemoniod was leading the defense against the Pegs and with the Pegs gone and the rest of the Universe still on his side he could effectively rule the Universe.”

Phil sighed. “Please stick to the scientific matters of the universes. Don’t keep falling into history.”

“Okay,” said Billy, “I don’t know anything else, then.”

Phil shook his head. “What do they teach in schools nowadays? Okay, let me go from there. I’ve pretty much got the ship on course. There’s just a little stop we’re going to have to do for gas. We might be able to do that on Diarama.”

“All right,” said Billy. “What else is there about the universes and mimes?”

“Well, there’s creation itself. Let’s just keep it short and say that with nothing but nothingness there’s an infinite amount of nothing, and nothing is a certain amount of mass, and with an infinite amount of nothingness there’s an infinite amount of that mass, therefore forming a black hole. Black holes have the funny characteristic of creating something out of nothing – it may not make any sense but it’s been proven mathematically, so you could assume that it’s true.” Toby and Billy nodded. Phil continued. “A particle and an anti-particle can partner together out of nowhere since algebraically the pair is still equal to nothing. You know, it’s like x and negative x . So, with that in mind, we can say that

there are perhaps infinite amounts of those bits of technical nothingness floating around the black hole, and occasionally the one of the particles will fall into the event horizon, thereby making the other particle suddenly exist.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” interrupted Toby.

“Why’s that?” asked Phil and Billy at the same time.

“If there’s no space, just infinite amounts of nothingness, there can’t be an event horizon.”

“But nothingness doesn’t need space,” Phil said, “and once some of the nothingness falls into the black hole, perhaps by pure chance, couldn’t it be safely said that since the newly made particle exists, it can be out of the event horizon by definition?”

“That won’t work,” said Toby, a bit braver around Phil now that he didn’t have his “Shelly”, “The newly made particle needs space.”

“Not if it’s on the black hole,” countered Phil.

“What?”

“What if the particle was on the event horizon and it was stretched all around it?”

“I don’t know much about black holes. Maybe.”

“Anyway, there can be an infinite amount of these particles, since each particle is really made from nothingness. Therefore, we can say that there are infinite particles and the same number of anti-particles, considering the laws of probability. Also, if we were to say that all of the particles are stretched around the event horizon that doesn’t really exist we can say they’re all in the same place. If they’re all in the same place, we can say that they’re colliding. What happens when a particle collides with an anti-particle? There’s an explosion. Well, this explosion was infinitely

large. However, an infinitely large explosion doesn't really have much place to go in a not-world consisting of nothing, so we could say that something had to be made from it all in order for the explosion to destroy it. Within the boundaries of probability, that seems very possible."

"So you're saying that the Universe was made to be destroyed, and that explosion was the big bang?"

Phil nodded. "We're what are left of what was destroyed in that explosion. Rather, we're what are left of what *wasn't* destroyed in that explosion, since nothing really existed then." He stopped, waiting for Toby to sink it all in.

"Go on," Toby said.

"The final question that remains," said Phil a bit darkly, "Is: where'd all that nothing not go? I say 'not go' since nothing can really move. That is, the substance of nothing. Nothingness....whatever. Let's just say for now that 'nothing' is a piece of matter so that you can understand this."

"Okay," said Billy.

"So, where would this nothing go or not go? Existence is the opposite of nothing, and it is based on stupidity. Therefore, we can say that existence is stupid, and nothing is smart. If nothing is smart, then it would want to get away from the idiots. Sorry, I'm personifying a little too much. Let me put it this way: Nothing would need to escape the Universe, since by definition it can not not-exist with existence around. There's nothingness in the Universe and in the other universes, to be sure, but none of that nothingness can compare to the infinite amounts of nothingness that didn't exist before existence existed. Some less intelligent people argue that that infinite amount of nothingness stopped

not existing when the Universe started existing, but I don't believe that's true. You cannot lose infinite amounts of anything unless you negate it with infinite amounts of its opposite. I explained to you in the apartment building why it's impossible for there to be infinite amounts of existence, so it's only fair to conclude that the infinite amounts of nothingness have to be out there somewhere, just not where we can see it. That seems to be where the mimes are getting all of the things that they are able to conjure up out of nowhere: what I call the Dimension of Nothingness."

"Nothing makes sense!" Toby exclaimed, but Billy was a little more skeptical.

"How can the nothingness, which is the opposite of existence, leave existence? It's a law of nature that opposites attract, or that at least there has to be equilibrium."

"Immediate equilibrium?" asked Phil.

"No, but it'll happen eventually," said Billy a little less confident.

"Exactly," said Phil. "It will happen in time. Things will be destroyed, and when they are they will join nothing in the Dimension of Nothingness."

"That can't be true," said Billy, "There's a basic law of physics that states that no mass or energy can be created or destroyed."

"But there is another that says that matter is not always in existence, it always pops in and out of it."

"But it'll always come back. It has to," said Billy.

"Not necessarily," said Phil, "Besides, that law only covers the fact that matter cannot cease to exist. Well, it does exist in the Dimension of Nothingness."

Billy was stumped. “Well, I guess there could be a Dimension of Nothingness.”

“It’s probably the best explanation for things such as mimes and anti-mimes and imaginary friends,” said Phil seriously.

“Hey!” exclaimed Toby. “I thought you said that imaginary friends only existed in the mind!”

“That’s true,” said Phil, “But just as I said, things are constantly popping in and out of existence. If there is indeed a Dimension of Nothingness it would make the most sense for the matter to be actually going into the Dimension of Nothingness, which still abides by the law of conservation of mass. The imaginary friend is just an idea, and ideas are representations of patterns in the brain. If your brain is constantly popping in and out of the Dimension of Nothingness, wouldn’t it be possible for the pattern to be copied in the Dimension of Nothingness? If it could, then that would mean that your imaginary friend can also have some kind of existence within the Dimension of Nothingness, too. I have a feeling that things from there are manifesting themselves in the Universe. I think that that’s what mimes are. There’s no place in the Universe where mimes could have come from. We would have surely noticed such strange creatures if there was.”

“Hey!” exclaimed Billy, “The movements in and out of the Dimension of Nothingness are random. How could the mime manifest itself into the Universe without popping out of it again at a random time?”

Phil smiled. “I’m glad that you’re now acknowledging the existence of the Dimension of Nothingness. You’re right. The random popping in and out of the Universe and

Dimension of Nothingness would mean that there would have to be mimes randomly disappearing. Since we've never seen that happen, it would have to be assumed that they are coming in and out voluntarily, most likely from one particular source, the way I reasoned it. What do you know about The Big Brain?"

Toby perked up. "My uncle Tony went into The Big Brain!" he exclaimed.

"How?" Phil asked, interested. "I believe your story, it has become a common tale in the Universe, but nobody's actually been able to explain how."

"Well," began Toby, "Tony had a turkey friend named Gabriele – he was named that because he gobbled a lot, despite the fact that he was a male turkey. When he didn't like the name, a PufferFish suggested that he changed his gender, so he agreed to the same – who wanted to find out what his brother's secret about Roy and Simon was. The secret was that Roy and Simon were half brothers, but that's not important. Gabriele wanted to find out the secret, and he couldn't get it eavesdropping on Goober – that's his brother's name – so he decided to take a chance with going into The Big Brain. Tony was afraid, because The Big Brain is a brain that's so big that it's actually inside a black hole, and the black hole is so strong that not even gravity can escape it! The only gravity that escaped was the gravity that was made when The Big Brain was created, and it is a pattern that causes you to hear "I would like a tuna sandwich and a diet cola" before you die! People think that The Big Brain was once the brain of a customer of the El Tuna Café, who was transported across the Universe." Phil looked at Toby as if he didn't need to know what The Big Brain was.

“So, anyway, Tony was really scared of The Big Brain, but Gabriele told him that there was nothing to worry about. He was right, since apparently black holes have no ending, and you’ll be sucked into it for eternity. Well, the inside of the black hole was colored, and there was a voice that talked to them. Gabriele found out what he wanted to know, and also that Simon was planning to attack the El Tuna Café, but he couldn’t leave because The Big Brain wanted their company. Gabriele tricked The Big Brain by asking him to simulate the Universe for them, and The Big Brain did. Since the inside of The Big Brain was now virtually gravity-free, Gabriele was able to fly out.”

“So that’s how it happened,” said Phil. “Well, we’ll need to be making a stop to refuel soon. We’re approaching Diarama. Gotithian, do you have any money?”

“All I have is a pocketful of Margusean currency. I do have some wood, though.”

“Get that,” said Phil.

Billy reached towards a cabinet at the bottom of the control board and unlocked it with a key attached on the outside. He tore off a small splinter of wood and handed it along with the rest of the little golden scarabs to Phil. “That should be enough,” he said. “Now, what’s the connection between mimes and The Big Brain?”

“Remember how I said that since the Universe is based on stupidity, nothing must be smart? Well, The Big Brain is incredibly intelligent. I was thinking, what if The Big Brain was the gateway between the Universe and the Dimension of Nothing?”

“How could that happen?” said Billy. “How could an innocent guy standing in the El Tuna Café turn into the

gateway between the Universe and the Dimension of Nothing? Probability?"

"It could have happened randomly," said Phil. "But it seems that mimes came into being a little too closely to the creation of The Big Brain for that. I suspect that there's something behind it."

"That's ridiculous," said Billy.

"Worse, it's *possible*," Phil said, "Suppose someone were to figure out what I did. What if the Cube People were able to force open the Dimension of Nothing? The Cube People, Dave and the Pious Presleytarians are the only groups that have mimes. If someone were behind it, then it would explain why those particular groups would be the ones that have control of the mimes."

"But the Cube People are just machines," protested Billy, "They can only improve pre-existing ideas taken from the Universe. Plus, there were no Presleytarians when The Big Brain existed."

"Then Dave has control of the mimes," he said. "Maybe he was trying to overthrow Roy."

"By the way," Toby butted in, "Where'd you get all of this information?"

"From a book that I always carry with me," said Phil. "I have a feeling that mimes could be the most important thing that has or ever will happen to the Universe." Toby couldn't hold a laugh in. "But it's true!" Phil exclaimed. "Mimes are the main way to exploit the nothing within the Dimension of Nothing. Nothing is so powerful it could destroy the Universe!"

"I'm even more confused now," said Billy. "If the mimes can harness power from the Dimension of Nothing,

couldn't it be that they can get themselves into the Universe voluntarily?"

"Just read this book," said Phil, pulling a small paperback book out of his pant pocket and handing it to Billy. Billy looked at the book.

"The Power of Nothing, by Bob Rednow," said Billy out loud. Phil nodded.

"Please be quiet now, I have to land the ship," Phil said turning to the control board and notebook of gold foil.

Billy opened up the book to the table of contents. He browsed them quickly, muttering in Gotithian to himself. "Most of these Phil's already talked about," he said in English. "Oh, listen to this: chapter 13: the sound of silence."

"That's a good one," Phil said, then returned to his calculations.

Toby was listening hopefully for something interesting, but Billy just sat there reading. "Don't worry," he said looking up at Toby, "I'll summarize and translate it for you after I read it."

"We're landing," said Phil. "There's a gas station marked on the screen."

Phil landed the ship after a few more calculations. He opened the hatch and stepped outside. He saw a Space Monkey gas attendant and greeted him in Gotithian, showing the splinter of wood that Billy gave him. Toby watched. It looked like the two of them were negotiating how much gas Phil could get for the wood and the foreign currency. Toby was disappointed that he didn't know Gotithian.

"Billy, do you think that you could teach me Gotithian?" Toby asked Billy, whose face was in the book.

“Not now, I’ll tell you about the chapter soon,” said Billy.

Toby waited patiently. After a few minutes, he lost his patience. He looked outside to the two Space Monkeys. They were still negotiating.

“Okay, Toby, I’m finished with the chapter,” said Billy, shutting the book. “It’s a little strange. Basically it says that since it’s mathematically possible to have nothing with matter – you know, a pair of a particle and an anti-particle – it’s possible to make sound out of nothing. Some crazy mathematician from Tapioca calculated probabilities for movements in these pairs of particles and how they would strike each other, the probability of an explosion, and the probability of this happening in a medium for sound like an atmosphere. In places like an atmosphere there is too much interference for the same patterns to be possible, so the exact same sound as in silence is impossible. This guy stuck a bunch of equipment onto the event horizon of The Big Brain to ‘record’ the movements of these pairs of particles and then ran a computer simulation of the particles movements relative to the movements of particles striking on say, a keyboard, and the differences in pitch. From all of that he finally concluded that the sound of silence is something like, ‘Yo, yo,’ in a soft melodic tone.”

“What are the odds of that?” asked Toby.

“He warned the scientific community that his recording equipment had messed with the actual movements of the particles and that he was estimating what the particles would move like without the recording equipment based on what he finally received from the recording equipment.”

“So, basically this guy got everything wrong?”

“He said that more research was needed, but died before it could be done. It shouldn’t be surprising that no one else actually investigated the topic.”

Toby shook his head. “What exactly is Tapioca? A planet? Are Tapiocans a species?”

“Yes to the last two questions,” said Billy. “Tapioca was a pretty advanced planet, but Simon destroyed it when he was trying to scare Roy into surrender.”

“It’s a little weird that two brothers were killing billions of people fighting each other like that,” Toby muttered.

“Hey, you know what they say, it all starts with a brotherly quarrel.”

Toby turned back to the outside. Phil had finally negotiated with the gas attendant, who was grabbing a clear tank of some purple gas. “The Universe has turned out to be nothing like what I expected.”

“What’d you expect?” asked Billy.

“I don’t know,” admitted Toby.

“I guess that’s why it didn’t turn out that way,” said Billy. He returned to the book.

Phil came into the ship and slammed the hatch shut. “Raise the ship,” he said in a panicked voice.

“What’s wrong,” asked Billy, sticking the book into his pocket.

“The gas attendant didn’t believe my story. He saw the two of you, and he’s going to report us. Let’s go!” Phil said to them, although the last part was unnecessary since he was raising the ship himself.

“How much longer will it be until we get Mr. Parrot’s notebook?” Toby asked.

“Things are going well so far,” said Phil. “I asked the attendant what the latest news was on the destruction of the asteroid. The Diaraman government has been ordered to install a new asteroid for the El Tuna Café to orbit, but they can’t agree on where they put it and are still squabbling on how they plan to get to the El Tuna Café, and when exactly, since time is pretty messed up. We still have time.”

“How much time?” Toby asked.

“What?” asked Phil. “Oh. I didn’t mean it that way, but we probably have a good, oh, maybe thirty Earth minutes to get there, find the notebook and get back.”

“You’re good at math,” said Billy. “I don’t see how you could calculate that in your head.”

“Thirty minutes!” exclaimed Toby. “That’s not long enough!”

“Sure it is,” said Phil, “It should only take twenty minutes from here to get there.”

“That only leaves ten minutes to find the notebook and leave before we’re detected!”

“Remember that that’s just a padded estimate,” said Phil reassuringly. “Besides, I’ve got a good idea on where it is.”

“Where?” asked Toby.

“Well, as you should know from your uncle Tony,” started Phil, “Roy used the Squeenburg in an attempt to destroy the El Tuna Café and everyone in it. The Squeenburg was able to create a new universe temporarily, and now the El Tuna Café is just an old shell of what it was with a giant void inside it. The void has to have a hole in it, otherwise it

would have been registered by officials as a new universe. If we can get inside the void we can get Mr. Parrot's notebook."

"How are we supposed to get a little notebook inside a void....how big is it?"

Phil thought a little. "Well, judging by the size of the Squeenburg relative to Earth's moon, Earth's moon relative to Earth, and the Squeenburg relative to the El Tuna Café, I would say it's about, oh, half the size of Earth."

"Half the size of Earth?" said Toby loudly. "Half the size of Earth? We can't look through a void half of Earth's volume and expect to find a teensy notebook!"

"It's not half the Earth's volume," said Phil. "Voids made the way that one was are normally in a cone shape. You know, the void starts from one point and grows outward from there, while the beginning is pushed down. Mr. Parrot was one of the first people to go when Roy went over the edge. We can make our way down to the bottom of the void and then search in an easy area. Mr. Parrot's not that hard to miss. Well, maybe he is. I don't know how hard the vortex was when the void was created."

"Well then how are we so sure that Mr. Parrot's notebook is even around anymore?"

"I think that there's a good chance that it's around," said Phil. "If we can't find it within ten minutes I suppose that we'll have to leave, but it's always worth a shot to get a payoff that big."

"You don't sound so sure," said Toby. Phil ignored him, leaving Toby to his own thoughts. He really wondered what would happen next in the Universe, if they would find Mr. Parrot's notebook or if they were going to be caught and

imprisoned by Diaraman soldiers or if he was going to meet Jimmy or something incredibly strange. He also wondered if Phil was going to betray them when they found Mr. Parrot's notebook or something else a psychopath like him would do. He also wondered what other sort of things he would discover in the Universe. He had already discovered Jimmy partially existed, that there was a chance of a Dimension of Nothing, that oxygen bars in the Universe charged you for breathing, that infinity meant that everything had to be the same and that the El Tuna Café was half the size of Earth.

“Why’s the El Tuna Café half the size of Earth? I thought that it was a restaurant.”

“It was a restaurant,” said Phil, “But when Roy stole the Universe from Mr. Parrot while he was temporarily a pure parrot Roy figured that he might was well administer the Universe from the El Tuna Café. Naturally the El Tuna Café would have to be bigger than the tiny restaurant that it was.”

“But why would the El Tuna Café have to be *that* big? Half the volume of Earth’s is a lot.”

“Well, there were a lot of things that that space was being used for. For one thing, the offices of all the administered planets in the Universe had to be there, and most of the scientific research was being done in the capital. There was also the arsenal that was being kept in the case of a massive invasion by the Cube People. But I guess you’re right, that still doesn’t account for that much space. My theory is that most of it was used for Ba-ing-go beams.”

“Ba-ing-go?”

“It’s a Peg term,” explained Phil. “When a metal comes into contact with the purple gas from the Dimension

of Stupidity, it becomes baingatized. Ba-ing-go is incredibly strong, and mostly used in place of steel for support beams. It's also used in ships like this one; although the metal here is so low quality if I were less of an expert I would mistake it for Horsium."

Toby didn't bother to ask what Horsium was. "But why would the El Tuna Café need to have that much Ba-ing-go?"

"To hold up the building, obviously."

"But there's no gravity," said Toby.

"The El Tuna Café produces its own gravity."

"But that's only because it's so big!"

"Yes, and since it's so big it needs to use the space for Ba-ing-go support beams!" Phil exclaimed. "I won't carry this discussion any further. The El Tuna Café is coming up."

Toby and Billy looked up onto the screen. They were going slower than the speed of light again so that Phil could dive the ship down into the funnel shaped void.

"How much area will we have to inspect?" Toby asked.

"Shut up!" Phil barked. The funnel was getting tighter around the ship. Toby also wanted to ask how they would dig through the void in case they needed to in order to get out, but he didn't dare to.

Five more minutes passed by in silence. Phil had to stop before the walls of the void started crushing the ship.

"There's not much time left before the Diaraman army should arrive with the new asteroid," Phil said. "Once they've got that in there's no chance that we can get out. The two of you make the most of this time searching while I point

this ship outwards. I suspect that you don't have spacesuits in my size anyway."

Billy nodded. "Good idea. Toby, the space suits are in the laundry room." Toby chuckled, partially because he remembered how the day had started but mainly because he was nervous about going into open space for the first time. He didn't want to seem scared, though. It was likely that people in the Universe used space suits all the time and the technology in them was extremely advanced.

Billy lifted a space suit out of a closet in the laundry room and tossed it over to Toby. It looked a lot like a space suit on Earth, but it was a two piece suit (for convenience) and the top part of it had room for horns. It was obviously made for Gotithians. "It seems a little heavy," Toby complained.

"Don't worry about it," said Billy. "That's just because there's the El Tuna Café's gravity plus the simulated gravity in this ship. Surely you've noticed it?"

Toby nodded and put the suit on. They didn't have any time to talk. Billy did the same, and they hastily made their way out of the ship, though Toby wished that Billy had taken the time to check that Toby had put it on right.

Phil began backing up the ship, the light of which reminded Billy and Toby to turn on their headlights. As the light of the Jiggy Gas Piggy faded away with Phil's turning it around, they began their search.

The walls of the void were gruesome; with traces of soldiers (dead ones, too) sticking out of the compacted rubble of what was once the capital of the Universe. The walls of the cone shaped void were perfectly smooth with the compacted rubble, making Toby wonder how they were ever

going to dig anything out. Toby looked down further into the void and groaned. There were so many places to look in, and so little time.

“Don’t feel bad, Toby,” said Billy over a radio that Toby didn’t know that the space suits had. Toby looked down at Billy and saw the radio speaker. “Phil’s watching out for any signs of an approaching Diaraman army. We shouldn’t worry about the time. That’ll only make our search less efficient.” Billy turned back to continue searching the walls of the void.

“We need a process, though,” said Toby, making his way down the steep slope of the void’s ground. “What area should we cover, and how should we manage it? Plus, how are we going to dig?”

Billy looked up at Toby. “We should only cover maybe....I have no clue how much distance exactly. Maybe only from here to halfway down to the bottom of the cone, and that same distance up.”

“How are we supposed to do that with the Jiggy Gas Piggy in the way?” Toby demanded.

“Phil’s hearing this,” Billy said, “He’s moving upwards.”

Toby looked up. “Good.” All of the sudden, the ship flashed out of the void.

Roy and Simon

Both Roy and Simon trembled with fear. Their dive into the vortex of the El Tuna Café to save their mother had ended up with them being frozen for an unknown amount of time, and now they had been revived in the future. They didn't know how far into the future, or how the Universe had ended up in that time. All that they knew was that they were tied to chairs in someone's office with blindfolds over their eyes, but there was no explanation for why.

“Are you ready to interrogate them, sir?” a voice asked from another room.

“No, can’t you see that I’m interrogating someone else? He hasn’t responded, but he’s got to break at some time.”

“That’s a painting, sir.”

“Is it? Oh, I should have known. I haven’t been getting any sleep for a while. Those kids at the Presleytarian Academy are really rebellious, you know. I’ll have to take another pill, then.” There was the sound of a desk drawer sliding open and a bottle being twisted open.

“I know about the academy. You told me about them when we were negotiating how to deal with Roy and Simon. Don’t you remember?”

“Really? What’d we agree on?”

“That I’d take Roy and Simon.”

“We didn’t agree on that!”

“How do you know?”

“I don’t remember agreeing to something like that.”

“You were just interrogating a painting.”

“Well, I trust my judgment on this one.”

“You were just interrogating a painting.”

“Well, maybe you’d like to interrogate the painting, eh? I’m taking Roy and Simon, no questions asked.”

“No! I need to take them!”

“Why? Didn’t you pay them off?”

“Of course I paid them off! But that’s not the point.”

“You want revenge?”

“Yes.”

“That’s sort of useless, isn’t it? I’ve got a real reason to use them.”

“We’ve already discussed this! Your use is useless.”

“Roy and Simon could be perfect examples of how Presleytarianism is in everyone’s hearts! Didn’t I tell you that earlier? Isn’t that good enough reason for me to take them?”

“If they’re poster boys you’ll only need them for a little while. Just brainwash them and send them over to the academy, then give them back to me!”

“You seem skeptical about my plan.”

“I’ve never really liked Presleytarianism.”

“What’s wrong with my plan?”

There was a grunt. “The point of the argument is that if Presleytarianism is really the divine truth it should have been known before now. It should have been known in Roy’s time.”

“But don’t they see that would make life meaningless? Don’t they see that immediately knowing the truth will prevent them from appreciating it?”

“Go discuss that with your theology class. I’m only interested in having Roy and Simon eventually.”

“Fine, you can have them when I’m done with them.”

“When will that be?”

“I’m not sure. It really depends on how this thing works.”

“I got them out of the ground. Why shouldn’t I get them? Because some Gotithian in a funny hat can’t teach religion?”

“Because I have the bigger army,” the Gotithian said gruffly. “Now if you’ll excuse me I’m going to go have a word with them on the current situation.”

“Where are they, anyway?”

“In that closest, tied in chairs and blindfolded.”

“Why did you do that?”

“I don’t really know..... I need to get more sleep.”

Roy and Simon heard a doorknob being turned and felt a flood of light. “Do whatever you’d like. I’ll be going now,” said the gruff non-Gotithian voice.

The blindfolds were pulled off. Standing in front of them was a fat bearded Gotithian who was wearing a strange hat that was supposed to – though Roy and Simon did not know it – shape the wearer’s hair into the hairstyle of The King.

“Who are you?” Roy demanded boldly, despite being afraid. His reign had made him act that way no matter what situation he was in. Simon, on the other hand, had lived in exile Roy’s million year reign and was silent more often.

“I’m WonderClaus, the head and founder of the True Presleytarian Church,” the fat Gotithian said with a happy bleat.

“What’s that?” Roy asked next. “Why do you want us for it?”

“It’s the truth, of course! I need the two of you to prove a point and shut up the young skeptics at my academy.”

“So, it’s a religion?” asked Roy, a little confused. “Religion’s spread? How long has it been since the battle at the El Tuna Café?”

“Oh, almost a million years now,” said WonderClaus.

“Only? How did religion spread so quickly?”

“I managed to get a few members of the Gotithian Republic to convert, and they did most of the converting business.”

“Is the Gotithian Republic still in power?” Roy asked, remembering WonderClaus mention having an army.

“No,” said WonderClaus solemnly. “I don’t think you’ll want to know how that happened, though.”

“Of course I want to know!” exclaimed Roy. Simon cringed. He hoped that Roy didn’t anger the hulking Gotithian.

“Let me untie you,” said WonderClaus, who bent down to Roy’s chair.

“Stop avoiding the subject! What happened to the Gotithian Republic?”

“If you keep this up I’m not going to untie you.”

“Then don’t untie me,” Roy said stubbornly.

“You can untie me,” Simon suggested.

WonderClaus sighed. “Okay, maybe you’re going to need to find out anyway. The Gotithian race is extinct.”

“What! Not in a million years!” Roy exclaimed.

“Yes, in only a million years,” WonderClaus said gravely. “Pudding got them. Someone contaminated the pudding with some virus engineered to take out Gotithians

and the virus quickly spread. The remainder of the Gotithian population is being hunted down. The only Gotithians that are known are males. The Gotithian race is gone.”

“Pudding? How could this have happened?” Roy asked despairingly.

“There have been virus attacks before, if you remember,” WonderClaus said. “It’s just that we didn’t have anything to stop them. All of Mr. Parrot’s knowledge of Gotithian immunity is gone forever.”

“The other thing that I want to know: who got us?”

WonderClaus sighed again. “Loothpit organized the thing.”

“Loothpit?” exclaimed Simon. Roy was speechless. Loothpit was the most advanced Moose-that-looks-like-a-turtle, a species of hardy turtle like creatures the size of moose in black shells coated with the Dimension of Stupidity’s purple gas. They are the only animal able to exceed the speed of light naturally, as a result, and are fearsome in other ways, too. Loothpit is the only one that can talk, but most of them are very intelligent and have sharp retractable antlers and, for some unknown reason, claws. They are in the same family as the mosquito thanks to how dangerous of pests they are. Roy had taken Mr. Parrot’s position as ruler of the Universe peacefully – he didn’t give up the position of power Mr. Parrot gave him while he had to be away due to parrot-related problems – and so Mr. Parrot had still been alive and well when Roy wanted him to make a tranquilizer for the species so that he could capture Loothpit. Loothpit was captured, and the Moose-that-looks-like-a-turtle species lost the only one who could keep them together as one swarm. Roy gained a lot of respect for the feat, and he

wanted to keep it by keeping Loothpit and showing him off rather than killing him. He kept Loothpit in a large pit in the El Tuna Café that was surrounded by moose tranquilizer dart guns, and Loothpit stayed there until a suicide PufferFish bomber blew himself up in the kitchens. The explosion was enough to disable the dart guns and Loothpit made a hasty escape. It suddenly made complete sense to Roy why the creature talking to WonderClaus wanted to have revenge.

“Is it possible for you to....not give us back to Loothpit?” asked Simon.

“We’ll cooperate with you,” said Roy. “We’ll do anything you say.”

“I’m not expecting that from you,” said WonderClaus. “The kids in the theology class are too smart for that. You’re going to have to present your actual beliefs.”

“Then you’re just going to turn us over to Loothpit when that doesn’t work out for you!”

“Or it could be an example to others of what non-believers do,” said WonderClaus. “Imagine what they’ll be thinking when they finally realize that infidels fight their own brothers and end up frozen at the bottom of a hole for a million years!”

“But not all infidels do that,” said Roy angrily. He stood up, knowing that WonderClaus had finished untying him.

“But surely you believe that only someone without set morals and values would do such a thing?” asked WonderClaus as he reached to untie Simon.

“You’re saying that people are naturally malevolent? I think that’ll actually make your argument for Presleytarianism worse!”

“Why’s that?” asked WonderClaus softly.

“Because....well, assuming your religion has an omni benevolent god....”

“You could call The King that,” said WonderClaus.

“Yes, so if it does have an omni benevolent god, why would he make malevolent beings?”

“He didn’t,” said WonderClaus. “People have the choice of doing wrong or right.”

“If they’re going to do the wrong thing without religion, I think that they’ve got a predetermined choice of actions,” said Roy.

“Of course!” exclaimed WonderClaus. Simon stood up now. “Every species in the Universe has personality characteristics!”

“If they have predetermined characteristics, then they’ve got no choice,” said Simon. “They’re going to act based on how they have been programmed to think.”

“That’s only partially true,” said WonderClaus. “The mind is flexible. We can get over everything with enough effort.”

“Who has the effort? Presleytarians?”

“No, whoever wills to get what he, she, or it wants.”

“Yet wants are set into the personality characteristics of a creature,” retorted Roy. “So willing your way into your goal is impossible. Every want must be given by the environment, so even if will exists, it isn’t free. It comes from what’s going on around you.”

WonderClaus smiled. “You still admit that people have a choice?”

Roy shook his head. “People prioritize what they want more – whether they want to break their Snuff Puffa

addiction or want to continue is according to how their brains function. If their brain ravaged too much by the addiction they can acquire the preference of not having the drug, and then stop.”

“Well,” WonderClaus said, still smiling. “That doesn’t really seem like much of an argument, now does it? You’ve been saying in all of your arguments exactly what I’ve been saying: the environment shapes the decisions but the wants can override those decisions.”

“No, I’m saying that wants are overridden by the environment,” Roy snapped. “Your mind produces your wants, and your mind is shaped by the environment. If you think that it’s too much trouble to change, then you won’t, because your want to change is overridden by the want to avoid work. If, however, you see success stories of those who have changed and believe that you can achieve what they did, your want is changed. The changes in your wants and feelings are created by external stimulus, and people will always follow the path that they believe will bring them the greatest pleasure, no matter how you define pleasure. Since you are following your feelings, and not someone else’s commands, though, you believe that you are making your own choices. That’s why prisons work. They change people’s priorities by punishing those who break the law. That’s also why religions work. If free will truly existed as you say it does there would be no need for religion. People would do good on their own because they would have the choice every time to override temptations.”

“That’s nonsense!” WonderClaus exclaimed. “People need external suggestions in order to have free will! Otherwise they would be slavishly following instincts!”

“And yet with those suggestions you can’t have free will, because your decisions are based on those suggestions. It’s impossible.”

Simon could see what WonderClaus was doing but kept his mouth shut.

“If free will doesn’t exist, then wouldn’t that just reinforce my argument that religion makes people better, more moral people?”

“If that’s your definition of religion,” said Roy. “That instead of a system of beliefs, then maybe. However, religious people tend to hide away in their emotions instead of looking at bare facts, and then when the situation changes and religions have to adapt, they stick their emotions to the church. What happens when the church is wrong, then? Then people’s emotions are wrong, and they make the wrong moral choices! Therefore, logic is a better means of getting things done right and since religion clouds logic it’s a bad thing.”

WonderClaus laughed. “I’ve heard so many of you say things like that! I’ve always agreed that logic is the best way to solve things, but let’s look at this logically for once! Logic has to have roots and basic principles, right? Where do you get those basic principles? You can’t use math or statistics or cause-and-effect analysis for that. You can’t decide whether or not to kill a person or even whether or not to punish a person for killing a person without knowing that killing a person is bad. How do you know that killing a person is bad? There’s no space-time curve spelling out ‘don’t kill people’ other than the one that Mr. Parrot made out of asteroids! You have to use emotions and basic human instinct. It’s instinctive to have a religion, as far as I’m concerned,

otherwise religion would have never popped up. Religion uses basic human instinct, and consulting religion is just returning to your roots to make a decision!"

"Once again you're saying that it takes religion to make good decisions," said Roy. "Religion could not have formed without instincts guiding them, as you just said. The religion is not guiding, it's the goodness of the being."

"If the goodness of the being is inspired by the divine, then the religious would be the ones more correct!"

"Religion has nothing to do with correctness," said Roy. "Let's just say that there was some sort of religion that was completely correct. Well, people in it would corrupt it for their own purposes, as we've already agreed nobody has the will to prevent himself from doing what will be the most satisfying. Some people will try to defend it, and the religion will split. The religion will continue splitting and getting more and more wrong."

"That doesn't answer my statement that the divine can make those who are faithful correct more correct than those who aren't," said WonderClaus.

"But why would the divine only help those who are faithful?" said Roy coldly. "If the divine was omni benevolent, and there is no such thing as free will, then you have to agree that the divine would want to give the best information to everyone."

"The information is not accepted by those who don't want to hear it," said WonderClaus.

Roy opened his mouth to protest but couldn't say anything to that. He decided to attack another part of theism. "Those who want to hear it are obviously the ones who

belong in the right religion. But how do you know which religion is correct?"

"Besides," added in Simon, "Wouldn't the divine make itself clear what's correct?"

"Not if the meaning of life is to learn," said WonderClaus. "If people have to be gradually going towards the truth, but there is constant opposition, then people will appreciate the truth more and thus fully understand it."

"Then why are we wasting our time with religion?" Roy exclaimed. "We should be advancing other things! If the meaning of life is to learn, then what good would it do to sit around talking about the afterlife and who's holier? There's no logical process to it, it's a waste of time, and new discoveries are just going to force the holy men to change their ideas!"

"They'll change their ideas because new information is coming," said WonderClaus. "But if everyone's doing research and everyone's putting the data together, then what's the use of the data?"

Roy grunted again. "But the people who put together the data are always wrong, because the data is always incomplete. It's completely pointless to assemble the information because no matter what it'll have to be reassembled again. People would still want to cling to the old belief system, though. It's emotional."

"Of course!" WonderClaus said. "Don't you want to believe that The King is watching over you? Don't you want to believe that in the event that Willy Lemoniod's Afterlife is destroyed, you can still be conscious?"

"You can't believe anything by pure emotion," said Simon. "It's not a true belief, then. There's no choice when it

comes to believing. You either believe or you don't. We were once religious, but that all fell apart when we realized that. Too many people are clinging to religion because they're afraid of disappearing for eternity when they die or burning for eternity if they don't believe. That's a fake belief. I believe that Roy and I just were revived from the El Tuna Café and are facing the threat of Loothpit killing us even though I would much rather believe that I'm sitting safely in a mansion. I can't delude myself into thinking that I'm sitting in a mansion because I don't see any evidence that I'm safe in a mansion. I do, however, know that I plunged into a vortex in the El Tuna Café and have been awoken because I woke up in a dark void. The rest I'm assuming because of the conversation I heard between you and Loothpit and I can believe that things that have happened without a system of order for the Universe."

WonderClaus nodded. "Let's go to the ship now, shall we?" he said in a seemingly fake sad voice. Simon had a feeling of what was coming, and Roy was beginning to piece it together. They had been interrogated by WonderClaus without even realizing it and WonderClaus had been making mental notes of their arguments. It was probably all part of some master plan to teach the rebels in the theology academy a lesson. Simon still thought that WonderClaus didn't like the way that he and Roy had attacked him. If they wanted to survive they would have to go along better with WonderClaus.

Roy had other ideas. He figured that something bad might happen to him if he escaped, but that didn't really matter since WonderClaus had no reason other than to use Roy and Simon for the sake of his arguments and once that

was over for diplomatic purposes he would hand them back to Loothpit. He decided that escaping would be the best way out. The question was, how? He might need to ask a few questions to WonderClaus to find out. "WonderClaus," he began, trying not to sound hesitant.

"Yes?"

"What exactly is the Presleytarian Academy like?" he asked, figuring that they would be going to the academy.

"It has the most important people of the next generation," said WonderClaus. "That is, it has the descendants of the most important people of the post-Roy era. We've got the children of several businessmen in Diarama, the head of the main gold synthesizer, a few cockroach warlords, for a while we had the child of the oyster magnate Jim Bob...."

"How's the oyster business going these days?" Roy asked. Jim Bob was an old friend of his and he was hoping to find out about him so that he could possibly get his help.

"Not so good," WonderClaus said. "There was a great harvest, but too much competition. The attack on Diarama also stunted growth in that industry, so few people were willing to buy the oysters, even at prices half as high as they normally are. Worse yet, there are even fewer people willing to buy preserved oysters. The stock of oysters is a quarter its value and it keeps dropping. Thousands lost their jobs. Jim Bob's done by far the worst. He got over confident and bought practically all of Oystia on credit. He couldn't even pay the interest on the loan because a band of oyster pirates bombed his headquarters and stole millions of pounds of oysters to sell on the black market."

“Did you say that there are cockroach warlords?” Simon asked. The price of oysters wasn’t really on his mind as much.

“Yes,” said WonderClaus. “The cockroaches make fine troops, considering how sturdy they are in almost any situation. There was a group called the Vermin Vigilante that last for a while, but then the giant Guinea Pigs from Margues that Roy helped finance beat them. Interestingly enough, they were in same void in the El Tuna Café as you.”

“How’d that happen?” asked Roy.

“The Guinea Pigs tricked the cockroaches,” WonderClaus said simply. “The Guinea Pigs had taken Margues from the cockroaches, so it seemed like they would be satisfied. But apparently they wanted control of Graceland. It really doesn’t make any sense, since the Guinea Pigs are Presleytarian. They took over all of Diarama but the fort where Graceland was actually being kept. They couldn’t blast the cockroaches out and they couldn’t starve them out, so they figured the only way to get Graceland was to outsmart them.”

“How did they –” Simon asked, but was interrupted by Roy.

“What’s Graceland?”

“Graceland is the holiest land in the Universe for Presleytarians. It is the home of The King, and contains much of his property and sacred relics.”

“I also wanted to ask, who is ‘The King’ anyway? What did he do that was so important?”

WonderClaus struggled to find the right words. “He was a good-natured man, he did some charity work, and he

had the voice of an angel. He made quite a lot of money off of his music.”

“So, I probably know who The King is, then?” Simon said, resisting to ask why there was a mass worship of a singer. “Is he Bobby Jones?”

“No, he’s not from Head Trauma,” WonderClaus said, rolling his eyes.

“Is he from ‘Various Artists?’” Roy asked.

“No,” said WonderClaus. “He’s....a human singer.”

“Why are you worshipping a human singer?” asked Roy, surprised and a little appalled.

“Millions of humans listened to his music and idolized him. That got the attention of the founders of Presleytarianism. After meeting a ‘tragic death’ which was staged by the first Presleytarians to get their hands on The King in his mundane form without attracting any attention, they seemed to be paying homage to his home, which they called Graceland. That got my attention. I met the original founders of Presleytarianism, most of them living in their parents’ basements, and we began to write the holy books. The fall of your reign, Roy, gave me an excellent opportunity to present the religion. At first it started slow, but when we managed to convert the head of the Gotithian Republic things really took off. Now most of the Universe is practicing Presleytarianism!”

“Wait a minute,” said Simon, “If the death of your god is all a hoax, then that could only mean.....you have your god hidden somewhere!”

“Yes,” said WonderClaus, turning into the lobby of the large ship. Behind the other set of lobby doors was

WonderClaus's ship. "We do have The King in our possession. He's in a container of frozen tunamatic water."

"How can you worship someone when you know he's not divine because he's not able to unfreeze himself?"

"We True Presleytarians have held firm to the belief that The King is not divine in his present state. He has powers superior than anyone else, no doubt, but he's not divine unless he's in the pre-life." The doors to the lobby and the slide away doors of WonderClaus's ship opened at the same time. The three stepped into the ship. "There's been a lot of conflict with other Presleytarians thanks to this. We have to use this argument if we want to keep The King frozen but some people don't know this and they can't see why we think that The King would be worshipped in the first place if he weren't divine outside the pre-life. The other main sect of Presleytarianism is the Pious Presleytarians and they've separated from us over this issue. They insist that the only way for The King to have been able to survive diving into such a shallow pool as his is if he used divine powers. I too believe this, but if I were to say it, how could I justify to my closest allies that I'm keeping the core of the Universe's religion frozen in tunamatic water?"

"Why are you keeping 'The King' in tunamatic water anyway?" Roy asked. The ship began to move away from Loothpit's ship.

"I'm really not sure," said WonderClaus. "There's no point to have it, and we've probably burned in pre-hellfire for it. Maybe, though, by keeping him alive we can assist him in completing his mission."

"When will that be?" Simon asked.

"What mission?" Roy asked.

“Well, it’s probably going to be after Graceland is properly returned and Earth is secure enough so that no Presleytarian can interfere. As for what the mission is....The King only knows.”

“How do you know when he can accomplish the mission if you don’t know what the mission is?” Simon asked.

“He was made a human for a reason,” WonderClaus said. “If we can get him back on Earth safely without alien interference he should be able to complete his job, whatever that is. To do so we’re going to have to take Earth from Dave. Unless the True Presleytarians have Earth secured there’s no hope for it. The other important part, though most people don’t realize it, is that The King would need his home back. The key is to get Graceland, take over Earth, and revive The King.”

WonderClaus, Roy, and Simon, who had been standing during the whole conversation, sat down. “It’s not pleasant to be revived,” said Simon. “You know that you’re doing something stupid like jumping into a vortex, and the next thing you know you’re surrounded by strangers who might kill you.”

“It would be nice if I didn’t have to kill fellow Gotithians,” WonderClaus said. “Unfortunately if I don’t give you two to Loothpit he might break his alliance from me, and he would be very useful in taking over Earth. He’s already helped finance my new ship, which is going to be bigger than the Squeenburg.”

Roy and Simon were depressed from the talk. Roy was about to ask about the ship bigger than the Squeenburg but he didn’t get the chance.

“Maybe we can stage an escape by you two,” WonderClaus suggested. “The Presleytarian Academy is on Planet Yourmom. It should be easy to get out from there.”

“What?”

“Um, it’s a planet that was raffled off on the Squeenburg,” WonderClaus explained. “Someone obnoxious won the raffle, legally changed the name to ‘Yourmom’ and sold it to the True Presleytarian Church.”

“How are we going to escape from there?” Roy asked.

“Well, it has to look like an accident, otherwise it’s pointless, and so you’re going to have to wait maybe until nighttime on Yourmom. I’ll have to keep the security just as tight too, though, but I’ll send you a cockroach to help you.”

“How will the cockroach help us?” Roy asked.

“I don’t know yet,” said WonderClaus. “But it knows the security around the academy better than you do. Just do what it says and you’ll be fine.”

The two brothers were relieved that there was some hope of surviving. “What are we going to do until then?” Roy asked.

“The day’s almost over, luckily,” WonderClaus said. “By the time we get there it’ll be, what, one hundred El Tuna Café years? I don’t know. I can’t do math too well, partially because of your measurements, Roy.”

“That was the scientists’ fault, not mine,” insisted Roy. “I told them to unify the Universe’s measurement system so that the economy would run more smoothly. They did it wrong. That’s why the Universe is confused.”

“Roy, have you noticed that every time you give vague instructions to your scientists you end up making a historical change?” WonderClaus half joked.

“I think that my scientists were just stupid,” countered Roy. “I gave the project codename ‘Pickle Universe’ and they take it literally! The same thing happened with the measurements system.”

“Well, whatever it is,” said WonderClaus, “It’s still a real problem for the Universe. Time and length are constantly changing and unless you have superb math skills you could barely function in case something strange was to happen to the El Tuna Café’s orbit. We managed to smash the asteroid the El Tuna Café was orbiting, practically freezing time and space.”

“Clever,” said Roy, “But not clever enough. Whoever’s in charge of the El Tuna Café can replace the asteroid when they figure out how to get it there. You should have made the El Tuna Café rotate in the opposite direction, and turned time backwards! The ships would have even worse trouble then.”

“That’s a good idea,” WonderClaus said.

“If you do that soon, you can make the asteroid replacers fly backwards!”

“Tell us about the ship that’s going to be bigger than the Squeenburg,” Simon said.

“Oh, that. Well, it’s going to be bigger than the Squeenburg, as you know. People think that I’m embezzling money in order to build it. That’s actually not true. It’s part of the pious act of restoring The King into his proper place in the Universe. We need it to take out Dave’s Squeenburg if we want Earth. Unfortunately, we can’t tell anyone that without revealing that The King is being kept in a pool of frozen tunamatic water.”

“What about the ship specifically?” Roy asked.

“We’re getting much of the material from the Cube People,” WonderClaus said, “But we don’t want to put the whole project in their hands. They’ve got too much power the way it is. We’re building the jet engines and turbines in a new factory, and the body is going to be built in the Universe too. I only trust Cube Person Ba-ing-go and electronics, though. The skeleton of the ship as well as the inside controls are being manufactured by the Cube People now. It’s incredibly expensive. We’ve had to pay the Cube People around 30,000 scarabs for their work, complements of Loothpit. All the rest of the money is tied up in making sure that the parts made in the Universe have the right quality.”

“Who are making the guns?” Roy asked.

“That’s going to be another factory, but that one isn’t built yet.”

“Why would Loothpit help you, where would he get the money to help you in the first place, and why would the Cube People be willing to build a warship for you?” Roy asked.

“I don’t know where Loothpit’s getting all of that money,” WonderClaus admitted. “He gave it to me as payment for the machinery to unfreeze the two of you.”

“So he has ‘legal’ rights to us,” Roy said.

“Yes,” said WonderClaus. “But part of the deal was that I would get to use the two of you as well. Captain! When are we landing?”

“Soon,” the Jelly Blob captain said.

“Good,” WonderClaus said to Roy and Simon. “I’ll show you around Yourmom and the academy. I hope that we can get everything finished before nightfall.”

“What do you need us to do?” Simon asked.

“The argument that I tricked you into earlier was a start,” WonderClaus said happily. “We can build from there.”

“Be more specific,” Roy demanded.

“Well, how did the argument end?” WonderClaus asked.

“How did it end?” Roy demanded. He wasn’t in the mood for games.

“I really don’t know,” WonderClaus said simply. “My mental ability is sharply dropping thanks to my sleep deprivation. I’d better take some more Snuff Puffa.” He pulled out a bottle of pills, twisted the lid off, and popped a pill in his mouth.

“Snuff Puffa is a depressant,” Simon said.

“Hmm?” WonderClaus hummed, swishing the pill around in his mouth for no apparent reason.

“It makes you sleepy,” Simon finished.

WonderClaus swallowed the pill. “Oh really? No wonder I can’t remember anything. Darn it, I’d better take another Snuff Puffa.”

“You seemed fine during the argument,” Roy commented.

WonderClaus shrugged. “That’s just the adrenaline. Well, it’s wearing off now.” He popped another pill into his mouth.

“We’re landing, sir,” the captain said.

“Okay,” said WonderClaus. He gave Roy and Simon a big smile. “I’m going to be showing you guys around, soon!” he squealed. Simon looked nervous.

The ship landed and the doors of the ship slid opened. Yourmom was hideous. The ground was dry and the only plants that were around looked like giant yellow pineapples.

In the distance there were tall skyscrapers lining up the pink skyline. The clouds were purple, giving the sky a polka dotted look. In front of the ship was a small straw thatched shack labeled 'bomb here'. What a great place to center a religion.

"I know the planet's not much," said WonderClaus, getting off the ship with Roy and Simon. "But it was a cheap, inhabitable planet that we can dedicate to Presleytarianism!"

"Why do you want to have a whole planet for Presleytarianism?" Roy asked.

"To teach those Pious Presleytarians a lesson," WonderClaus said. Roy didn't comment.

"I see that you've got a Groundscratcher here," Simon said, pointing to the hut.

"Yes," said WonderClaus. "The hut's above the Groundscratcher as a symbol of frugality – that's very important in Presleytarianism – but the Groundscratcher itself is fabulous. We put it in the park of the capital of Yourmom because all of these buildings dig too far down into the ground."

"What's the 'bomb here' for?" Roy asked.

"Oh, that? That's just some graffiti," said WonderClaus. "These kids are really getting on my nerves now. There isn't enough discipline allowed. The parents are too powerful. We don't want to upset them."

Simon turned his attention to a Space Monkey in a long red robe carrying a puppy in front of him. A large grey frog, probably the native species of Yourmom, came hopping on a path in the park, wearing headphones and minding its own business. The Space Monkey stepped in front of the frog. The frog stopped and tapped its music player, probably

to turn it off. The Space Monkey grinned at it, and held the puppy up to its face.

“Look at this puppy,” the Space Monkey said in a cheerful yet somewhat mournful voice. “Look into his eyes. How can you say that Elvis isn’t God?”

The frog knocked the missionary over and continued hopping down the path. Roy and Simon were stunned.

“What you just witnessed is a little bit of Pious Presleytarian preaching,” WonderClaus said smugly. “Terrible, isn’t it? Let’s go inside.”

The three walked into the hut. The inside of the hut turned out to be the inside of an elevator. The walls of the elevator were lined with ruby studded mirrors and there was a wooden railing. The frugality thing was a complete joke.

“The Groundscratcher doesn’t only have the best Ba-ing-go beams, it also has a few Donkeyium beams.” WonderClaus said proudly.

“Donkeyium?” said Roy, surprised. Donkeyium was the strongest material known in the Universe. It was obtained from the bones of the Giant Space Donkey. “Why do you need to use Donkeyium?”

“Ever heard of Boomwater?” WonderClaus said simply.

“Oh,” said Roy. Boomwater was the tunematic byproduct of making Ba-ing-go from a metal. Boomwater was highly explosive; a single drop could create an explosion with a diameter of 20 feet. Since Roy’s reign, though, the dangers of Boomwater had sharply decreased, as nobody was able to measure the destruction anymore. “Does it rain Boomwater on Yourmom?”

“Just a few little sprinkles,” said WonderClaus. “We have to reinforce the most important Ba-ing-go beams with some Donkeyium to prevent anything bad from happening. A lot of the buildings on Yourmom do that.”

“Interesting,” said Simon.

The elevator stopped and the doors opened. The Groundscratcher looked like some sort of wooden lodge. Students of all different species were walking around and chatting, and there was some interesting computer equipment that they were using, but neither Roy nor Simon could get their eyes off of how much wood the Groundscratcher used! During his reign Roy had been more than rich enough to make a Groundscratcher like this one, but he had never thought of wasting so much money. “Maybe if you hadn’t spent all of your money on wood you wouldn’t have to rely on Loothpit,” Roy suggested as they stepped out of the elevator.

“The cash flowed freer when I made this Groundscratcher,” WonderClaus said sadly. “But the Universe is falling apart more and more and people have less money to give to the Presleytarian Church. We still regulate most trade amongst Presleytarian states, but that business is getting less profitable. We had also expected to take Earth peacefully, but Dave refused. Now he’s building up an arsenal of mimes to defend against us. Attacking a planet has never been so difficult!”

“I say you should just blow up Earth,” Simon said.

“Why’s that?” WonderClaus asked. He knew that Simon understood why he couldn’t.

“I know it’s important for your religion, but if Dave’s stocking up on mimes he’s a little dangerous.”

“What do you know about mimes?” Roy asked, surprised.

“I know a lot about them,” said Simon. “During my exile I met Bob Rednow.”

“We need to go to my office,” WonderClaus said off-topic. “It’s to the right.”

Roy and Simon figured that they shouldn’t continue talking about mimes and followed WonderClaus. WonderClaus stopped abruptly.

“Look at this!” he cried out mournfully. “Some student carved a Q into my wall!” Roy and Simon looked at the wooden wall and Roy gasped. “Well, I can’t afford to buy a new wooden panel. It’ll just have to stay as it is.” WonderClaus sighed, and the three continued walking down the hallway. “This is almost too much,” he said, popping another Snuff Puffa pill into his mouth. “I’m going to have to start taking some serious disciplinary action against them. The parents are barely funding me as is. I might even need to sell my precious wood if things don’t get better. I can’t do that if the kids are vandalizing it.....” The three stopped at a door with a pair of jeans nailed to it.

“Now that’s creative vandalism,” Simon said, reaching for the doorknob.

“WHO GOES THERE?” The pants boomed, catching on fire. Simon jumped back.

“That’s not vandalism,” WonderClaus said. “That’s my pair of security pants.”

“Security pants?” Roy asked.

“I forget when, maybe 200,000 years ago, an artist created a piece called ‘pants nailed to a slate board’. There was a Universe-wide craze over the piece of art. The artist

continued making new forms for the pants. There was ‘pants nailed to board watering flowers’ and ‘pants nailed to board dancing’. The security pants are based off of both ‘flaming pants nailed to board’ and ‘talking pants nailed to board’. None could even begin to match the wild popularity people had over the original piece, though. The artist got depressed and died in a gutter.”

“I said, ‘Who goes there’!” The pants said impatiently.

“WonderClaus,” WonderClaus said boldly to the pants.

“And who might you be?”

“Sorry,” WonderClaus said, turning to Roy and Simon. “It does this sometimes. I’m WonderClaus.”

“I know that,” said the pants angrily. “But who are *they*?”

“That’s none of your business!” WonderClaus said angrily.

“Are you trying to undermine my authority?” the pants demanded.

“What authority?” WonderClaus asked angrily.

“Aha!” the pants screamed. “Rebel! I’m not letting you in.”

“I’ll have you hung for this,” WonderClaus said, shaking a fist at the pants.

“I prefer the dryer, thank you very much,” said the pants obnoxiously.

WonderClaus thought a little, and then turned back to the door. “Whose office are you protecting?”

“The office of his Presleyship WonderClaus,” the pants said proudly.

“I’m WonderClaus!” WonderClaus screamed back at it. His face was red.

“Dance, little fool!” the pants screamed back.

“All right, then,” said WonderClaus to himself. He began jumping around almost randomly. He played a few notes on an air guitar and hopped around even more like an idiot.

“WonderClaus sir! I didn’t know it was you!” the pants said, apologizing. “Please come in. You’ll find that your ‘caretaker pants’ has made a delicious beverage waiting for you.” The flames on the pants extinguished. WonderClaus opened the door, revealing a fine office with well polished mahogany almost everywhere.

WonderClaus wiped the sweat off his face. “I need more Snuff Puffa,” he said, and popped another pill into his mouth. “Have a seat,” he said, pointing to two wooden chairs in front of his mahogany desk. Behind WonderClaus’s desk was another pair of pants, this one nailed to the wall.

“Try the coffee, sir,” the pants said politely. “I found a new recipe over the PickleNet.”

“I’m fine,” WonderClaus said. He looked at Roy and Simon. “I’d like to take you on a tour of the rest of the Groundscratcher, but I’m starting to get a little tired.”

“I wonder why,” Simon murmured to Roy, who was staring fixedly at the pants on the wall. He was almost sure that he saw tears come out of it.

“I needed to sit down,” WonderClaus continued, ignoring Simon’s comment. “At least here we can discuss our options.”

“What options?” Roy asked, focusing his attention back on WonderClaus.

“Well, what we could do with you at the moment, and how soon we could or must arrange your escape.”

“Is a cockroach still supposed to help us?” Roy asked.

“If for some reason the cockroach isn’t able to help you adequately,” said WonderClaus, “I mean, I don’t know what kind of situation you might get yourself in with all the security around here, but the pants should be able to help you if anything like that happens.”

“What kind of security is there here?” Roy asked. The escape sounded simple enough. It seemed like all they would have to do would be to walk out of the office and get into the elevator.

“How are you going to get off of Yourmom?” WonderClaus asked. “The Presleytarians own it. Most actions you take are recorded by the Presleytarians. If you try to get out you’ll probably be discovered by us or turned over to us. Then I’ll have to put the two of you into a maximum security prison. You’ll never be able to escape then, and Loothpit will demand you again.

“Maybe we don’t have to get off Yourmom,” Simon suggested. “I lived for a million years in exile, jumping from planet to planet. I know my way around most wildernesses.”

“Staying would be even harder than leaving,” WonderClaus said. “Because there will be planet-wide searches after you escape. There will be a price on your heads, something that never happened to you, Simon.”

“How are we going to get off the planet, then?” Roy demanded.

“The King knows,” said WonderClaus. “I’m so tired, I can’t concentrate much anymore. It’s been a rough day. Not

even my Snuff Puffa can help me....maybe I should take another.”

“Can’t you tell us?” Roy asked.

“I can’t arrange anything too cozy for you without the case looking suspicious,” WonderClaus said simply, popping yet another Snuff Puffa pill into his mouth. “I can, however, show you around the place more until we find the cockroach and you two figure something out. I have to use you two for something, anyway.”

“What do you need to use us for?” Roy asked.

“Let me show you,” WonderClaus said wearily. “That is, if I can get up.”

After a lot of grunting and pushing, WonderClaus, with his face turning purple, managed to pull himself out of his chair.

“Sir, maybe you should take the coffee,” the pants on the wall said worried.

“I’m fine,” said WonderClaus, trying to catch his breath.

“Are you sure? On the PickleNet it’s rated one of the best coffees to give you a buzz. I know that those rebels in theology class are keeping you up at night, so I just thought.....”

“I’m fine!” WonderClaus shouted. He gasped for air, and then collapsed.

“What do we do?” Simon asked the pants nervously.

The pants were jumping around on the wall. “I don’t know, I don’t know,” it said nervously. “Call a doctor!”

“Simon, let’s go!” Roy yelled.

“But there’s a phone on his desk!” Simon shouted.

Worship your Vermin

“There’s no time! Let’s go!” Roy grabbed Simon’s arm and tugged on it. Simon reluctantly followed.

The two raced down the hall as fast as they could. Roy was screaming, “Someone get a doctor! WonderClaus just collapsed!” There was a panic across the whole lobby.

Roy reached for the elevator and pressed the “up” button. He was tapping his left foot nervously.

“Roy, you shut the door behind you!” Simon exclaimed.

Roy smiled. “I know.” The elevator door opened. The two stepped in. The doors closed.

“Don’t you remember the flaming pants?” Simon yelled. “What if they don’t let the doctors in?”

“There’s no need,” Roy said, still smiling. “Snuff Puffa has to be smoked.”

Time Travel

Toby stared at the top of the void in disbelief, hoping that Phil would come back. Billy seemed a little less surprised.

“You’d have to expect that to happen,” Billy said angrily. “It seemed a little suspicious, the whole thing. I think that he figured that a Gotithian and a human would have a stash of wood, and since he couldn’t bring his gun along he just had to wait until we were out of the ship. Fortunately I still have a little bit of wood that I put into my pocket to look at.”

“Fortunately?” screamed Toby hysterically. “We’re stuck in the El Tuna Café! We’re going to die! We’re going to die!” That was all that Toby was able to say.

“Maybe,” said Billy, also getting upset at the situation sunk into his head. “The Diaraman army is either going to come and find us or we’re going to be sitting here until we run out of oxygen and suffocate.” He whimpered a little. “Our only hope is to find Mr. Parrot’s notebook.”

“How will that help us?” Toby screamed.

“I don’t know,” said Billy softly. “But it’s the only hope we have. So, let’s stick with the old plan. I’ll look from here to halfway down the void, and you go the same distance upwards.”

“What if we don’t find Mr. Parrot’s notebook then?” Toby demanded.

“Then we’ll widen our search perimeter by the same distance if we still haven’t found it,”

“Then we’ll give up and die,” Toby finished.

“No, then we’re going to have to cooperate and dig into the void, starting from the bottom, of course,” said Billy optimistically.

“What are the chances that we’re going to find the notebook?” Toby asked pessimistically.

“Very slim, but they’re the only odds we have,” said Billy. “So stop wasting oxygen and get to work!”

Billy had a point, Toby figured. “Fine,” he said, and made his way up the steep ground of the void, inspecting everything. The walls of the void were perfectly smooth. Somehow everything had been compacted perfectly into the cone when the void had been created. The contents of the void were not so pleasant. In between the vast amounts of rubble there were little pieces of PufferFish and square chunks of flesh that Toby suspected belonged to a Cube Person. There were scraps of metal too; including a square gleaming thing that Toby figured must be a Cube Person bomb. Toby was starting to get desperate. “Any luck?” he asked Billy.

“No,” said Billy. “I don’t think that finding it will be that easy.”

“Well, then how am I supposed to find anything?” Toby screamed.

“Just stay calm and keep looking. Make sure to inspect little bits of gold that you find. If there are characters on it, tell me. It might be part of Mr. Parrot’s notebook.”

“Okay,” Toby muttered. “I’ll do that.” He continued his search. A light shined over the void. Toby jumped over and hit the ground.

“The Diaramans!” Billy screeched, though there was no need to. It was all obvious.

Toby had the best view. At the top of the cone shaped void were huge ships coming out of what seemed to be nowhere – an effect from quickly slowing down from the high speeds spaceships travel – with large headlights. There were thirteen ships in all, twelve equally sized ships in a circle around one large ship that had an asteroid much larger than itself on top of it. The circle broke and the large ship in the center flew right above the mouth of the void. For a second Toby was afraid that they would drop the asteroid there and the asteroid would hit the El Tuna Café, causing boulders to tumble down the void. Both Toby and Billy were being pulled forward slightly by the new gravity of the asteroid, but with all of the excitement neither noticed.

They were going to notice, though. A few ships disappeared from view of the top of the void. The El Tuna Café began to orbit around the asteroid, causing Toby and Billy to smack against the walls of the void. However, they must have put the rotation backwards or something, because when the orbit began the ships internal calculations got confused. The ships, most notably the ship with the asteroid on top of it, began to go backwards. The El Tuna Café followed. The ships stopped themselves, and the asteroid began orbiting in the other direction. The ships were going backwards again. The El Tuna Café followed again. The ships had to adjust again. Unfortunately, the large ship with the asteroid on it adjusted too much, and the asteroid smashed into the El Tuna Café. Toby and Billy screamed again, and fell down the void. Pieces of rubble and other things fell out of the walls of the void and tumbled down it with them. Most of it bounced harmlessly off of their Ba-ing-go spacesuits, but it still was scary. The scariest collision of

all was Toby's collision with the gleaming box that he had suspected was a Cube Person bomb. Before it was over, though, Toby realized that he wasn't dead. He looked down at the 'bomb'. It had characters on it.

Toby was ecstatic. "Billy! Billy! I think I found it! It's a metal box with Gotithian writing on it!"

"Really?" Billy said, overjoyed too. "Wow! Lucky that the pilot of that ship was stupid! And lucky that Mr. Parrot kept his notebook in a metal case! I'll be right over. I need to get out of this rubble."

Toby picked up the precious case with unnecessary care and, though his leg was a little bad from the fall, raced towards Billy as fast as he could. Billy pulled himself out of the rubble and met him. Toby handed him the case.

"Oh, no," said Billy. Fear rushed through every part of Toby's body.

"What is it?" Toby asked, his voice trembling.

"It's Mr. Parrot's notebook, don't worry," he said reassuringly. He jumped as high as the void would let him. "It's Mr. Parrot's notebook!"

"What's the matter then?"

"Oh, it's just written in Diaraman, that's all."

"Diaraman?" Toby asked, relieved. "You can read in it?"

"Yes. I suppose it was a little much to think Mr. Parrot would write in Gotithian. He made the Gotithian species, for Elvis's sake! Fortunately he based the Gotithian language off of Diaraman, so I'll be able to get most of what's in here." Billy opened up the case, revealing a thick leather bound notebook. Toby squealed in delight.

"Can you read to me what it says?" he asked.

“Sure!” Billy said. “I’ll go to the table of contents. Maybe there’s something that can help us get out of here.” Billy flipped through a few pages, including (for some completely inexplicable reason) a copyright page Mr. Parrot wrote warning himself not to copy the book without permission or he would take legal action against himself. “Ah, here it is. The table of contents. Hmm.”

“What is it?” Toby asked, fear surging through him once again. “Nothing that can help us?”

“Okay, listen to this yourself: ‘Table of contents: Note, there are no table of contents in this book. To save space I’ve made the pages change show up similarly to particles with fractions of revolutions (where the particle must be spun around multiple times in order to get to the original viewpoint). The book must be flipped through several times to get to a certain page. This has made it incredibly annoying adding things to the book and for convenience there is no glossary or index. Have fun reading it.’”

“That’s...different,” said Toby, not really understanding the fraction-rotation particle thing.

“It is,” said Billy. “Well, since Mr. Parrot’s not going to help us, it looks like we still have to hold our breaths.” Billy continued flipping through the pages. Toby sighed. “Ooh,” he exclaimed, stopping at a page. “Time travel!”

“Time travel!” Toby exclaimed too. “That could really help us!”

“It could. Let me see what it has to say,” said Billy, who was fantasizing of Toby and him going back in time to when Phil abandoned them and then taking over the ship from him, and so recovering their precious wood. “Oh darn. Well....” He muttered to himself.

“What?” asked Toby, once again hoping that there was nothing that could shatter their hopes of getting out of the void.

“Nothing,” said Billy. “It’s just that Mr. Parrot left a warning to himself about time travel. He’s talking about opening up a wormhole, and how most scientists are under the misconception that you can go wherever you want to with the help of wormholes. He correctly says that you can’t really tell where you’re going. The multiple dimensions of space make it extremely hard to visualize exactly where you’ll end up and so there are a lot of risks associated with going back in time.”

“That makes sense,” Toby said, remembering how fondly his science teacher talked about how wormholes could allow humans to travel light years of distance without having to actually go through that distance. “It’s still the only hope we have. How do you open up a wormhole?”

“Let me see....” said Billy, turning the page. “Wait a minute,” he muttered, “What was that last part? Oh darn, the page changed.”

Toby was alarmed again. “You didn’t lose that section, did you?”

“No, just the first page of it. Okay, let me see....opening wormholes,” said Billy, still muttering to himself (although muttering over a radio speaker makes it a little different). “Ah, here it is. It says that you can open a wormhole by....taking highly tunamatic material, stuff it into a Dave’s brand light bulb, and then smash the light bulb. Hmm. I wonder why he tried that.”

Toby was sure that there was a good scientific reason associated with tunamatic material and light bulbs that Dave

sold, but he still hadn't expected that solution. "Do we have those ingredients?" he asked, trying not to let himself get worried again.

"It's the El Tuna Café, so of course we have tunamatic material," Billy said. "I'm just a little worried about our odds of finding a light bulb here. I know Roy used as many of Dave's products as he could, but I don't think that it's likely that we'll find a light bulb in one piece."

"How about a partially broken light bulb?" Toby asked.

"It doesn't say, but since it's probably our only hope, we should still try it. The problem is: how to get one? I know that the tuna kitchens weren't far off from where the beam was in the El Tuna Café, as I remember from history class. I mean, I was there, but I didn't see anything of the battle, so I can only guess. I'm trying to visualize where in this void the kitchens would have ended up. My only guess is that the part of the void that gave way had some tunamatic material behind it that was weakening it. Hopefully, if there's enough tuna behind there, a fluorescent light bulb from the kitchen has been preserved."

"I'll check it," said Toby, scrambling up the steep, littered slope. He stopped. "Wait, how do I know if it's tunamatic or not?"

"Let me have a look," Billy said. He stumbled up the rubble and took a look into the opening in the wall of the void. "Yeah, there's some frozen tuna stuff in here," he said optimistically. "Let's see if there's any light bulb material around here." He began digging into the tuna.

"I found some glass!" Toby shouted to Billy.

"Really? Let me have a look."

Toby handed a small curved shard of glass over to Billy. “Is it part of a light bulb?”

Billy studied the glass carefully. “I can’t tell really, but it probably is. There weren’t too many windows in the El Tuna Café, other than the interior windows of the offices, but those wouldn’t have had this curve.” He held up Mr. Parrot’s notebook. “I need to keep a firm grip on this,” he said. “Could you pick out some tuna for smashing?”

Toby nodded. His heart was pounding and his hands were sweaty. He bent over and picked up some chunks of frozen tuna from the ground of the void and dropped them onto the glass shard. He raised his hand to smash it, but stopped. “Should I smash it now?”

“Yes.”

He brought his fist down, but stopped just before hitting it. “Wait, how are we supposed to get back?”

“Why would we need to?”

“What if we don’t end up in a good place?”

“What are the odds of that?”

“Can you please just snap a little bit of glass off?” Toby pleaded, picking out another chunk of tuna from the ground.

“Fine,” said Billy, “But it won’t be easy.” His gloved fingers fumbled over the glass shard, and, out of instinct, he hit the shard against the wall of the void. A blinding light flashed, and the two boys began falling.

Billy, still unable to see, felt something on the glove of his spacesuit. “I still have a piece of glass!” He shouted to Toby.

“What?” Toby yelled back. Their radio speakers must have switched off during the flash and all Toby could hear

was a murmur. Toby blinked. His vision was starting to come back. There seemed to be some plants in front of them, so he figured it was safe for them to take off the suits. Still grasping the tiny bit of tunamatic material in his right hand, he unsnapped the two piece spacesuit and pulled off the top. He took in a deep breath. It felt good.

By now his vision was clear again. He looked to see where he was. He wasn't vertical on the ground, he was horizontal. That was weird. He turned to his back and gasped. The two of them had each busted holes through the wall of some wooden shack (of course with the help of the wormhole and the space suit). Billy pulled the top off of his suit. He also gasped. "This is great!" he exclaimed.

"What?" Toby asked.

"That we're alive, of course!" Billy said.

Toby had to agree with that. It was nice to be alive. "Okay, we need to find out what timeframe we're in. It looks like we're on Earth, although I'm not too sure, since I don't see any humans. If we are on Earth, it doesn't look to modern...."

"That all can be figured out later," Billy said, pulling himself out of the wall. Toby decided to follow. Billy picked up the top of his spacesuit. "For now we need to collect some wood. I see a forest in the distance!"

"We shouldn't," Toby said. "We've got to figure out what to do."

"What's the worst that could happen?" Billy asked. "We've got the ability to travel through time one more time, so let's not waste it. We should get a bunch of wood so that we have some money when we get back to civilization."

“I’m beginning to wonder if we should go through time again,” Toby said. “We ended up in the wall of a shack. We shouldn’t risk it again.”

“That’s up to this,” Billy said, raising Mr. Parrot’s notebook. “For now, though, we should get a bunch of wood.”

Toby sighed. “I guess the forest is okay. There aren’t any people there. Did you mark your spot in Mr. Parrot’s notebook?”

“Yes, with tuna,” Billy said, opening the book. “Oh darn, it’s now talking about how to bet in Squeenball.”

“What’s that?” Toby asked.

Billy pointed towards the forest and started walking. Toby followed. “Squeenball’s arguably the best sport in the Universe. It combines the outdated sports of car racing and soccer into one game that’ll be entertaining forever. There are two teams, with eight cars on each team. The teams are going on a track with a giant barrier racing at a constant – though high – speed. The objective of the game is for the cars of one team to hit the ball over to the other side of the barrier in order to score points. Points are scored by the team on the opposite side of the barrier where the ball is lost. When a ball is lost it is replaced by a ball given by the barrier to the scoring team. The game continues until either everyone on one team has crashed or the cars have gone around the track for a certain number of times.” They were entering the woods by now. “Start picking up wood, human.”

Toby remembered unpleasantly how Billy had given him the same order when they first met in person. Billy had seen the wood on the railroad track that Toby had chosen to meet at, and Billy ordered Toby to pick up the wood. Billy

explained that it's okay for a human to use wood, but since aliens are not allowed to interfere with Earth outside Earthland and because the wood is technically the property of Dave aliens could not meddle with wood. Toby suspected that the loopholes to the rule didn't matter in lawless times, but Billy wasn't moved. Once again Billy was ordering Toby to pick up the wood, in case they were in a time where Dave had control of Earth and was making sure that no one stole his precious wood. It didn't really bug Toby, though. He was interested in the Squeenball betting scheme. "So *that's* what Tony was playing," he said. "He never really told me the details. He just said that he had been forced to play Squeenball. So how do you bet?"

"Keep the wood coming," Billy said.

"My hands are full," Toby said, annoyed.

"Those are teensy little sticks! Break them up and shove them in your pockets. I have a lot of pockets. Hand some sticks to me." Toby handed a handful of sticks to Billy, who snapped them up and stuffed them down the spacesuit. Billy looked back at Mr. Parrot's notebook. "Isn't that just my luck!" he exclaimed. "As soon as I put down the book, the page changes!"

Toby giggled a little. "What's it say now?"

"It says, 'how to escape a cocktail party'."

"Interesting."

"That's not the best part. There's a little box labeled 'Even the experts need their practice. Time travel on this box!'"

"Easy escape," Toby said happily. "I think we have enough wood. Let's go!"

“Put on the top of your space suit just in case it doesn’t work out perfectly,” Billy warned, carefully laying the open book onto the ground. He snapped back together his spacesuit, and Toby followed. Toby walked up to Billy, who was placing a small piece of tuna on the last precious Dave’s brand light bulb shard they had. He placed the shard onto the box on the notebook. Toby was excited about traveling through time again, but braced himself for another sudden fall. Billy swung his fist down onto the page, but a sudden breeze flipped the page as he did it. He yelped. The same blinding white light came, and the two were falling again.

The fall was harder this time, and the two were more disoriented. There were voices murmuring in a distance that were making Toby’s head light. Feeling the ground, he rested his back against it, trying to regain his breath and vision. The murmurings got louder. Toby wanted to take off his spacesuit but he knew that people were watching. His vision returned. A few Gotithians were standing over him with martinis in hand, chatting about something. Toby wished that he could understand them.

“Toby!” Billy said over the radio. “I just realized they might expect you to speak Gotithian! Quick! Get to the bar!”

“What bar?” Toby asked back over the radio. “There are Gotithians here! When are we?”

“I’m not sure,” Billy said. “It doesn’t matter. There’s a bar in that corner. Get up and keep your spacesuit on!”

Toby stumbled upwards. He looked over to where Billy was going and followed. His vision was fully clear now, and he could see that there were a whole lot of Gotithians, all chatting and holding martini glasses. There were also a couple of Space Monkeys, but no other species

was in sight. Toby looked around a little more and saw that they were in some sort of lofty extraterrestrial ballroom. There were large windows on the walls that revealed that they were floating in space over some sort of inhabited planet. Above the bar was a banner in Gotithian characters. He asked Billy to read it for him.

“It says, ‘Welcome to the Convention for Space Money-Gotithian Research and Cooperation’. I’ve heard of these. They’re held by Mr. Parrot. Funny that Mr. Parrot would have an entry about how to escape one of these cocktail parties, eh? Too bad that I lost the page in the book.”

“Why are we going to the bar?” asked Toby, getting nervous around all the Gotithians and Space Monkeys crowded around the bar.

“We need to get you drunk,” Billy said seriously. “What will we do if someone asks you a question in Gotithian? You’ll be in a lot of trouble, all right. However, if you were drunk, then you’d have an excuse for not being able to respond.”

“Aren’t there underage drinking laws?” Toby asked.

“No. That’s only a stupid human law,” Billy said, pulling a twig out from his pant pockets. He said something in Gotithian to the bartender, who grumbled something to himself.

“What’d you say and he say?” Toby asked over the radio again.

“I wanted to pay for a bottle of Liquid Turtle with wood. He grumbled about how spoiled of children we are.”

“Um, I don’t want to be drinking something called ‘Liquid Turtle’.”

“Oh, don’t worry. It’s only a brand name for a type of wine. It comes from Zebus. You know, the planet Simon was launching missiles off of that Roy ended up obliterating.”

“Okay,” said Toby. The bartender pulled out a glass bottle holding approximately a liter of Liquid Turtle. The bartender popped the cork and poured some blue stuff into two wine glasses, accidentally spilling some of it onto his white tuxedo in the process. He slammed the bottle down in between the two glasses and walked through a door, swearing loudly.

Toby sat himself onto the tall barstool and unsnapped his spacesuit. He lifted the top of it only enough for the Liquid Turtle to reach his mouth, and took a sip. He coughed in repulsion.

“They call it Liquid Turtle for a reason, you know,” said Billy, looking up at Toby. “Here’s a hint. It hints at the flavor of ground up turtles. It’s sort of an acquired taste. Well, I’m going to go look around a bit.”

“Don’t you want some Liquid Turtle?” Toby asked.

“No, I’m fine. You drink it yourself. Remember, it’s your only cover up. I want to see if we were shot back into a time when Mr. Parrot was still alive. I want to meet him.”

Toby nodded, happy that Billy was going to meet such a smart alien, but disappointed that he would have to be too drunk off of turtle flavored liquor to do anything himself. He also wished that Billy had ordered some food for him, but the bar didn’t seem to be serving food. He sighed, and faced his enemy.

The Auction

Billy took a deep breath and confronted a herd of well dressed Gotithians and Space Monkeys. He wanted to ask them where Mr. Parrot was, but they seemed to be in the middle of a conversation.

“Shame, isn’t it?” said a Gotithian woman with a tall hairstyle that covered her horns. “The artist cheapened the beauty of the original with his remakes.”

“I say the artist is getting caught up too much in his ambition too,” said a short round Gotithian in a bulging black suit, “But only because of the astonishing political messages of his later works. I find them more creative and sensory than the original work.”

“But doesn’t the original have a vintage appeal to it?” asked a tall Gotithian with a monocle.

“Surely,” said the portly one, “But the vintage appeal came as a result of the finer, later works.”

“The later works are trash,” grumbled the woman. “The original is the only honest art.”

“What makes you think that?” asked the portly Gotithian.

“Well, the form of the original piece, for starts,” said the woman, pointing to the wall behind the group. Billy turned his head around the mob to see what she was pointing at. It was a pair of pants nailed to a board. Alongside it was a flaming pair of pants nailed to a board, a pair of pants nailed to a board chatting with a few other well dressed Gotithians, and a pair of pants nailed to a board pouring Liquid Turtle into a few admirers’ glasses. “Is much more elegant than the

sloppier later works. Also, there is a clear message on the original piece, as I'm sure you all agree. The later works are being made so that the artist can have more things to sell."

"What do you mean?" asked the tall monocled Gotithian. "The artist hasn't sold a single piece!"

"Not yet," said the snooty woman, "But soon. There's going to be an auction at this very party."

"Interesting," said the tall Gotithian. "But really, what message do you see in the pants?"

"Isn't it obvious?" exclaimed the woman. "It shows the two dimensional look of designers today. It is an outcry against consumerism. It's a warning, people. Don't you see it?"

Billy rolled his eyes. They weren't going to stop babbling anytime soon. He considered leaving to ask someone else about where Mr. Parrot was, but he decided to have a little fun first. He pulled the top off of his spacesuit. "How do you see it?" he asked.

"Silence, child," said the woman, waving her hand at Billy. "It's people like you who simply don't appreciate art."

"Where did you get that observation from, though?" asked the portly Gotithian.

"I need to get more Liquid Turtle," the woman said, turning towards the wall of pants.

The tall Gotithian looked suspicious. "Please tell us where you got your noble observation, though."

The woman turned back angrily. "Not with the boy here. He wouldn't appreciate it."

"Why would that matter?" Billy asked.

"See, utter insolence. This boy is so ignorant!"

Billy tried not to say something rude. “Can you tell me where you’re getting your wisdom? I’d like to learn.”

“Oh, *sure*. Like *you* would have an appreciation for the arts.”

A butler passed by, carrying a tray full of bottles of Liquid Turtle. “She got it from the labels,” he muttered.

“Excuse me?” the woman asked rudely, grabbing the butler’s shoulder. “What’d you say?”

“All I’m saying is that your observation is the same as the label next to the artwork itself,” said the butler, sticking up his nose mockingly.

The woman’s face went red. “Well, I agree with the observation, therefore it’s....oh, never mind! Why were you eavesdropping on us?”

The butler grinned. “I hear more than you could ever imagine.”

Billy was very annoyed now. His meeting with the Space Monkey who had saved Toby and Billy from suffocating in the El Tuna Café was ruined by a bunch of eloquent idiots. He looked up at the butler. “Where’s Mr. Parrot?” he demanded.

“Which one?” the butler asked, turning his face away from the angry woman.

“Huh?” Billy asked.

“Which version of Mr. Parrot?”

“Just....any of them,” Billy said, embarrassed. He hoped that people wouldn’t get suspicious of his not knowing that there were somehow multiple Mr. Parrots.

“At the entrance,” the butler said, and walked away.

Billy groaned. He didn’t know where the entrance was either. He couldn’t ask the butler that question. It was too

suspicious. Who would he ask, then? Maybe he could join Toby on his mission and then ask the bartender or someone where the entrance was. They might excuse him then. No, that probably wouldn't turn out too good. Who could he ask? Billy could see only one clear answer: the pants. Obviously the only pants that he could question were the pants that talked, but they seemed to be the life of the party. He would need to distract the people talking to the pants just long enough to ask his question.

A Space Monkey with a paint brush and palette was coming up to the crowd of people socializing with the talking pants. Billy figured that he was the artist. This was his chance. Billy quickly and excitedly approached the crowd, pretending to be interested in the artist, and keeping his eyes focused.

“How did you create such fine artwork?” asked a well dressed Space Monkey. “How long did it take you to make those pants talk?”

The artist chuckled. “I never made the pants talk, oh no! That’s far too menial of labor for an artist! I hired a team of scientists to do it for me. The same with the flaming pants.”

The Space Monkey was disillusioned. “So, all you did was nail pants to a board?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“You can’t make such foolish assumptions,” said the artist, curling a smile. “Do you have any idea how much work went into planning it?”

“So, you came up with the basic ideas for how the pants will work?” asked the Space Monkey.

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“Yes,” said the artist, still wearing a large grin. “I planned it all. The engineering and the nailing, however, were done separately.”

The Space Monkey furrowed his eyebrows. “Why did you outsource the nailing job?”

“Artistic integrity,” said the artist. “I had a starving PufferFish orphan do the nailing job for me. The poverty there would surprise you.”

The Space Monkey did not comment on this. Perhaps he didn’t get a chance, because at this news the mob went wild. Billy overheard things such as, “You had an orphan do the nailing? How sweet!” and, “The child may not have money, but he has the gift of artistic expression!”

The artist’s cheesy grin grew wider. “Many orphans took place in making these four pieces of art. I do hope that someone will appreciate my art, the money from it could feed so many of them for so long.”

A Gotithian woman gasped. “Oh, those poor children! I’ve always wanted to fill my mansion with fine art, and I want to do charity. I could do both in one! I’m going to get myself that artwork!”

“I hope someone does,” the artist said, his grin disappearing. “Say, what’s the starting bid in the auction? I never really had the time to take part in the planning of it.”

Billy heard the butler who had just given him directions say in an annoyed voice, “Each piece will start at five thousand scarabs.”

“And when is the auction?”

“In twelve Diaraman minutes.”

“I’m definitely going to bid on it,” said the Gotithian woman. “Five thousand scarabs. How much food can it buy the children?”

“Oh, it could probably feed that whole orphanage for two El Tuna Café months!”

“Even with the scientists’ and your cut?” asked the Gotithian incredulously.

“Cut?” exclaimed the artist. “Cut? They’re not getting any ‘cut’! They’ve got fat salaries, working at the companies that they do. It wouldn’t hurt them to do a little charity!”

Billy was growing impatient. He decided on staying, though, figuring that Mr. Parrot would attend the auction, and then he could catch him. Twelve Diaraman minutes wasn’t that long of a wait.

“But how are you going to live without some of the money?” asked the Gotithian.

“Oh, don’t worry,” said the artist. “I’m going to keep some of the money. Unlike those scientists, I don’t have a fat steady salary. I need the money to get by.”

“Don’t you have other sources of income, like painting?” asked the first male Space Monkey, noting to the paintbrush and palette that the artist was carrying around.

The artist laughed heartily. “Oh, this is just standard artistic uniform! I’ve never painted in my life!”

The Space Monkey muttered something, and turned to walk away. “Are we leaving?” asked a female Space Monkey that was probably his wife.

“Yes, I’ve had enough of this ridiculous cocktail party. Let’s say goodbye to Mr. Parrot.”

Billy perked up. He decided that he should follow this couple to Mr. Parrot.

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“Which one?” asked the female Space Monkey.

“Any of them,” said the male Space Monkey. Billy followed behind them, trying to look like he was coincidentally walking in their direction, silently wondering how there could be multiple Mr. Parrots.

A gleaming pair of Donkeyium double doors slid open and the pair of Space Monkeys disappeared. Billy stopped for a few moments to fall behind them, and then made his way through the doors.

“Stop!” said a pair of voices in unison. Billy looked around to see who they were. His best guess was that the hedge plants were talking to him. He sighed. What else had the artist done (or made others do)?

To his relief, two burly PufferFish guards slipped out of the hedge plants and puffed up. “Who goes there?” they said in unison.

“Out of my way,” Billy said confidently, and walked in between them. The two puffed up even more to stop him.

“You cannot go through,” said the PufferFish in unison again.

“Why are the guards behind the doors that lead to what they’re trying to block?”

“We’re positioned here to prevent anyone uninvited from entering the building.”

“I just came in through the building!”

The PufferFish thought about it. “Well, you might try to enter it again if you leave.”

“Wouldn’t it make sense that if I’m invited, I would have been in there?”

“Well, you’re not in there now, are you?”

“I just was!”

The PufferFish stared blankly, unmoved.

Billy groaned. “All right, I’ll go back inside.” Billy turned around and reached for the “open” button on the right door.

“You can’t go inside unauthorized!” The PufferFish called out again. Billy ignored them and opened the doors. The PufferFish grabbed him and threw him backwards. Billy took his chance. He stumbled upwards and ran down the hallway.

“Stop him!” The PufferFish cried to each other in unison. They puffed up menacingly and pursued Billy in unison. Unfortunately, the first turn of the hallway wasn’t as wide as the rest of the hallway, and the pair of guards was stuck. They screamed for help.

Billy could see the couple he was stalking. “Excuse me! Excuse me!” he cried out, still running though it was unnecessary. “Where’s Mr. Parrot?”

The couple turned around. The female Space Monkey spoke up. “I’m sorry, dear, but it turns out that Mr. Parrot’s not here. He went back inside for the auction.”

Billy groaned. He turned around to face the two PufferFish that were each trying to puff the other one out of the turn in the hall so they could continue their pursuit. Unfortunately, they did everything in unison, so each of them was exerting the same amount of pressure. They were cutting off their circulation and beginning to turn purple. The two then deflated, coughing and wheezing and trying to catch their breaths in unison. Billy leapt over the pair and made his way to the door again.

“Stop him!” The two yelled again in unison. They collapsed.

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Billy ran as fast as he could to the double doors, and pressed the button. The doors opened, and he made his way through the lobby.

He stopped to listen. There was the moan of inane chatter coming out of the wall to his left. He figured that that was where the auction was being held. To his luck, the doors, in front of which the artist had been politely confessing his schemes earlier, were still open. Billy stepped inside.

Looking over the throng of people, he saw that there were indeed multiple Mr. Parrots: one leading the auction, one talking with the artist, one observing the collection of pants and one on a cell phone. Each one had the distinctive look of Mr. Parrot, with feathers all over his body, little bird like eyes, long yellow beak that had formerly been a nose, and a strangely boxy head. Billy could see that each one was marked with a different stage in the transformation to a parrot, so Billy could correctly guess that each Mr. Parrot was really the real Mr. Parrot traveling from a different time of his life. One of the Mr. Parrots, which must have been the youngest one, didn't even have enough feathers on his arms to give the impression that he had wings. The one that Billy thought to be the oldest was the shortest and the most feathered. His boxy head was rounded and his sturdy physique had softened. The other three looked much like what Billy had seen in his history text books in school. Billy still wasn't sure what time frame he was in.

“The auction will be starting in two Diaraman minutes,” said the Mr. Parrot at the front of the auction room. “As you may already know we’ve changed on plans for it. Rather than a silent auction, the artist and owner of these pieces of....art....has proposed making this a conventional

auction. He strongly urges you to be as loud as possible in bidding. That is all.” The Mr. Parrot, though the youngest one in the room, sat down looking tired. He must have been the one who had originally planned the cocktail party. Billy wondered which Mr. Parrot he should go to. The oldest Mr. Parrot, who was on the phone, seemed to be avoiding the auction, and probably knew the most of any of the Mr. Parrots. Billy decided to go towards him, even though it would take the most pushing through the crowds to get to him.

“Hello-o-o-o, Diaramans and Gotithians!” someone said loudly from the front of the auction room. Billy had been unlucky enough to be in front of one of the giant speakers in the room. Billy looked up to see who the culprit was. It was the artist.

“Are you ready to bid?!?” the artist screamed at the top of his lungs.

“Yes!” shouted the crowd excitedly. Billy jumped away from the speakers to safety.

“I can’t hear you!” the artist screamed back.

“Yes!” the crowd shouted louder.

The artist cleared his throat. “Well, then let’s start the auction,” he said hoarsely. He handed the microphone to the Mr. Parrot in charge of the auction.

Billy looked over to the Mr. Parrot on his cell phone. He had stopped talking on the phone (for obvious reasons) and was now focusing his attention onto the auction. Billy sighed. It would be rude to talk to him now, that is, if it wasn’t impossible.

The Mr. Parrot at the front of the room began to speak. “Our first item,” he said, pointing to the artist, who was

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holding up a pair of pants nailed to a board. “Is very nice for parties. This cleverly engineered pair of pants can serve as a bartender and an entertainer, having over fourteen thousand different cocktail recipes programmed into its memory and having been trained by only the finest comedians. If the need arises, it can even toss drunks into the street. A great conversation starter, by the way. Starting at five thousand scarabs. Bids go up by at least one thousand.”

“Six thousand scarabs!” screamed a Gotithian at the top of his lungs.

“Seven thousand!” screamed a Space Monkey at the top of his lungs.

“Eight thousand!” screamed the first bidder again.

“Ten thousand!” said the Space Monkey woman Billy had heard talking with the artist. The crowd was silent in tension. “For the children!” she added. The crowd went wild.

“Eleven thousand!” screamed the first bidder.

“Twelve thousand! Thirteen thousand! Fifteen thousand!” screamed the second bidder in sequence, tearing the hair out of his head. That gave Billy an idea.

“Six –” the first bidder began to shout, but he either decided against it or he couldn’t scream loud enough again.

Billy stood up on the top of the speakers. “Twenty thousand!” he cried out at the top of his lungs. Several people looked at him suspiciously. Billy waved around a fistful of twigs to reassure them of his honesty.

“Twenty thousand!” repeated the youngest Mr. Parrot. “Is that our final offer? Twenty thousand?”

Billy’s face clenched up. He didn’t have nearly twenty thousand scarabs. He probably had five thousand with his and Toby’s wood combined.

“Thirty thousand!” screamed the gullible Space Monkey woman.

“Thirty one thousand!” screamed someone else.

The auction house went into pandemonium. Billy could only hear bids occasionally.

“Forty thousand!”

“Forty five thousand!”

“Seventy five thousand!”

“Fifty thousand!”

“Seventy six thousand!”

“Oh. Er, eighty thousand!”

“Ninety thousand!”

The room was getting more out of control. People were pushing and shoving and screaming themselves hoarse. In the chaos Billy got knocked off of his position on the speaker, which hurt, though many were more badly hurt than he was. One Space Monkey had to be carted out of the room by paramedics. Several were badly injured by fist fights. Billy suspected a riot could break out at any time. He needed to get to a Mr. Parrot before it was too late.

To be safe Billy crawled along the edges of the room, where no one wanted to be since Mr. Parrot couldn't here their bids. The only bidder he saw was the talking pair of pants nailed to a board, which had obviously been planted into the crowd to heat up the frenzy. No one other than he seemed to notice, though. The crowd was too busy pushing, shoving, fighting, and screaming themselves hoarse at a chance to waste money on pants.

“Oh Presley!!!” Billy exclaimed, although it was an anachronistic term. A huge wagon came plowing through the crowd from the double doors of the auction room. It was

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equipped with a huge amplifier, a microphone, and what Billy suspected was a large battery, and it was motorized. Driving it was a grinning Gotithian holding a megaphone. Billy hit the floor and covered his ears. The Gotithian held up the megaphone to the microphone, and shouted, “Two hundred and seventeen thousand scarabs!”

The room went silent. Many people had fainted, and the others were too terrified to move. The security guards advanced towards the Gotithian.

“Let him be,” said the artist, at the microphone at the front of the auction room. “Would anyone else like to bid?”

A brave Gotithian raised his arm. “Two hundred and eighteen thousand, please.”

He got what was coming to him. “TWO HUNDRED AND NINETEEN THOUSAND!!!” the man screamed into the megaphone at the top of his lungs. Many more people, including the opposing bidder, dropped to the ground. Billy’s ears were ringing loudly and tears were trickling down his covered face.

“Two hundred and ninety thousand,” said the artist firmly. “Going once, going twice, sold to the man with the loud amplifier. What is your name, sir?”

“Um, I bid two hundred and *nineteen* thousand,” said the Gotithian a little quieter.

“I heard you clearly,” said the artist. “Are you trying to back your bid down? I don’t tolerate pranksters very well.”

“No, I said –”

“DON’T YOU LIE TO ME! I HEARD WHAT YOU SAID!” the artist yelled. The Gotithian opened his mouth to loudly protest. “YOU THINK THAT’S LOUD? I’VE GOT LOUDER!!!” The artist pointed to the sound engineer to

prepare for battle. However, the sound engineer was in a little ball crying.

Luckily the Gotithian didn't notice the sound engineer, and didn't want to risk having a sound war. He sighed. "I'll take it for two hundred and ninety thousand, then."

"Sold!" the artist exclaimed. "Come up here to get your masterpiece!"

The Gotithian happily walked up to the front of the auction room to collect his expensive prize. On the way he was tripped.

The young Mr. Parrot in charge of the show didn't look surprised. Another Mr. Parrot probably told him what was going to happen. "Thank you, thank you. Please, though, don't smuggle amplifiers into the next Diaraman/Gotithian Cooperation Meeting. How'd you get past security, anyway? Well, that ends the auction for tonight, unless of course you want to bid on the next item, this lovely pair of pants nailed to a board that can catch it on fire. Nuclear fireworks couldn't hold a candle to this piece of art."

The people on the ground – few others were still in the room – got up angry and in pain. It was very clear that no one wanted to bid on another project. The artist saw his dilemma and grabbed the microphone desperately. He made sure that his voice didn't show desperation, though. "Are you sure that you don't want this art? This is probably the only chance you'll ever have to getting it. All remaining artwork will be sold to the El Tuna Café and be displayed there, so it's not like you'll lose it...." Nobody responded to his trick. They were too badly shell-shocked. "Tired, huh? How about we take a short break for drinks and then we'll discuss it again, huh?"

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Once again, nobody responded. The artist turned his head away from the weary crowd, trying not to show his despair. Billy continued advancing towards the front of the room. He wasn't interested in the drinks but he knew that he would have to check on Toby soon, especially if everyone else was going over to the bar. He couldn't lose Mr. Parrot, though.

"This artwork is really funny," said the youngest Mr. Parrot. "The auction was hilarious! With luck nobody else will want the rest of the artwork, and then I can acquire legal rights to franchise the pants. That has happened, hasn't it?"

"I wasn't told, and I'm not going to be telling you, er....I'm not going to tell myself because I didn't say anything to me." The oldest Mr. Parrot said.

"I guess you have your reasons," said Mr. Parrot simply. "Do I know?" he asked, pointing to the three other Mr. Parrots.

"Not entirely," said the oldest Mr. Parrot. "You'll find out."

A more middle-ranged Mr. Parrot, the one that was talking with the artist when Billy entered the auction room, came to the oldest Mr. Parrot. "I'm quite interested in the book I'm writing. Can I tell me more about it?"

"It's almost complete by now," said the oldest Mr. Parrot proudly. "I've just got to jot down a few things that the Gotithian prince is going to tell me today. Three of me remember."

"What Gotithian prince?" asked the youngest Mr. Parrot, raising a feathery eyebrow.

"I referred to him as Billy, I'm sorry. As I remember he's behind me right now."

“Wow!” exclaimed Billy. “You guys already know me! Do you know what I’m going to be saying?”

“Not entirely,” said the oldest Mr. Parrot, smiling as much as his beak would allow. “That’s the reason why I’m here. I need to finish some stuff for the notebook.”

Billy reached down into the bottom half of his spacesuit and pulled out the gleaming notebook. “You mean this?”

“That’s it,” said the oldest Mr. Parrot. “Now I trust that you have seen the page ‘how to escape a cocktail party’?”

“Yes,” said Billy. “It’s a little strange, but Toby – that’s my human friend – and I needed it to get out of a forest we ended up in. We only got there because of your time travel, sirs, which prevented us from suffocating in the former El Tuna Café.”

“What’s happened to the El Tuna Café?” asked the younger Mr. Parrot.

“Roy’s gone. That is, Roy will be gone. He and Simon got into another war and Simon made his way into the El Tuna Café. There was a huge battle and Roy used the Squeenburg to build a temporary universe. The El Tuna Café’s contents got sucked into the vortex of the universe and when the universe froze over all that was left was a cone shaped void.” The Mr. Parrots nodded. Billy waited for them to say something. Nothing happened, so he decided to ask a question. “So, what’s going to happen tonight?”

“Well,” said the oldest Mr. Parrot, “We’re supposed to be finishing this conversation soon, then we’ll join the others for some drinks and you’ll check up on the human. Then we’ll exchange information about the future and some

scientific ideas for both parties' benefit. You'll be leaving in the Squeenburg, which has just been completed."

"Sounds good," said Billy. "Let's go to the bar."

"But," continued the oldest Mr. Parrot, "That's not necessarily what is going to happen. That's what's most likely going to happen. You see, you always have to leave open the probability of something else happening. Something other than what I just basically explained is the most likely thing to happen within our knowledge of reality, but things can defy what we think of when we think of reality. As I've told my younger selves, look out."

"What do you mean?" asked Billy.

"Well," said the oldest Mr. Parrot. "I happen to know that you went looking for one of me at the dock of the ship we're on, and you came across two imbeciles that are my security guards. How do I know this? You never told me it, and not a single Mr. Parrot here was there. I know it because I remember myself hearing myself say it to you at this moment. No information actually came into my mind, it just popped into existence as a result of time travel. Time travel itself changes reality, so not everything follows the laws of reality that we recognize. Most of it is determined by the new laws, though, so in most circumstances I would know what's going to happen in the future because I remember what happened. However, there is a probability factor to everything, so what I remember may disagree with the future ahead."

"So, you're memory might be false?"

"Not quite. It's a real memory by normal logic because the events actually happened. You could argue that it is a false memory if something else happens that disagrees with

the memory, though, in the unlikely event of something noticeable new happening like, say, the Universe randomly turns into chocolate cake and eats itself. Alternate history is probably possible. There's a good theory by an old colleague of mine that the reason why we don't notice changes in histories is, well, because our memories will change with the change in history, so in our mind nothing has changed. Yet if we were to go back in time we could notice the change."

"So reality only really exists in your mind," said Billy.

"Yes. Reality only exists in the mind. Thanks to probability, though, the history stays on a fairly logical path."

"Was your colleague Bob Rednow?" asked Billy, remembering Phil's teachings.

"No, no," said the oldest Mr. Parrot. "Bob Rednow didn't think that time travel was possible. He thought that the past disappeared as soon as the moment passed. The colleague of mine was named Ed Lemoniod, a distant relative of Willy Lemoniod. Didn't you read the chapter that got you here? It talked about who he was."

"I didn't read the chapter," said Billy. A smile curled on his face. "Hey! History's just changed!"

"I don't know if that's bad luck or good luck," said the oldest Mr. Parrot, frowning. "It proves my point pretty well, but normally when history noticeably changes it defies reality and logic. It's like the time all the chicken eggs on Margues rose up to rebel against the Cube People. Very strange, very dangerous. Millions died."

"I will have been there? Cool!" said the youngest Mr. Parrot.

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“I was there, I remember going there when I was younger. But I don’t know if one of you’ll go there, if history’s changed.”

“But I thought that history could change and nobody would notice because their memories would change!” Billy exclaimed.

“Usually it’s only a slight change, so it doesn’t contradict their memory. When it’s something noticeable, it’s normally really weird, like the Egg Rebellion.”

“So wait a minute,” said Billy. “All of history’s running at once, in a way? Why aren’t there more weird things going on?”

“The possibility of changing is usually infinitesimally small,” said the oldest Mr. Parrot, “and the Universe hasn’t existed forever, and just as a guess it won’t last forever either.”

“We should probably be getting to the human now,” said one of the three middle ranged Mr. Parrots. Billy was finding it difficult to keep them straight. “As I recall the human’s drunkenness gets him into a lot of trouble. I’d like to see how it is this time.” The six of them agreed, and made their way out of the room.

“How much does time travel affect the Universe?” Billy asked the Mr. Parrots.

“Time travel itself has no effect over the course of history,” said the youngest Mr. Parrot, “As I explained in a speech today. You probably weren’t there. It can make some illogical impacts, like giving us Mr. Parrots information that only came to us through listening to our future selves speak and then repeating the statement when we came to that time. Those changes aren’t really changes on the course of history

since they are a part of history. The only time that history changes is in the unlikely event that a possible history becomes the actual history. Time travel has nothing to do with it, but due to our memories it is only possible to view the change in history when you travel back in time, giving you the illusion that you did something.”

“I see,” said Billy. “I also see Toby. Gee, he looks drunk. Pretty good for his first taste of Liquid Turtle.”

“Actually, it’s not at all surprising,” said a middle ranged Mr. Parrot. “Liquid Turtle’s made to taste terrible. The inventors were trying to enter the liquor industry but there were too many good tasting competitors. They correctly figured that if they made a terrible tasting drink, people would feel bad and find a need for alcohol, which could be temporarily satisfied by another drink of Liquid Turtle. Temporarily is the key, because of course Liquid Turtle tastes just as bad the second time as the first time, and you’ll need to take another drink. The downward spiral continues until you’re too drunk to taste anything at all.”

“Clever,” said Billy, but his happiness of the discovery faded away. Toby seemed to be trying to talk to some nearby drinkers! He really hoped that no one understood English before Presleytarianism, but given the huge number of classy Gotithians and Space Monkeys around the bar it was likely that a few of them would recognize the human language.

“Don’t worry about the human,” said the youngest Mr. Parrot. Billy jumped at the word “human”. “I said don’t worry. I’m good friends with both Roy and Dave, so no livestock property lawsuits will come your way.” Billy sighed in relief.

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The pair of Space Monkeys that Billy had followed to the entrance came running in, looking very worried. Running behind them were two Gotithian security guards.

“Mr. Parrot! Mr. Parrot!” screeched the female Space Monkey. “We’re trapped!”

All five Mr. Parrots were startled. “What?” three of them said in unison.

“It’s true,” confirmed a security guard, coming up to the group of Mr. Parrots, panting. “Check for yourself. This couple was....the couple was....trying to get out, but couldn’t....so I tried to help them. We somehow couldn’t get out of the garage, although the exit of the garage, as well as Diarama, was in plain view. I even went above the speed of light, and still couldn’t get out!”

“So you weren’t moving at all?” asked the oldest Mr. Parrot, raising a feathery eyebrow.

“Oh, we were moving all right, the measures all confirmed that we had traveled ten light years, but when we slowed down we were in the exact same place as we had started.”

“That’s not the worst part,” said the other security guard. “I went into the airlock and threw a rock down to Diarama. The rock fell out of the ship, but it curved and landed back where I threw it.”

Everyone in the room was murmuring and panicked. The five Mr. Parrots were also shocked. This was nothing like what their memories told them.

The oldest Mr. Parrot looked down to Billy. “Billy, did anything strange happen when you came here?”

“Nothing really,” said Billy, “except...the wind flipped some pages over the page that had the box on it. The box that brought us here....”

The Mr. Parrots gasped. “Do you know what this means?” cried out the oldest Mr. Parrot. The four others nodded.

“We’re trapped in between pages of a book,” said the youngest Mr. Parrot. The murmuring turned into shouting.

“How could this happen?” Billy shouted.

“Youngest, and maybe the others,” said the oldest Mr. Parrot, “Control the crowd. Billy, this is one of those history changes. A wind randomly blew onto the pages of my notebook in that history. The box that you use to travel to this cocktail party is a small connection to this part of space-time. Time travel forces you through the connection. There’s normally no problem with things going through the connection, unless of course the pages that blew onto it held other connections of space-time. If time travel sucks of other connections....well, that’s disastrous. It can wrap space-time around this certain area of space-time and completely isolate it from the rest of the Universe.”

“What are we going to do?” Billy yelped. He couldn’t understand why the Mr. Parrots didn’t seem as concerned as the rest of the people.

“Oftentimes the problem resolves itself,” said Mr. Parrot. “That is, in natural occurrences of this sort, when space-time randomly jumbles itself together. The matter and energy that make up the space-time will eventually sort itself out according to probability. With time travelers it’s a little trickier, basically since time travelers have such foreign space-time alienated from the rest of the Universe due to the

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reactions between tunamatic material and the interior glass of Dave's light bulbs. In those cases the tangle of space-time is more tightly knotted, especially if there are multiple time travelers."

"That doesn't explain how we're going to get out!!!"
Billy screamed.

"Be patient," said Mr. Parrot calmly. He thought for a moment. "Well, you're right. It doesn't. I don't know what to do."

"Don't you have any light bulb tricks or anything?"
asked Billy.

Mr. Parrot shook his feathered head. "Sorry, I don't. To be honest, the filling of light bulb with tuna and smashing it was just an accident. The phenomenon was never fully studied. I just assumed that there was some sort of reaction between the tuna and the light bulb that was unique to Dave's brand, but like I said, it was never fully studied. I suppose that it could be...."

"That's not going to help," said Billy miserably. His head was throbbing and he had a headache. He sat down on the ground, and silently vowed that if they ever got out of this, he would immediately return Toby to Earth and probably live there too.

"Moping isn't going to make anything better, either,"
said Mr. Parrot.

"Well, what else am I supposed to do?" exclaimed
Billy angrily. "Are we supposed to fill every nook and cranny with tuna, and smash it?"

"Maybe," said Mr. Parrot, scratching his red chin. "But look at it this way. We're basically stuck in a giant, four

dimensional knot. The real question is: how do you untie a knot?"

"You'll grab the knot and pull on it until the string comes undone," said Billy, hiding his face in his knees, "But usually that applies to three dimensional, little knots. Not four dimensional knots in space-time."

"But there really isn't any difference, now is there?" said Mr. Parrot reassuringly. "You have a point, though. I don't think anyone's ever untied a knot from the inside. It'll probably have to be worked out from the outside. From the rest of the Universe this knot looks like some sort of wild light deflector. Light randomly appears and disappears as it travels though different times, and ships do seemingly random things, like disappear into nothingness and crash into the edge of one of my notebook's pages, giving the owner a terrible paper cut. Billy, how will people react to such a strange phenomenon?"

"They'll probably launch nuclear fireworks at it to see what happens," said Billy miserably.

"Fireworks! Of course!" said Mr. Parrot enthusiastically. "Nuclear fireworks wouldn't do the job, but...have you ever heard of quantum fireworks?"

"No," said Billy, looking up at Mr. Parrot.

"It's a very interesting idea. Basically the firework breaks up quarks, anti-quarks, and even strings themselves. Space-time decays and there's a small area of absolute chaos. Makes a very nice explosion, but terribly expensive. My point is, if someone launches a quantum firework at this knot it could untangle it."

"Then we could escape?" asked Billy, getting his hopes up.

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“Then we’d be flung into almost anywhere in the Universe,” said Mr. Parrot. “When a space-time knot snaps, it’s not pretty. But don’t worry. Little could happen to us if we’re prepared.”

“What could we do to prepare for it?” asked Billy.

“Well, we could get into a ship and wait patiently for a firework to hit, but since we’re already in a ship we can skip that step and go right to the waiting.”

“How long will it take for a quantum firework to hit?” asked Billy despairingly.

“There’s no telling,” said Mr. Parrot. “What with the fact that we’re in our own very isolated timeframe, that history could alternate outside, and the like. Don’t worry. It has to happen at some point in time, whatever that is.”

Tears trickled down Billy. He sighed. “What do we do until then?”

“Well, we could hold another pants auction,” said Mr. Parrot, “But I don’t think that the artist would approve of that. He can’t contact his call-in bidders. I’d better tell myself to explain to him why. For you, I suggest helping your human friend out.” Mr. Parrot turned and walked away.

Billy looked over to Toby. The top of his spacesuit was now completely off, and he was trying to chat with a Gotithian. The Gotithian seemed angry, but the youngest Mr. Parrot was keeping Toby safe. Strangely enough, now that he was drunk, Toby was able to say a few words in Gotithian. It made Billy wonder what Mr. Parrot was doing when he came up with the Gotithian language.

“Come on, man! This is the last time! Oh, you’re fired! You’re definitely fired for this! What’s that? I don’t pay you anyway? Well, I’ve only sold one pair of pants, genius! Oh,

no, you listen to me!” The artist ranted and raved into his cell phone. Next to him was the oldest Mr. Parrot, trying to calm him down and let him know that they were out of contact with the rest of the Universe, and had been for some time now.

Billy looked over at Toby. He had gotten sick to his stomach and was lying on the floor, leaning against the bar table and drinking from the bottle of Liquid Turtle. It made Billy sick to see his friend like that. So sick, in fact, that he needed a drink. He sat down next to Toby and greeted him. Toby didn’t respond, so he took the bottle of Liquid Turtle from him. It was half empty. If Billy hadn’t learned the business strategy of Liquid Turtle from Mr. Parrot, he would have been proud of him. He was a little proud of him for having not thrown up, but slightly afraid of him for the same reason. He scooted away from Toby and took a drink of the stuff. The artist had finally got off his phone, and was quite shocked when Mr. Parrot told him that they were completely isolated from the rest of the Universe. When Mr. Parrot asked why the artist was considering firing an over-the-phone “bidder” the artist had to use the bathroom badly and ran off, so the youngest Mr. Parrot joined the three middle-ranged Mr. Parrots in explaining to the crowd the exact situation they were in. Meanwhile the oldest Mr. Parrot was sitting calmly at the bar, drinking a martini and probably contemplating the Universe in relation to the situation that it had lead them into. Billy wondered if Mr. Parrot knew anything more about the Dimension of Nothing. He seemed to know something about Bob Rednow. Billy checked on Toby, who was in a drunken sleep. “Mr. Parrot,” asked Billy

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from the ground, “What do you know about the Dimension of Nothing?”

A middle-ranged Mr. Parrot came running up to them. “Me, Billy, human, I suggest you put on your spacesuits.”

“Is it happening?” asked the oldest Mr. Parrot. “Don’t tell anyone else, though. I don’t want a panic.”

The oldest Mr. Parrot nodded. “Billy, put on your spacesuit and get Toby to do the same.” He looked up at the other Mr. Parrot. “That’s what I’m doing too, right?”

The middle-ranged Mr. Parrot nodded. “I suggest you do it too. Our spacesuits are on the coat hanger.”

“What’s happening?” asked Billy, snapping Toby’s two part spacesuit together. He suspected a quantum firework had hit the space-time knot, but he didn’t know why there weren’t immediate results. He also wanted to know why they needed their spacesuits.

“No time,” said the two Mr. Parrots, who then left.

Billy was worried. He put his spacesuit together and braced himself. The crowd was getting suspicious. Several people were asking where a Mr. Parrot was, and a few were fleeing to their spaceships. Outside of the window the view was still the same, except for a giant page flashed through their view occasionally and a few minor explosions here and there. A Mr. Parrot in a custom spacesuit came running to him, dodging all of the questions from the dreading crowd.

“Billy! I and the other of me devised a way to prevent space-time whiplash!” Mr. Parrot said in a muffled voice from his spacesuit.

“How?”

“Follow me!” said Mr. Parrot simply.

“What about Toby?”

Worship your Vermin

“We can carry him,” said Mr. Parrot, sparing no time for Billy’s agreement. The two picked Toby up and Mr. Parrot guided them away from the crowd.

“So what do we do?” Billy asked

“Well, because of the light bulb to tuna reaction and the knot in space –”

SNAP!

Hobo It

The elevator doors opened. "All right," said Roy, "How are we going to get off of Hahaiwontherafflesonowyouhavetocallyourplanetthis?"

"WonderClaus's trick was clever," said Simon, "People should be too wrapped up in trying to save WonderClaus to check up on us right now. I suggest staying calm and trying not to bring any attention to us."

"I'd like to," said Roy, "But WonderClaus's trick isn't going to last forever. Besides, we're Gotithians, a hunted species!"

"Relax, Roy," said Simon. "We're on the run. I happen to have extensive knowledge of that, thanks to you. Come on; let's walk around the park so that we don't draw attention."

Roy nodded, and the two began walking. "We still need a way to get off this planet."

"Yes," agreed Simon, still very calm, "But WonderClaus was talking about having a cockroach help us. He had to have planned the Snuff Puffa trick, so he most likely told us that with the cockroach escape in mind. Also, remember that he told us that the cockroaches suffered a huge defeat to the Guinea Pigs. That probably means that cockroaches are rare. We can take a safe bet and say that a cockroach that we come across is going to help us."

"That's not true," said Roy.

"Well, any Margusean cockroach, of course."

"No," said Roy, "Still. WonderClaus would have had to plant a helping cockroach, unless he has several. Either

way, we will have to go on a route that he figured that we would go on, or we won't run into the right cockroach."

"Where do you think he would expect us to go?"

"Well, that's the thing. If we try to go to where he would expect us to go, we wouldn't be going to where we would have gone, so we would fail!"

"Maybe he expected us to go where he thought we would think that he would expect us to go," muttered Simon.

"Wait!" said Roy. "I just remembered! He told us that his pants could give us help if we needed it, right? All we need to do is to find a pair of his pants!"

"Out in this city? That seems a little unlikely," said Simon.

"Well, the city belongs to the Presleytarians. I would expect that some government establishment on Hahaiwontherafflesonowyouhavetocallyourplanetthis would have pants. How about the police department? They might have some security pants on staff."

"Or the bank," suggested Simon. "The problem is: where do we find either of those places?"

"The bank's easy," said Roy, "Since there are typically banks all over a city. The problem is that the bank might not have government owned security pants."

"Well, we'll look at a bank," said Simon, "and even if they don't have security pants, they can point us in the right direction."

"Sounds good," said Roy, "But what about the issue of not being caught?"

"Well, my plan sort of relies on the word having not got out yet," admitted Simon. "It does seem a little risky, doesn't it?"

“Well,” said Roy, “WonderClaus has an excuse not to call on his police – he is dying of a heart attack, isn’t he? – but someone else might have called up. It doesn’t seem like a good chance to take.”

“Maybe, since the police don’t know he’s supposed to be dying of a heart attack, he sent the word out, and the police are supposed to ‘arrest’ us, which will lead us to the cockroach he was talking about?” suggested Simon as they reached the road. He motioned his thumb behind his back and looked at Roy. Roy shook his head and the two began walking in the city.

“That doesn’t seem like a risk I’m willing to take,” said Roy. “The bank thing seems slightly less risky, and if the situation is as your plan says, then the banks will probably help us too. We should try a bank. Ah, there’s a bank right down there, next to that pub. There’s also one across from the pub.....and I think what’s sharing a building with the pub is a bank too.....”

“Good,” said Simon. “Feels weird to see banks that aren’t yours, doesn’t it, Roy?”

Roy nodded. During his reign all banks became government property, under the name “Royal Universal Bank”. “Obviously these banks can’t be government owned, can they? Why would there be three banks next to each other if they weren’t competitors?”

“Well, actually,” pointed out Simon as they got closer, “The bank above the pub and the bank next to the pub are the same.”

“Really? That’s just stupid,” muttered Roy. “Maybe the one above the pub is an office building for the company that owns the bank next to the pub.”

“No, there’s an ATM up there,” said Simon, now pointing to an exhausted looking frog native to Hahaiwontherafflesonowyouhavetocallyourplanetthis who had climbed a telephone pole and was now reaching for the ATM with its bank card.

“Maybe it’s the other way around,” said Roy, looking flustered. “Why else would the frog be reaching for that particular ATM?”

“No,” said Simon. “I can’t make the sign out well at this angle, but it seems like an ad for the bank.”

“Strange,” murmured Roy. “Which bank should we try, then?”

“I don’t know,” said Simon. “I don’t know which one would have a pair of security pants.”

“There’s no need,” said Roy. The two brothers were now in front of the pub. Roy peered into the glass on the doors of the pub. “There’s no need,” he repeated. Simon looked in with him. “See that frog in police uniform?”

“Yes,” said Simon. Suddenly something dawned to him. “Roy, why don’t you recognize this species?”

“Never had the time,” said Roy. “They never really caught my attention. This planet’s not exactly Gotithia, you know. I was a little busy with other work.”

Simon looked at him funny.

“It’s a big Universe, okay?” Roy exclaimed. “I had only a million years in office. How am I supposed to remember all of the species and planets?”

“When it comes to life, the Universe isn’t that big,” said Simon. “We’re wasting time. The police frog is getting away. Let’s go.”

Roy nodded. He was a little embarrassed to have his ignorance of the Universe exposed. He pulled one of the pub's double doors open, and let Simon go through. He followed.

The pub smelled terrible, both brothers noted as they entered. After a quick glance around the room they found that the smell was coming from a small table surrounded with frogs that were smoking something that was probably Snuff Puffa. A few frogs were fighting and three were debating whether or not one of them lost its teeth in a fight (they were clearly drunk). To Roy's surprise, rather than drinking their liquor they poured it onto themselves. Due to his experience in the wilderness, Simon wasn't also surprised. He knew what they were doing.

The police frog they were following approached the glowing blue bar in the center of the room. He was saying something to the bartender. Roy and Simon advanced as casually as possible, keeping an ear out for what the policeman might say on the status of WonderClaus's search for them.

"Health inspection again?" asked the bartender frog. Simon was disappointed. Roy saw opportunity. "The vodka needs to be inspected how many times?"

The police frog turned its glazed eyes upwards as if thinking about the question. "Well, uh, boss told me to be sure that it's all right. I got a little suspicious about that last one."

"As well as the three before that?" asked the bartender.

"Yeah," said the frog. "Gotta be sure, right? Public safety!"

The bartender sighed and poured something into the police frog's obscenely large "shot glass". At a closer look Roy could see that it was actually mouthwash.

"What can I get you two gents?" the bartender asked, looking at Roy and Simon.

"Nothing," said Simon. "Do you know what's going on with WonderClaus?"

The frog widened its eyes. "What's happened?"

"Nothing," said Simon, turning his head towards the police frog. "We were just a little worried about his health." The police frog let out a belch, and dumped the mouthwash onto its head. Roy saw his chance.

"Sir, we would like to know –"

"It's for public safety!" the police frog interrupted. "I've got to be sure this....uh....vodka....is okay, okay?"

"Yes, I know," said Roy, "but I was wondering if you could tell us where –"

"I'm not a tour guide, okay?" the frog shouted.

"It would take a drunk to think anyone would travel to *this* planet," Simon muttered to Roy.

Roy nodded, and then sighed. He had had trouble with drunks before. He remembered the drunk in Dave's office shortly before his demise. The drunk had thrown poker chips at him, claiming it was cake, and had forced Roy to endure his tales of woe, including how he had robbed his own house and then lit it on fire. The drunk had revealed to Roy Simon and Willy Lemoniod's original plot against him, though, so Roy figured drunks could be useful.

"Are you two looking for the Gotithian Hall?" asked the bartender before Roy could speak again.

"Gotithian Hall?" asked Simon.

The bartender didn't expect Simon's response. Not knowing what to do, he turned away from Roy and Simon and started wiping glasses. Though both desperately wanted to know what "Gotithian Hall" was, they decided not to question the bartender.

Roy focused his attention back on the drunken policeman. "Could you tell us where the police station is?"

"I told you, I'm not a tour guide," said the frog, irritated. He pounded his shot glass against the bar. The bartender pretended not to hear him.

"Well," said Simon, thinking fast. "Perhaps you need to arrest us. Have you ever thought of that?"

"I need to arrest you, eh?" asked the drunk, looking at Simon half interested, half wanting badly to puke. He pounded the shot glass against the bar again. The bartender began humming.

"That would not be worth your time," said Simon. Roy nodded. "It would be more convenient if we arrested ourselves. The problem is, though," he said with a dramatic sigh, "We don't know where the police station is."

The frog gave out a bellowing laugh. "Don't insult my intelligence like that!" he boomed. Simon bit his lower lip. "I see your plot! Trying to arrest yourselves, sure! You two are just trying to get on the boss's good side."

"No we're not!" argued Roy instinctively. Simon elbowed him.

"Really," said the frog, coming so close to Roy that Roy could smell his mint-fresh breath. "Then what's your crime?" He banged his shot glass down for a third time. The bartender's humming grew louder.

“Crime? We’ve committed lots of crimes,” said Simon, looking to Roy for help. Roy shrugged. “Well, we’ve....uh, robbed several valuable pieces of jewelry! That’s it!”

The frog laughed. “Nice one, rookie! I’m not letting an innocent pair of Gotithians get in that easily, though! Where’s your proof?”

“Well,” began Simon, thinking to himself. “We’ve got the culprits’ confession, don’t we?”

“True,” said the frog, scratching his throat. He banged his shot glass down yet again. The bartender began humming so loudly it sounded like a muffled scream. The frog pondered Simon’s evidence a little more. “All right,” he said finally. “You can arrest yourselves. The police station’s down the street. You take a left at the first intersection, and then you take a right.” The frog raised his shot glass as if to bang it down again, but decided he’d rather throw it at the bartender. It missed.

“Thank you for your help,” said Simon politely but nervously, as a gruff looking frog came from the direction in which the police frog had thrown the shot glass. “We won’t be a burden to you like this again.”

“You’d better not be,” said the frog. “Pretty bad of you, to steal jewelry. Hard criminals, though. How’d you manage to catch yourself?”

Simon and Roy did answer that last question, as they were already headed towards the door. Their sudden retreat made the angry frog suspicious. “Why are they running?” it asked.

“Resisting arrest, I suppose,” said the police frog as the two brothers pushed the exit doors open. “Don’t worry, they’ll probably catch themselves.”

The door closed behind them. The two brothers stopped for a moment. “Are they following us?” Roy asked.

“No,” said Simon, turning to the street. “I see an intersection down this hill. The police station’s probably around the corner.”

Roy nodded, and the two made their way down the street. “We’ve been pretty lucky so far. We’re on a small planet owned by a Gotithian. I can’t imagine the trouble we’re going to have wherever we’re going.”

“We’ve been lucky to not have the police after us,” said Simon grimly. “They must still be held up with the WonderClaus issue. But speaking of Gotithians, what do you think the bartender meant by ‘Gotithian Hall’?”

“That perplexed me too,” said Roy simply. “It can’t be some sort of Gotithian admiration thing, since he expected us to be part of it. It has to involve actual Gotithians. Yet WonderClaus said that the Gotithian race is extinct.”

“That doesn’t mean we and WonderClaus are the only Gotithians,” said Simon softly. He knew Roy was thinking about Billy. He was too. He had put that kid through a lot of trouble trying to overthrow Roy.

“Still,” Roy began. He cleared his throat to sound firmer. “If there was only a small number of Gotithians in the Gotithian Hall then the bartender would recognize the Gotithians, right?”

“Probably,” agreed Simon. “Maybe there is a small number, though, and since he isn’t a part of the group he just assumed that we were members even though he didn’t

recognize us. You know, he didn't trust his own judgment because he isn't there."

The two of them turned left. They saw the police station to their right. "That's a shoddy place," Roy said, pointing out the obvious.

Indeed it was a shoddy place. Not only was the building's mint green paint chipped and, from what they could see, the floor inside covered with filth, but it also was on fire. At least, the top of it was burning, and the flames didn't look controlled.

The doors slid away automatically much like a convenience store's do. There were even what Roy guessed to be anti-shop lift devices still installed behind the doors. Roy took extra precautions to watch his step – the floor was covered in old bags of chips, spilled soda, and all kinds of other snacks that had become unrecognizable from the heavy traffic of policemen coming and going. As the convenience store-style doors closed there was a small ring, probably intended originally to notify store employees of customers.

"By Elvis, if you're Allan, you'd better start running!" exclaimed a small, firm voice.

"We're not Allan," said Simon anxiously.

From the hallway emerged, just as Simon had expected, a small Margusean cockroach.

"Roy and Simon! I've been waiting for you! Could you lift me up....I don't know, onto that counter?"

Roy bent down and lifted the cockroach to the counter to the side. He was now positive that this police station used to be a convenience store.

“Sorry,” said the cockroach, “But I got myself stuck in one of those vermin trapping machines and my hover board broke. I think Allan did it again.”

“I thought that Margusean cockroaches were smart enough not to fall for those traps,” said Roy. He felt awkward after saying it.

“In most cases, yes,” said the cockroach. “But shortly before the fall of the cockroach faction a few other factions began producing cleverer and cleverer bug traps. This one looked just like one of the old bags of chips on the floor that I like to snack on from time to time. Allan’s sick of this filth, being a frog. But hey, I’m the sheriff, right?”

“If WonderClaus set you up to help us, why would he expect us to come here?” said Simon, looking around the filthy former convenience store.

“Who are you anyway?” asked Roy.

“I’m Jerry,” said the cockroach, flicking his antennae as a greeting gesture. “And WonderClaus knew you would come here because he planted the drunk that would tell you to go to the police station.”

“But how could he expect us to go to that pub?” asked Simon.

“A recent study of history shows us that you have an unconscious attraction to pubs, Simon. I think that your brain hears the undetectable noises of a rowdy pub and you end up going in that direction.”

“Clever,” said Simon, stunned at this discovery.

“Yes. Well, we’d better be going. There’s a Jiggy Gas Piggy outside.”

“Oh,” said Roy. “Before you leave, maybe you should know that this building’s on fire.”

“What? Oh, of course! That’s just a pile of security pants. The pants will light up to strangers and I don’t want that happening inside the building, so I just keep the pants on the roof.”

“Where are you taking us?” asked Simon, figuring that was a more important question than why the building was on fire.

“Pick me up and go through that door,” said the cockroach, pointing an antenna at a door to the side of the counter. Simon obeyed, revealing a one ship garage with a small gray Jiggy Gas Piggy.

“Now get me into the driver’s side of the ship,” said the cockroach.

Simon walked around to the other side of the ship and opened the door. He looked up at the top of the ship. “That’s a pretty bad police ship. It is a land ship, isn’t it?”

“It’s normally used on this planet,” confirmed Jerry.

“Then why doesn’t it have sirens?” asked Roy. “I only see a little speaker.”

“Uh, that’s a little embarrassing,” said Jerry. “You see, we’ve had a lot of lawsuits.”

“Lawsuits?” asked Roy, raising an eyebrow although nobody could see him on his side of the ship.

“Yes. Several frogs on this godforsaken rock are epileptic, and they’ve been complaining about how the bright, flashing police lights can induce seizures.”

“So?” asked Simon.

“So, sirens were banned. Now all we can do to alert people of our coming is to use that speaker to tell people to move out of the way, and the like. However, there were a few more complaints, this time from criminals. They were

complaining that they had gotten out of the way of the police when committing their crimes and do not deserve an arrest since the police, who had told them to get out of the way, were now bringing them *closer*. They said we were vague, cruel, and impolite hypocrites.”

“What do you do now?” asked Roy, sympathizing with the law enforcer.

“Well, our police warning has been reduced to a beep followed by ‘Please do not commit a crime’. Unfortunately, there’s a new investigation underway on how the repetition of the court ordered police warning is psychologically damaging the youth of Hahaiwontherafflesonenowyouhavetocallyourplanetthis through subliminal brainwashing.”

“Subliminal brainwashing!” cried Roy, finally stepping into the ship.

“I know,” said Jerry. “And, like I said, it’s a court-ordered message, and yet we’re losing hundreds of thousands of scarabs in court from it. Budget’s been cut pretty badly, and the bank foreclosed on the police station loan, so we had to move the police station to a run down former convenience store. Not that I’m complaining. The filth is what got the police to hire cockroaches like me.”

“Okay,” said Simon. “I have two more things to ask. Where are you taking us to and....can you take us there?”

“There’s a secret society of outlaws on Diarama,” said the cockroach, pressing a few buttons on the ship. The garage door opened and the ship flew out. “How’d you like WonderClaus?”

“He’s nice for saving us like that,” said Roy, “But I hate talking to him. He was trying to get some information

about nonbelievers out of us, and we had a horribly stupid conversation.”

“You’d better not complain about it at the society. There are a lot of Presleytarians there.”

“That’s the other thing. I hate Presleytarianism. I don’t see how the Universe can function with the church in so much power.”

“The church needs to be in power,” said the cockroach.

“Why?”

“Separation of church and state is impossible.”

“That doesn’t explain why,” said Simon.

“No, don’t you see? I think that we can agree on religion being a group of fundamental beliefs common to a large amount of people. Not all religions have an afterlife, or even a god, you know. With that in mind, atheism is a religion. Separation of church from state is impossible.”

“Well, secular governments are the most logical!” exclaimed Roy.

“That’s the other thing,” said Jerry softly. “If a religion is the correct one, then the judgment from that religion must be the most correct judgment. By believing that a secular government is more logical than a government governed by your religion, you admit that your religion is illogical and therefore untrue.”

“That’s what religions are!” said Roy.

“That’s very diplomatic of you,” said the cockroach. “Here’s the funny part: religions are always illogical anyway. They’re always so deceptive, corrupted, and modified by the time they pass a cult stage that the original version is hardly anything like the modern version. The reason? The situation

changes and the religion becomes inconvenient. If the religious doctrines were correct in the first place, why would they need to be changed? Presleytarians used to believe that if you were bad you would burn in pre-fire for eternity. People abhorred the idea – and, frankly, it didn’t make any logical sense – so they abandoned it. Now pre-fire is a temporary thing. Why? Because people wanted to be more comfortable with religion.”

“That’s always the case,” said Roy coldly. “It’s always that people want to be more comfortable. That was WonderClaus’s main argument in the end of our discussion, really. He asked us if we wanted to believe in a pre-life and an omni benevolent rock star.”

“That tends to make religions very illogical. People will ignore the truth to feel better,” said Jerry. Roy and Simon nodded. He flicked his antennae happily. “Tell me, how do you two atheists go to sleep at night?”

“Well,” said Simon, detecting a rhetorical question, “I lie down and I sort of stay put until I doze off.”

“No, that’s not what I meant,” said Jerry irritably. “I meant, how can you go to sleep with thoughts like the fact that all of your consciousness will fade away for eternity after you die?”

“I try not to think about it,” admitted Roy.

“Aha! See, you’re falling into a comfort zone yourself.”

“That’s different,” said Simon, “We acknowledge the fact that we are going to disappear forever once Willy Lemoniod’s Afterlife is destroyed – whenever that may be.”

“Sure, sure. It’s always different.”

Roy scoffed. “Well, if you don’t think that religion is honest, and you don’t think atheism is honest, what do you believe?”

“I’m a nihilist,” said Jerry proudly.

“Great. You believe in nothing,” said Roy, rolling his eyes. “That’s a solid belief.”

“Not like that,” said Jerry quickly. “I mean, I believe in the Dimension of Nothing and that all of existence is going to come into unison with nonexistence. You’ve heard of Bob Rednow, haven’t you?”

“Yes,” said Roy. “He sued the El Tuna Café for injuries to his imaginary friend. I think he made up the whole theory for the sake of the lawsuit.”

“Maybe, but it’s still a pretty convincing theory if you ask me!”

“Tell us about where you’re taking us,” said Simon, wanting to get finish the conversation.”

“Oh, of course,” said Jerry. “Just don’t think that this was your last theology argument. WonderClaus knows this society and he’ll probably come to use you once the coast is clear.

“But what is the secret society for?” Roy asked anxiously.

“I don’t know the exact details,” admitted Jerry. “I do know a thing or two from WonderClaus, though. It’s a group of what you would call ‘hobos’. They’re fabulously wealthy. I don’t know how, but they manipulate the economy of Diarama.”

“Hobos are manipulating the economy of Diarama?” Roy exclaimed.

“Oh yes. They’ve been doing it for a while. In fact, I think it started at the beginning of your reign, Roy.”

Roy was surprised, but not as much as Simon. “I’ve always been wondering how Diarama has any money at all. Their main industry is still gold synthesizing, right?”

“Yes, they still mess with anything cheap made out of gold. Mainly paper, still. That’s what the society does. Although there are plenty of government officials and economists and rich businessmen who think that they are doing their work to keep Diarama stable, it’s really that secret society that controls the economy.”

“But why would they want us?” asked Simon, surprised. “Why would a group of rich hobos want anything to do with us?”

“How do they control the economy?” asked Roy.

“I don’t know the answer to either of those questions,” said Jerry. “But we’re landing soon, so you’ll be able to find out.”

“I’ve always been suspicious of the Diaraman economy,” said Simon. “They produce a whole lot of paper and junk like that, and their stock market is doing great, but few companies outside of Diarama actually buy the junk. That’s all they produce, that junk, and so they have to import everything else, yet they’re so rich!”

“Not all of it’s wealthy,” said Roy. “But they have zero unemployment and their economic success is almost completely unrelated to the economy of the rest of the Universe. I opened an investigation of the economic success of Diarama, but all of my researchers either quit early on or ended up in mental hospitals.”

“Maybe that’s why they want you,” said the cockroach. “Or at least, willing to take you.”

“Huh?” said Roy and Simon in unison.

“Roy opened up an investigation and failed. Maybe they want to ask you why the investigation failed so that they can repeat their success. The new faction that controls Diarama – the Guinea Pigs – is opening up an investigation of the economy as we speak. They’re definitely afraid.”

“About those Guinea Pigs,” said Roy. “These are the Guinea Pigs that Billy’s mother engineered, right?”

“Yes,” said the cockroach. “Shortly after that fateful battle in the El Tuna Café Billy’s family abandoned the ranch and went into hiding, supposedly separate from each other. It didn’t take long for the super intelligent Guinea Pigs to realize what had happened, and they left the ranch too. Some idiots must have given the Guinea Pigs weapons of mass destruction, because they somehow were able to show their superiority through a bloody campaign of killing and stuff.”

“How’d they crush your race?” asked Roy, though he quickly regretted asking the question.

“That’s sort of a grey area,” Jerry mumbled. “They didn’t really crush us, you know. They did annihilate our defenses and slaughter a huge number of us, but the commanders of the Vermin Vigilante supposedly froze the remaining soldiers to keep them alive until things got better. They got the idea from you two.”

“Sorry I brought it up,” said Roy.

Jerry mumbled something else and pressed a few buttons on the ship. The ship slowed down to below the speed of light, entered the atmosphere of Diarama, and landed. Simon, who had been on his fair share of bad ships

during his exile, was impressed with the smooth landing of the police ship.

“Please get out. I’m not officially a member and they don’t like non-members to hang around for security reasons,” said the cockroach. “There’ll probably be someone to point you in the direction of the founder of this society. It’s not really hard for them to recognize two Gotithians nowadays.”

“Where are we?” asked Simon.

“The sewers.”

“Be more specific.”

“The sewers of Diarama city,” said Jerry. Noting Roy’s face, he said, “Don’t worry, Roy. These sewers are maintained by the controllers of the Diaraman economy. They got great deals on the best that Dave had to offer way back when. It’s a palace.”

Roy wouldn’t have trusted a cockroach’s judgment of how sanitary a ‘palace’ was, but the mentioning of Dave convinced him it was fine. “So Dave’s in this too?”

“He’s a Class B member,” said Jerry. “They don’t normally let Class B’s into the society itself for security purposes. A Class B is normally someone in a position of power who helps the society in exchange for some of the money. Dave’s a Class B, WonderClaus is a Class B, and, sad enough to say, Loothpit’s a Class B too.”

“Loothpit?” yelped Roy. “How’d he become the center of attention all of a sudden?”

“The Universe’s fears of Loothpit uniting the moose-that-look-like-turtles have become very real,” said Jerry softly.

“But...how can it be that bad? I mean, Mr. Parrot didn’t make the moose tranquilizer until I came into power

and ordered him to, because there wasn't any threat of them then!"

Jerry shook his tiny head. "The stunt really was more for publicity than it helped the Universe, it turns out. In fact, it might have harmed the Universe. By creating a tranquilizer for the imprisonment of Loothpit you martyred him, Roy. The martyrdom caught the others attention, and they kept an eye out for him. You certainly knew the consequences of letting Loothpit escape when you sent that suicidal PufferFish into the El Tuna Café didn't you, Simon?"

"Not quite," said Simon before the cockroach could continue. "I knew that Loothpit's escape was going to cause a scare and make people doubt Roy's authority, but martyrdom never occurred to me. What happened after Loothpit escaped?"

"Well, the first news of a new pack of moose-that-look-like-turtles came from a report by Blasphemes that Loothpit was terrorizing them and they had employed Mr. Parrot to take them out, but the pack beat Mr. Parrot. Knowing the preposterous stories Blasphemes told – that is, before Simon blew it to pieces – and the fact that Mr. Parrot entered the battle at the El Tuna Café, you can be sure that many have doubts about the story. However, we do know for a fact that shortly after Roy's fall Loothpit and his gang prevented a lot of factions from doing their work. They destroyed buildings, looted without mercy, and wreaked havoc on otherwise sound security systems. Factions began paying the moose-that-look-like-turtles protection so that they would stay away and even attack rivals. Worst of all, the moose tranquilizer formula was lost with the El Tuna Café, so the group is almost unstoppable, which is why even

though they're not the brightest – except Loothpit, maybe – they're still one of the most powerful groups in the Universe at the time.”

“That's bad,” said Roy. “The formula was being kept in the El Tuna Café for safety purposes – I wanted to prevent a formula from being devised – and I had never even thought that the formula could get lost the way it did. The circumstances....who would have thought that the El Tuna Café *and* Mr. Parrot would be gone at once?”

“You *never* accounted for your precious El Tuna Café to be lost,” said Simon, irritated. “It's shown in the state that the Universe is in now. You may have made Billy your heir, but with the negative intelligence immortality you had from the El Tuna Café you never actually made plans for your succession. Don't even talk like that.”

Roy ignored Simon, and turned to the cockroach. “If the moose-that-look-like-turtles can only be killed occasionally, what's keeping them from conquering the Universe altogether?”

“Brains, I suppose,” said Jerry, looking up at the Jiggy Gas Piggy television screen. Someone was coming.

“Loothpit's got brains,” said Roy.

“Well, I don't know, then. Maybe they're afraid to act on a large scale, or the Cube People are holding them back or something. I'm just a policeman.”

“What are the Cube People up to these days?” asked Roy.

“Yeah, what happened to them after the battle?” chimed in Simon, who was remembering how the Cube People had come to rescue his outstretched army in the El

Tuna Café in exchange for ninety percent of power in his new regime.”

“I don’t know,” said Jerry. “Maybe you can continue this discussion with the founder of the society that you’re supposed to be in. I’ve overstayed my welcome. These Class A members really scare me.”

“But –”

“Get out!” yelled the cockroach as loudly and nervously as a cockroach can yell loudly and nervously.

Roy and Simon obeyed, stepping out of the Jiggy Gas Piggy. After a quick look around their new environment, Roy determined that the sewer was not at all a palace. It was dimly lit, smelled awful, and who knows what filth lied unseen. A Space Monkey was approaching them. Jerry’s ship vanished in a flash.

“Ah! Our newest members!” said the Space Monkey in a friendly, sagacious voice. “You must be Roy. You’re the shortest –” said the Space Monkey, pointing to Roy. Roy was not surprised. Simon had lived most of his life in boarding school after boarding school, planet to planet, while Roy had lived most of his life on Gotithia. Because of the space problems of Gotithia that resulted in the massive enlargement of the planet, the gravity had, like it had to most other Gotithians, stunted his growth. “– and you’re Simon, our favorite outlaw!” completed the Space Monkey.

“I thought people would hate us,” said Simon to Roy. The Space Monkey heard this.

“Why would people hate the two of you?” he asked, coming close enough to the two brothers for them to see him clearly. He was wearing a nice green suit with a purple tie and a pair of rose-tinted glasses. It reminded Roy much of

Antonio, who used to be the master of the mint and one of Roy's closest friends, before he cleverly robbed the warehouse that held trillions of scarabs in wood meant to back the Universe's currency.

"You know," said Simon. "We were a bit stupid. We put the Universe through two civil wars and blew up several planets before admitting we were brothers and making up at the last minute. As far as I know, Roy's consequential downfall has lead to yet another civil war."

The Space Monkey laughed. "That hasn't affected this society one bit! Well, it has," he admitted hastily, "because of the Guinea Pigs....but that shouldn't hurt our friendship, should it?"

"Who are you?" asked Roy.

"I am Warren, the founder of this great society," said the Space Monkey proudly.

"What are you doing so dressed up in a sewer like this?" asked Roy.

"More importantly, why do you want anything to do with us?" asked Simon before the Space Monkey could answer Roy's question.

"All that I'll explain," said Warren. He motioned Roy and Simon to follow him in the direction from which he came. "Let's get out of this sewer, though. As Roy pointed out, it isn't too good for my suit. You're going to love this complex. The whole place is made out of wide tunnels with the best climate control capabilities and lighting you'll find of all underground establishments. We allow our members to roam around freely and enjoy themselves, so that the mind's in the best frame for innovation. That doesn't mean that we aren't serious about our work, though. We have studied the

economy and political climate of Diarama very thoroughly – you can't afford not to, especially in these times – and most of our members are out on the streets doing research and tweaking markets. But they love it so much they consider these grounds their home and our most loyal. You'll understand when we get there.”

Warren turned to Roy and Simon for feedback, but both of them were too engrossed in their own thoughts to notice. The three of them walked in silence for a minute. Finally, they came to a large metal hatch labeled “Authorization required”. “That's to keep sewer employees out,” explained Warren. He flashed a card over the center of the hatch and the hatch popped open. Apparently it was designed only to look like it needed to be twisted.

The inside did look like a palace, and it did have excellent air quality – or at least the quality of the air felt much better than the stuffy sewer. The frame of the hatch blew out a fast and perfumed breeze to dry them off and give them a smell suiting the complex. The floors were covered with what appeared to be wood, and the round walls were lined with marble and fake windows that radiated bright, sunny light. Down the hallway at an intersection of the luxury sewer pipes was a large round room with a fountain and lounge at the center, and four small rooms off to the side of the walls.

“That's real wood on the floor,” Warren confirmed. “Of course the flooring that holds us up is not wood, and the boards are cut incredibly thin, but it still goes to show you the success of our business, doesn't it? Of course we don't have wood wherever we have heavy traffic, but these are the offices. Down at that lounge is where my own office is, and

the other three offices are vacant. So you can work near me....if you want to.”

“Why are you treating us like this?” asked Simon suspiciously as they entered the lounge.

“Come,” said Warren. He opened the door to the office at the upper left hand corner of the intersection. The room was very small – it must have been five feet by six feet at the most – and to the back of the wall was a long mahogany desk that Warren had to squeeze by to get behind. Roy and Simon seated themselves at two small chairs in front of the desk.

“What do you know about the stock market, Roy?” Warren began.

Roy thought for a moment, trying to find the right words. He knew that no matter what he said he would turn out wrong, though. “Well, um, companies issue stock so that they can get money to do....stuff....and they’ll pay the investors back if they make money?” Roy finished his statement as a question, being very unsure if that was what Warren was looking for.

“Yes,” said Warren. Roy was a little relieved. “That is the basic principle of the stock market. Companies need capital to do stuff. However, why exactly people invest in the companies is not completely known. Yes, companies will pay back investors, but I’m sure that you, Roy, having run the Universe, will know that it can be a very long time before companies will pay dividends, and even then the yield is small compared to the price of the stock.”

“Sometimes the company will buy back its stock,” said Roy.

“That’s true, but that is also fairly rare. Yet people will invest in companies that are not paying dividends and are not

buying back stock simply because they're growing or the people think that the company will grow. People see that the company is getting a lot of money, and they rush in to buy it. Those who bought the stock at the IPO get rich off of the later buying and then there are success stories related to the stock. With success stories comes more purchasing of the stock and greater faith in the stock market, and so the value of the company in question and the value of the market as a whole goes up, though the company in question hasn't even used the money it earned to pay back the investors! People will not call such values inflated because the yield to price ratio is actually industry average, or, more illogical still, the price to earnings ratio is quite healthy.”

“But with a high price to earnings ratio the company *can* pay the investors!” exclaimed Roy.

“True,” said Warren, “But that still means that investors are purchasing stock purely out of hope, and not out of reason. Many times, even, the greedy investors will prefer the company to use the money to continue growing, so that the big payout in the end gets bigger. As the stock will have gone up strongly for a while, more people will flock to it, and the price will continue rising. The early investors get rich off of the later investors, so again, people think that they can get rich too. With the stock market so dependant on optimism, people will need to see good results constantly. If they don't, then people start selling overvalued shares, then people start losing money, then there's a panic, and the company starts a buyback so people get faith again and they can continue stealing capital. Very interesting, isn't it?”

Roy and Simon, not knowing what else to do, nodded. They didn't see where this was going. What Warren was saying was common knowledge of the stock market.

"Interestingly, the companies people invest in only make money when people buy their products or services. Obviously you have to have money to spend it, though, and people get their money from the companies that require them to buy their products and services. You would consequentially assume that the economy as a whole could not grow because it requires the circulation of a fixed amount of money. The only way for the economy to grow is if new money enters the economy. That's where we make our money. We find the sources of money creation in the Diaraman economy and we manipulate them so that we get a share of the money. Now where do you think the money is coming from?"

"The mint," said Roy. "The government prints out new money at the mint and then the money gets circulated into the economy, so the economy grows."

"But money must be earned," said Warren, "Otherwise there is inflation."

"Well, the government can be spending the money its printing," countered Roy.

"Why aren't governments infinitely rich, then?" asked Warren. Before Roy could answer he said, "Because money loses its value when it's not earned. Money is a numerical representation of work in its simplest form. The answer must lie in the workforce. I assume you know that a bad job market leads to a bad economy, because people aren't spending, and the companies have to lay people off to keep their irrational investors satisfied. After all, when money

started flowing out of the Universe's economy and into the pockets of the Cube People, you gave benefits to companies that produced more than they could sell. Clever, the kind of cleverness we want to use here. You do understand how that worked, don't you?"

"Yes," said Roy. "The companies needed to spend money and inevitably hire more people to do the work, and that grew the economy enough that there was actually a market for the things that they were producing, so everyone won."

"That is partially what we do here," said Warren. "As you know, the Diaraman economy is based on the manufacturing of cheap gold junk. Diaraman businessmen do sell a lot of the stuff they produce to outsiders, but as Roy surely knows, a lot of the produce is unaccounted for. We understand how labor turns into money, and so we replicate the phenomenon on a scale that could not naturally happen. The society's main goal is to operate a huge scam of making Diaraman companies buy and sell gold products, recycle the products, sell the recycle products to producers, and sell the produced products to a series of middlemen that will only end up selling the products back to recycling plants. We do such a good job of covering our tracks that no one has been able to suspect it, and we get a good deal of capital for our fake companies whenever we need to grow them. Because of the constant spending of money by these fake companies, the Diaraman economy is very robust and can afford to import whatever other products it needs. They all get their jobs, and we end up with a whole lot of money. Everyone wins."

"But that still doesn't tell us why you are willing to take us," said Simon. "We can't do any research without

being noticed, and it looks like you've got the economy controlling thing pretty much down pat."

"Not quite," said Warren more serious than the brothers had seen him. "I didn't choose to control the Diaraman economy because I grew up on Diarama. I grew up on Blasphemes, actually. I chose Diarama because it was the strongest economy for small amount of regulation it had. I could easily get access to capital to power the scams, and yet no one would be able to find me out. Now the situation is changing dramatically. All these wars are causing foreign capital to dry up, but a more pressing issue is that the Guinea Pigs that have recently conquered Diarama are opening up investigations of the economy. Roy's had the more experience dealing with politics than anyone I know, so he'll be great for handling these problems. Simon, given how successfully you were able to cause chaos in the Universe, you probably could help too, but there's something else I want you to do. The Hobo Society has two different types of membership."

"I know," Simon cut in. "Class A and Class B. Our chauffeur told us."

"Yes," said Warren, a little unhappy that someone other than a Class A or Class B member knew anything about the society. He assumed that the chauffeur had learned it from WonderClaus. "Yes. Do you also know that Loothpit is a Class B?"

"Yes," said Roy and Simon in unison.

"That'll make my explaining easier," said Warren. "Well, thanks to the demise of both the El Tuna Café and Mr. Parrot, the formula for moose tranquilizer is gone. Loothpit's getting stronger, and he's been making more demands of us,

mainly wanting us to fund his army. Well, that combined with the risks of having you and Roy around are reason enough to want the formula. But we also understand that having the formula in our possession would allow us to throw more political weight around. You were probably the closest scientist to Mr. Parrot, Simon. Although you mainly worked with him for an immortality elixir I think that you know him well enough to be able to concoct a formula for moose tranquilizer. That would be very useful.”

Simon nodded. He felt safer around Warren knowing a valid reason for his being there, but he made a mental note to stay careful.

“Speaking of politics,” asked Roy, “What’s happened to the Cube People lately?”

Warren smiled. “The Cube People are still important in the political field. They’ve been out of the scene lately because most people are focusing on what’s happening in the Presleytarian realm and the actions of Loothpit. That’s unfortunate, really, considering what the Cube People have been doing. The ways of moving faster than the speed of light are still the same: the purple gas, the tunamatic highways, and the Pickle Universe. While most people don’t trust the Pickle People enough to travel through the Pickle Universe themselves, they still see the PickleNet as the easiest way to exchange information, and are putting a terrible amount of vital information in the hands of the Pickle People in doing so. For the moment, though, the Pickle Universe is still a safer means of travel than the tunamatic highways since there are a lot of factions from the Universe taking their own stakes in that universe. This is off the topic

of Cube People, Roy, but how did you get all that Boomwater into Zebus?"

Simon turned to Roy, also eager to hear how he managed to destroy the largest producer of pickles, a planet from which he had sent missiles in his battle against Roy so that he could turn the Pickle People against Roy when he fought back.

"The Universe has had a huge amount of secret connections through the Pickle Universe since that universe's creation," said Roy. "I had been trying to make a connection between the El Tuna Café and what was pretty much the center of the Pickle Universe so that I could keep a watch of it, but something backfired and the connection was made with the center of Zebus. The El Tuna Café had a big stock of Boomwater to defend against the Cube People, and I decided to use some of the Boomwater to destroy Zebus. There's nothing special about it, you see. Nothing that I could help you with. Tell me more about the Cube People."

"Yes," said Warren. "Well, while there's an overblown fear of the Pickle People, most people have enough sense to stay off of the tunamatic highways. However, they seemed to have forgotten that when you attacked the Cube People with a big glob of Boomwater that they barricaded not only the Dimension of Tuna, but also the Dimension of Stupidity from the Universe. This must mean that the Cube People have access to the Dimension of Stupidity. Why they don't use it to choke off the Universe I don't know, but they could do it at any time."

"For the moment they seem to be content with their specialty. They've still got the best products for the lowest prices and if it wasn't for the wars many people in the

Universe would have lost jobs. The most foolish thing is that factions are relying more and more on the Cube People to produce weapons for them. Some factions don't have the industrial power to produce as many of or as big of military equipment as they want – WonderClaus is an example – while others have assumed that since the Cube People can create the best military equipment so they have no choice other than to buy from them if they wish to survive these turbulent times.”

“How many factions are there in the Universe?” asked Roy.

“It's a big Universe,” said Warren. “And there aren't that many inhabited planets, but as we have found inhabitable planets aren't necessary to house armies and produce materials. People are starting to work with food synthesizing and large-scale base manufacturing to make do with the planets they can access. Dave's getting a new business out of the Squeenborg making people-friendly planets.”

“So, how many factions are there?”

“There are only a handful of factions to worry about. In every situation the factions to watch out for are different, of course, but for the Hobo Society I would suggest watching out for the Guinea Pigs, the Pickle People, Loothpit, the True Presleytarians and the Pious Presleytarians, Dave, and of course the Cube People. The remainder of factions is insignificant and uncountable.”

“You said to watch out for Dave,” pointed out Roy. “Why?”

“Well, there's the Squeenborg, but my biggest concern is his ability to get mimes.”

“Mimes?” asked Roy. “Those have been around since Mr. Parrot’s time, and they never posed a threat before! By the way, how did Dave get the mimes?”

“Maybe the Cube People, maybe the Pious Presleytarians,” said Warren. “I don’t know much about mimes other than that they’re able to conjure up imaginary objects out of thin air and are very dangerous now when they do so.”

“Wait a minute,” said Simon, “You said ‘conjure up imaginary objects out of thin air’ how can that be useful? I mean, I could make up an imaginary friend for myself right now!”

“And if your friend were to get too close to mimes without an anti-mime, he might get killed by the mime.”

“I don’t get it.”

“That’s not a pressing issue right now,” said Warren. “Just be assured that we’re safe from a mime attack thanks to the stock of anti-mimes we got from Dave.”

“You keep avoiding important political topics,” said Roy.

“No I don’t, I just want to keep track with the Cube People.”

“What makes the Cube People so important all of the sudden?” asked Roy. “I mean, sure, they’ve always been pretty important, but what’s so new about them that you want to talk about so badly?”

“They’ve made a Gotithian,” said Warren.

Roy and Simon had heard a lot of surprising things since they had been revived by WonderClaus, but nothing surprised them as much as the fact that the Cube People had

created Gotithians. “How?” asked Roy. “How do you know this?”

“WonderClaus told me,” said Warren. “He’s been talking to the Cube People a lot since he’s started that stupid bigger-than-the-Squeenburg project.”

“The Cube People could be lying,” said Roy.

“No, he saw it,” said Warren.

“Well, they could have planted the memory into him, or maybe they had a hologram. They’re very good with both technologies,” said Simon.

“WonderClaus thought that it could have been a memory planting,” said Warren. “But it’s highly unlikely, given the fact that he made a couple of phone calls to a few allies, including Presleytarian bishops and the Hobo Society, as soon as he found out. If they had planted a memory it would have to have been with brain-altering technology, since the Cube People aren’t good with hypnosis. Such a quick response seems unlikely to those who know the Cube People’s brain-altering technology.”

“Maybe they improved it! You know how fast the Cube People can improve things!” said Roy.

“I doubt it,” said Warren. “Let’s just assume that it’s true.”

“Well, then why haven’t the Cube People made big news?” asked Simon. “If the Cube People wanted to get the information out, they would have told more people than just WonderClaus!”

“At the time WonderClaus was the only known Gotithian surviving in the whole Universe,” said Warren. “And he’s certainly the most powerful in the Universe. Perhaps the Cube People were trying to sell him a revival of

the Gotithian race. As for publicity, I have seen that the Cube People's lack of publicity tends to make people put their guard down."

"How would the Cube People even get hold of how to make a Gotithian?" asked Simon. "The only one who knew how to make them was Mr. Parrot, and he wasn't known for writing his discoveries down!"

"WonderClaus reported that the quality of the Gotithian wasn't the best," said Warren. "He said that PiBotQ64 – that's the name the Cube People gave this current 'model' of the Gotithian race – came out as a mostly cube shaped Gotithian with only his horns and limbs sticking out. WonderClaus called it the most monstrous thing he'd ever seen, and he told me once his current order for the ship is done he'll never do business with the Cube People again.

"PiBotQ64 probably got made the same way I'm hoping you'll make the moose tranquilizer, Simon. Remember that Mr. Parrot was working for the Cube People when he created the Gotithian race. The Gotithian race was intended to be the Cube People's puppet species when they wrestled control of the Universe out of the hands of Willy Lemoniod. Mr. Parrot kept his fair share of secrets of the Gotithians from the Cube People – he later used the Gotithians to take the Universe from the Cube People – but it's doubtless that they know a thing or two about how to make one. The Cube People have probably been planning to make the Gotithians for years in secret, given the high numbers on the 'model' name. Of course, with the creator of Gotithians in power, and later a Gotithian himself, the Cube People didn't want to risk a war. This anarchy was the

Worship your Vermin

perfect time to use their expertise of the Gotithians to make one.”

There was a knock on the door.

Warren got up and prepared to squeeze himself through the mahogany desk, but decided against it. “Roy, would you open the door?”

Roy obeyed. On the other side was a PufferFish, who had blown himself up. Something was wrong.

“Warren, sir,” said the PufferFish. “There’s someone at the door. It’s....it’s about Loothpit!”

The Guinea Pigs

It was time travel all over again. Billy was dizzy, his head hurt, and his vision was blurry. He seemed all right otherwise. They appeared to have ended up on a planet rather than somewhere obscure in space. That was lucky. Which planet were they on? The cocktail party ship had been above Diarama, so there was a good chance of being on Diarama, but where on Diarama? Who else had come with him? He wrenched at the thought that either Toby or Mr. Parrot had been caught between two space-time warps and had been ripped to pieces. His final question: when was he? It was most likely that he was back in Mr. Parrot's time, but time travel was more unpredictable than that. Billy was worried. His vision hadn't returned! Oh, there. It was coming back.

Billy sat up, and sighed in relief. Mr. Parrot and Toby were lying blindly on the concrete they were on, but they were otherwise fine. Billy pulled off the top of his spacesuit and stood up to see where they were exactly. With a yelp he realized that they were on top of the Diaraman Gold Mills office building – the tallest skyscraper in Diarama City, the capital of Diarama. They must be at least in Roy's time, as construction for the skyscraper had started shortly before Mr. Parrot's downfall. Mr. Parrot sat up and took off the helmet of his spacesuit. He rubbed his eyes with his slightly feathery hands, and stood up. "Diarama City," he confirmed. "This is definitely the Diaraman Gold Mills skyscraper. Funny that we landed, oh, how high's this balcony? Well, pretty high up."

“Toby!” Billy exclaimed, looking down at Toby’s helmet for the first time. The glass on the inside was covered with puke. “He could suffocate!” Billy pulled away the top of Toby’s spacesuit and wiped his mouth. Toby coughed and choked, spitting out something onto Billy.

Billy pulled the stuff off of his face and looked at it. “Hamburger?” he asked.

“There was a plate full of miniature hamburgers at the bar,” said Mr. Parrot.

“Toby probably ate all of them!” Billy exclaimed. “He hadn’t eaten for a while, and there’s no way he could know that they grow to full size!”

“He needs medical attention,” said Mr. Parrot.

“We can’t risk walking around after Roy’s downfall!” Billy said nervously.

“I can handle this,” said Mr. Parrot. “One has to know medicine to create a species, you know.”

“What’ll you need?” asked Billy. “How much time do we have?”

“All I need to do is induce vomiting,” said Mr. Parrot, plucking a feather from his arm. He shoved his hand down Toby’s throat. Toby gagged.

“You’re choking him!” Billy screamed.

“Not so loud,” said Mr. Parrot. “It’s all part of the process.” Mr. Parrot pulled his hand out and pulled Toby at the edge of the skyscraper. He punched Toby three times and Toby puked onto the unsuspecting city.

“Anything else that’s in there can’t kill him,” said Billy, happy. “Well, that probably looked and sounded like a murder. We’d better get out of here.”

Toby weakly groaned out something incomprehensible. Billy said to him in English, "We're in the capital of Diarama, sometime after the fall of Mr. Parrot. You need to get some rest. We need to go someplace safer."

"Okay," said Toby. He vomited violently. Billy looked up at Mr. Parrot, worried.

"Don't worry," said Mr. Parrot. "I think he'll be fine. What'd he drink?"

"Liquid Turtle," said Billy. "There's nothing wrong with that, is there?"

"When Liquid Turtle mixes with miniature hamburgers it's not pretty," said Mr. Parrot. "It can even be poisonous to some creatures. I'm not exactly an expert in humans, but it may also be dangerous to them."

"What do we do?" asked Billy.

"We need to get of this skyscraper for one thing," said Mr. Parrot. "You need to get some antidote ingredients, and maybe some disguises for us for safety. Wear that spacesuit in case we're after Roy's time. Here." Mr. Parrot pulled out a scrap of gold foil and a pen and scratched out a few items. "Obviously you'll need to cash in some of your wood," he said as he handed Billy the list.

"Where do we meet?" asked Billy.

"Do you know Diarama well?"

"Not so much," said Billy.

"Do you know where the Universe's first gold synthesizer is? It isn't far from here."

"Yes," said Billy. "But that place will be packed with tourists!"

"There's a bathroom complex there. Meet me in the Space Monkey restrooms."

“Okay,” said Billy. “Do you need help carrying Toby?”

“That would defeat the purpose of you going yourself, wouldn’t it? Just get to a bank and then a store as fast as possible!”

Billy nodded and opened the door leading inside the skyscraper. To his relief, the floor was empty. He first figured it was a holiday, but the only holiday that Roy had was the tax day, where workers in the Universe were forced to take an El Tuna Café day long break to do their taxes. If it were tax day, though, there shouldn’t have been so much traffic in the city streets. He shrugged it off, and headed for the elevator. There wasn’t time to waste wondering.

What Billy didn’t know about the Diaraman Gold Mills was that, although they had the tallest building in Diarama, they had a habit of cramming all of their employees as tightly together as possible and wanted to stick to it. Of course, because the biggest companies used up all of their buildings, they felt that they couldn’t rent out the remainder of the office building, so the three hundred million scarab building was mostly unused, while all of the employees were crammed in the basement of the skyscraper so no one could find out the truth about the skyscraper. The only people that could interfere with Billy’s movement around the building were a few receptionists whose only job was to forbid anyone from entering the building without authorization, and most of those jobs had been outsourced to the other side of the Diarama because the company’s building expenses were way over budget.

Billy stepped inside the elevator. The insides were lined with finely polished wood and mirrors. Both sides of

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the double doors of the elevator were lined with small buttons leading to the many floors of the huge building, the highest number being 1007. On the other side of the wall were only two things other than the mirror and wood paneling: a television built into the wall, and underneath it, a medicine cabinet. Billy opened up the medicine cabinet.

The television flicked on, and a smile Space Monkey looked down at Billy. "Authorization required," she said in a honeyed voice.

"I'd rather just take some stuff," said Billy.

"If you don't prove you are a janitor, I'm going to have to take serious measures," said the Space Monkey, still smiling sweetly.

"I just need to get some..." Billy looked at the list and then up to the medicine cabinet. "Do you have anything to cure Liquid Turtle and miniature hamburger poisoning?"

"Certainly," said the smiling face. "The bottom row is stocked with alcohol poisoning related cures, but you can't take anything unless you prove you're a janitor."

"What's so important about being a janitor?" Billy exclaimed.

"That is confidential company information," said the Space Monkey. "You must prove you are a janitor of the Diaraman Gold Mills Corporation before I can answer that question."

"What if I don't prove that I'm a janitor?" asked Billy.

"Do you mean to say that you're not a janitor?" asked the Space Monkey, her smile fading.

"No, I'm not," said Billy.

"Security!" hollered the voice. Billy cringed.

A stern looking face wearing an officer's cap moved into the screen. Billy laughed.

"Is all security in the Universe incompetent?" he exclaimed.

"That is also company information," said the first Space Monkey.

"Sir," said the security guard to the right of the other Space Monkey on the screen, "I'm going to have to ask you to leave the building."

"All right then," said Billy, who had found the medicine he wanted. He slipped the bottle of pills into his pants pocket as he scanned the elevator.

"Only employees may use the elevator!" the janitor snapped.

"So what do you want me to do, walk outside and jump off a building?" asked Billy as he pressed the "lobby" button.

"Or you could take the stairs, but that would be preferable," said the security guard. He noticed the lit button that Billy had pressed. "What did I tell you?"

"What are you going to do?" asked Billy, sneering at the television.

"I'm..." the security guard was flabbergasted. "I'm going to shut down the elevator, of course!"

"You're not authorized to," said the other Space Monkey.

"Well, if this is really a Gotithian, then I should be able to get him!"

"The manager has the controls anyway," said the female Space Monkey.

The security guard thought about for a moment. “You’re right!” he exclaimed, and ran out of Billy’s view.

The elevator made a pinging sound, and Billy stepped out. No one was in the lobby but a Jelly Blob receptionist muttering, “Authorization required” in its sleep. Billy was amazed of how he had encountered security guards twice already and both had been with incompetent security guards. Thanks to the last encounter, though, he had acquired the poison treatment for Toby without much trouble. Billy put on the top of his spacesuit and exited the building.

Naturally, Billy assumed, there would be a map of Diarama City outside of the planet’s tallest building, which also was very fortunate.

“What’s the spacesuit for, little guy?” asked an obnoxious Space Monkey in front of the map. Billy waved his middle finger and looked at the map. It was very detailed, and it took a while for Billy to even find the red dot marking where he was. Beside the red dot was the number two, which Billy took for an indication of the location of a popular attraction. In the lower left hand corner of the huge map was a box containing an index of what the numbers were, and number one was the first gold synthesizer. To his surprise, the bathroom complex in which Billy was to meet Mr. Parrot made number ten on the index. Billy shook his head at the fact and headed for the bathroom complex.

Billy’s heart pounded, but for the first time since he had picked up Toby, it was with excitement. He was currently in the business district of Diarama City, and after going down the street and making a turn, he would be in the old historic part of the city. Not very far down the road, he would reach the bathroom complex and, hopefully, Mr.

Parrot, who could cure Toby! Then, if all went well, his only other hurdle was successfully selling his wood. He could buy disguises for Toby, Mr. Parrot, and himself and he would finally be able to enjoy himself! They would need to get a ship, of course, but with five thousand scarabs in wood it shouldn't be too difficult to get a nice used one. He didn't want to go anywhere too exotic, he had had enough of adventure, but he would be able to talk with Toby about Earth, and talk with the creator of his species about science. Billy's heart sank. He realized that could only happen if Mr. Parrot and Toby got to the bathroom complex safely. What if someone were to ask why a tall figure in a spacesuit was carrying a small figure that appeared to be unconscious in a spacesuit? What if someone were to question Billy, who was wearing a spacesuit with space sticking out for horns? Nothing good could come of worrying, Billy figured, so he should try to put his mind on other things.

Billy focused his attention on his surroundings. As he walked down the business district he could mainly see luxury shops and their shoppers and banks after bank, along with a few businessmen entering the huge office buildings or bragging on the street about their shrewd investing techniques. There were quite a few people that were obviously headed towards the Diaraman Stock Exchange at the end of the business district, and a few street peddlers were trying to sell investment advice or snacks, if not both. A few hobos were huddled up underneath benches or behind garbage cans, watching the passing businessmen. He saw the street he was looking for, and raced towards it.

To his surprise, the old part of Diarama City was not in good shape, even though it was right next to the business

district of the city and contained at least two popular attractions that Billy knew of. The oldest buildings were crumbling and the streets were filthy. A few cheesy animatronics were pleading people to donate so that the city could restore what was the most culturally significant place on Diarama, and a few others were telling people about the culture, following them relentlessly until someone threw a scarab their way. Billy thought that he understood the situation of the place when he saw a PufferFish, picking up a soda can he had dropped, get smacked in the back of the head by one of the begging animatronics. Billy was relieved in seeing such a strange place, as he figured that most people would assume people walking around in spacesuits were just part of the show. He only hoped no one questioned him on his significance in Diaraman culture. He walked a little slower and waved as he advanced towards the bathroom complex.

Billy's heart sank. He saw Mr. Parrot, with Toby slung over his left shoulder, talking with someone. He walked briskly again to see if everything was okay. Maybe Mr. Parrot hadn't realized that he could play the part of some sort of street performer, and Billy would need to play the act for him.

"That sounds like a tragic time," said the Space Monkey talking to Mr. Parrot.

"Indeed it was," said Mr. Parrot. Billy was relieved. It seemed Mr. Parrot had figured out the role playing thing.

"Did you know that a similar tragedy struck Diarama recently?" asked the Space Monkey.

“No!” said Mr. Parrot, astonished. Billy thought he was a pretty good actor. “Who would think that there would be *two* space-time snaps in just half a million years?”

“Worse than the first one,” said the Space Monkey. “One hundred thousand people died.”

“The population of Diarama is what, only five million?” asked Mr. Parrot.

“Yes,” said the Space Monkey. “Amazing to think that two percent of the population died so easily.”

“I know! There’s a two percent chance that you’re dead!”

“Say what?” said the Space Monkey, thinking that he had heard incorrectly. Billy smiled.

“Well, two percent means that two in every hundred people died,” said Mr. Parrot, “Or one in fifty people. There must be fifty people on this street, so wouldn’t you say that there’s a one in fifty chance that you’re dead?”

“Um, I’m alive, and have been for as long as I can remember,” said the Space Monkey, raising an eyebrow.

“Ah!” said Mr. Parrot. “That’s where you’re wrong! Perhaps you aren’t dead – you don’t behave like any dead person I know – but then you must agree that you’re only ninety eight percent alive?”

“Get a life,” said the Space Monkey angrily, and he walked away. Mr. Parrot began walking towards the bathroom complex. Billy ran up to him and tugged on his spacesuit.

“Billy!” exclaimed Mr. Parrot, surprised. “Oh. You look empty handed.”

“No, I’m not,” said Billy. He reached down and pulled out the bottle of pills.

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“That’ll make my job a lot easier,” said Mr. Parrot. “Come on. We’ll meet at the same place. How’d you get those without a prescription?”

“Not now,” said Billy, waving his hand around to remind Mr. Parrot there were people around.

They reached the complex. Billy wouldn’t have even known it was a bathroom complex, had it not been for the Universal bathroom symbols labeling the species. It looked more like an upscale shopping center, and indeed it had a few displays in the windows, although the displays contained different types of toilet paper and toilets. There were lots of doors, each with a symbol representing the species the toilet was to serve. Because of the diverse range of species in the Universe, in most cosmopolitan areas bathrooms served multiple species, and gender distinctions within a specie’s bathrooms was an unnecessary complexity. Half of the doors were marked for Space Monkeys, including three doors that used to bear the image of a Gotithian but in recent times had the horns cut off to somewhat resemble a Space Monkey. Mr. Parrot pushed open the first Space Monkey door they came across and the two (not including Toby, who was still slung over Mr. Parrot’s shoulder) entered.

“Wow,” said Billy in awe. He realized why the bathroom complex had made it on the list of attractions in Diarama City. Rather than the dreary line of stalls and sinks that Billy was used to, this bathroom somewhat resembled the cathedrals of Earth that Billy had studied in theology class. Instead of the normal tiled floors, the floors were covered with brilliant onyx stone. The walls and high ceiling were in an arch, and the top of the ceiling was covered entirely by a fresco of people of many species satisfied with

their bathroom experience, flocking around Dave, the largest and centermost figure in the painting, portrayed as the cheerful and benevolent bringer of bathrooms riding a wooden toilet on a cloud.

“Help me look for the stalls,” said Mr. Parrot, pulling Billy’s attention away from the elaborate fresco. “All I see are these fountains.”

“May I help you sirs?” asked an official looking butler holding a large and soft looking sheet of toilet paper in the crook of his arm.

“Show us to the bathrooms, please,” said Mr. Parrot.

“Private rooms are behind the fountains,” said the butler, pointing to one of the many fountains lined against the walls. Billy took a closer look. The fountains were at the center of a semi-circular indentation in the walls, and behind the fountain were four doors, each one with a unique mosaic on it. “I trust that you have a reservation?”

“No,” said Mr. Parrot.

“Then there may not be a room for you,” said the butler. “Perhaps you should try another hall.”

“Why can’t I just wait for someone to come out of a room?” asked Mr. Parrot.

“As long as there are people with reservations, they will be served first.”

“What if people with reservations don’t show up?”

“That seems unlikely,” said the butler, pointing to the many people sitting and waiting on the benches around the fountains.

“Okay, how do I get a reservation?”

“Most of our customers choose to order over a phone, but you may also use our new PickleNet service,” said the

butler. Billy realized that Mr. Parrot had come from before the PickleNet's invention.

"I don't have a phone," said Mr. Parrot angrily. "What if I just ordered here?"

"You can do that," said the butler, pointing to a desk at the entrance of the hall. Billy was relieved, but only for a moment. "See that black phone? You may use that one."

"But the receptionist would be right next to me!" exclaimed Mr. Parrot. "Why can't I just talk to her in person?"

"I would think that you would be talking to her in person if you were right next to her."

"But I would be talking on the phone."

"So?"

"Okay, fine!" said Mr. Parrot. "So with a reservation I'll be able to get a room, right?"

"Reservations must be made at least an hour prior to the visit of the reserved room."

"An El Tuna Café hour?" exclaimed Billy.

"Yes," said the butler.

Mr. Parrot looked down at Billy for a translation. "That's too long," Billy said simply, not wanting to seem suspicious.

"If you sirs and unconscious friend need faster service, you can order an express reservation. They are effective immediately, but cost much more."

"Do you take wood?" asked Billy.

"We don't do change," said the butler.

"You could keep the change," said Mr. Parrot. "We really need this quickly!"

"Is the wood physically here?" asked the butler.

“Yes, why?” asked Mr. Parrot.

“Well, while express service is effective immediately upon ordering, it must too be ordered through a phone or over the PickleNet, so naturally it is our policy that payments must be over the phone or the PickleNet.”

“We could try cramming the wood into the phone,” said Billy desperately.

“That could work,” said the butler. “Why don’t you try it?”

“Thanks,” said Mr. Parrot a little sarcastically. He made his way to the phone and motioned Billy to follow him.

“It is customary to give the butler a tip,” said the butler. Mr. Parrot stopped.

“I’ll pay you over the phone,” said Mr. Parrot.

“Why don’t you just pay me in person?” asked the butler.

“Why don’t I just pay for the reservation in person?” retorted Mr. Parrot nastily.

“It’s against our policy.”

“Then I won’t give you a tip,” said Mr. Parrot.

“Perhaps we can reconsider the policy,” said the butler.

“Oh, can we now?”

“Maybe you sirs can give me the wood, and I’ll pay for your reservation, keeping the change as a tip. Such service is normally reserved for the physically handicapped, but it probably applies to the mentally as well.”

Mr. Parrot was not happy about the last remark, but he didn’t turn down the deal. “What does it cost?”

“Fifty scarabs,” said the butler.

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“For using a bathroom?” exclaimed Billy, pulling some wood out of a pant pocket.

“For an express reservation,” said the butler, reaching his hand out. Billy dropped a two inch long twig into it. The butler looked pleased. “Feeling generous, are we? Well, I know one fellow who isn’t handicapped!”

“Can we enter a restroom now?” asked Mr. Parrot.

“Feel free to throw someone out if you need to,” said the butler, greedily fingering the twig.

Mr. Parrot nodded. “Come on, Billy!” he exclaimed. The two ran towards the nearest fountain like there was a space-time snap.

“Emergency!” Billy yelled apologetically as Mr. Parrot mowed through the crowd of Space Monkeys. “We’ve got an express pass!” Billy yelled to a butler about to question them. “From that guy!”

Mr. Parrot raced around the fountain, pulled open one of the decorated doors and slammed it shut.

Billy flicked a light switch. “Wow,” he said again. The bathroom was almost as impressive as the outside. It had a beautiful mural around the walls, a fairly high ceiling, and plants that glimmered in the replicated light of the Diaraman sun.

Mr. Parrot set Toby down onto the lavatory and pulled off the top of his spacesuit. “Pills, please,” said Mr. Parrot.

“Right,” said Billy, turning his attention away from a fern. He pulled out the pills and handed them to Mr. Parrot, who unscrewed the cap and popped a pill into Toby’s mouth.

“He’s in bad shape,” Mr. Parrot said. “The poison’s faster on humans than other species I’ve studied. All we can do is sit and see what happens.”

“What if the medicine doesn’t work on humans?” asked Billy, taking the top of his spacesuit off.

“I hope it doesn’t come to that,” said Mr. Parrot. He took the helmet of his spacesuit off and rubbed his eyes. “Man, it’s been a hard few days! I spent so long planning that cocktail party even with my administrative duties, and now I’m warped into the future to take care of a human!”

“You’ve done a great job,” said Billy.

“I haven’t done anything yet but lug a human around and pop a pill into his mouth,” said Mr. Parrot.

“That’s useful too,” said Billy, “But I was mainly talking about all the accomplishments you’ve done in the past, like make my species, run the Universe, and although you haven’t done it yet – I mean, when you’re older you will have – make moose tranquilizer...”

“Isn’t it funny how much people expect from restrooms?” said Mr. Parrot, apparently trying to steer Billy away from the subject of his life’s work.

“Yeah,” said Billy. “It really shows you how Dave makes all the money he does.”

“I wish I could get that much pleasure out of something so simple,” said Mr. Parrot, his eyes showing he was dreaming. “Like you said, all my life’s been work, work, and more work. I’ve never taken the time to actually enjoy myself.”

“Everyone needs a vacation,” said Billy. He thought to himself that the slightly deformed Space Monkey in front of him was nothing like the genius workaholic he had learned about in history class.

“A vacation won’t give me back the life I’ve deprived myself of,” said Mr. Parrot.

“What do you mean? You’re rich, powerful, and immortal!”

“Yeah, and I know where that lead me to!” said Mr. Parrot. “The old me is dead – literally. I now realize the life I’ve lost, and this warp in time has presented me with the perfect opportunity to make up for it!”

“Please don’t have a mid-life crisis,” said Billy quietly.

“Why shouldn’t I?” asked Mr. Parrot.

“Well, what’s wrong with living life the way you have been?”

“In case you didn’t know,” said Mr. Parrot irritably, “it takes a lot of work to create a species, overthrow the Cube People, govern a Universe, and create a biotechnology company in a mere 100 Diaraman years!”

“Aren’t you immortal?” asked Billy quietly.

“No one’s immortal,” said Mr. Parrot. “Simon’s and my immortality elixir didn’t do a thing in that El Tuna Café battle that’s supposed to have happened! Or did history change in a way that favored me? No, I don’t think so! Everything I’ve ever done has been ruined. The species I created has been hunted down and slaughtered to the point of extinction, and....I don’t know, I bet some other things happened! Give me the notebook!”

“So you have something to complain about?” asked Billy.

“Just give it to me!”

“How do you know all this anyway?”

“I learned a lot from my older selves and the people I’ve met on the street today.”

“Yeah, aren’t these people insane? Just in that short amount of time I met a security guard telecommuting, an old

Space Monkey whose life savings ended up being entirely in peanut butter...”

“Give me the notebook!” yelled Mr. Parrot again.

“Okay, okay,” said Billy, a little frightened. He reached into his pant pockets again for the notebook. His face froze.

“What’s the matter?”

“I can’t find the notebook!” Billy exclaimed. “I probably forgot it at the cocktail party! How could I have been so stupid?”

“You idiot!” Mr. Parrot screeched, getting up to his feet. “There’s no telling where the notebook is now! It’s lost!”

“Can’t we just go back in time and get it?”

“The Universe is a little too big to look for the right place to travel from!” said Mr. Parrot.

“You get the right place into the notebook,” said Billy.

“I retraced my steps from the cocktail party! Never in my life have I found a space-time connection from the *outside*.”

“I’m sure you could do it,” said Billy weakly. He realized what he had said and shrunk back.

A vein on Mr. Parrot’s neck was bulging. He looked like he could explode. Billy covered his face. Mr. Parrot sighed, and sat down next to Toby. “I’m not going to do any more work,” he said quietly. “I’ve made my decision. I’m going to start enjoying life.”

Billy sat up normally again. “You are going to help Toby though, aren’t you?”

“Of course I will,” said Mr. Parrot. “I’m only going to work when we absolutely need me to. Why don’t you go outside and sell some wood for disguises?”

“And you’ll stay in this bathroom?” asked Billy.

Mr. Parrot smiled and shrugged. “We could use the money, and we need disguises. It’s looks less suspicious with only one weirdo in a spacesuit, and anyway, these people reserve bathrooms here...how long exactly?”

“An El Tuna Café hour is roughly equal to two Diaraman days,” said Billy.

“Yes, they order bathrooms two days in advance. Do you think they rush themselves?”

“No,” said Billy. “I guess you’re right. I could use some food anyways. When will we know when Toby’s okay?”

“Just take your time,” said Mr. Parrot. “We’ll know when you get back. He’s looking a bit better now, so it should be good news.”

“Okay,” said Billy. He stepped out of the bathroom and after closing the door after him, shuddered a little. It looked like they might be able to enjoy themselves a little, but Mr. Parrot was acting so strangely now he didn’t know what to expect. He could have understood a normal person getting burned out from his experiences in the Universe, as he had, but *Mr. Parrot* had never done anything like that before.

Billy made sure he knew which mosaic was for their door one last time, and stepped out into the streets of Diarama City. He needed to get to a bank. Scanning the tourist and animatronics filled streets of the old part of town, he found a few banks. First Bank of Diarama, National Bank

of Diarama, Cash City, and Bank of the Universe. He studied the banks carefully, wanting to make sure that even in his spacesuit he could blend in with the crowd. At the National Bank of Diarama was an ATM. Billy had heard of new ATM's that acted entirely like tellers, allowing you to make deposits, open accounts, and sometimes even sell valuables. He decided to try that.

“I can take care of almost all of your banking needs,” said the ATM as Billy approached it. Like every other machine on the street, the redesigners of the old part of Diarama City had felt that the ATM needed to talk too. “Cash deposits, safety deposits, balance your checking account, convert currencies, trade shares at the Diaraman Stock Exchange, and now even purchase invested goods such as the purple gas of the Dimension of Stupidity and wood!”

“Yeah, I found some wood that I want to sell,” said Billy to the machine. The machine paused for a moment, and then restarted its advertising track. Billy pressed “Enter” on the keyboard to stop it.

A list of actions the ATM could perform appeared on its screen. Billy scrolled down and entered the number for selling wood. Next, a screen appeared with a list of sellable woods. Billy looked at a small twig roughly the size of what he gave the butler, but couldn’t tell what kind of wood it was. He pressed “miscellaneous”.

“Please insert your wood into the drawer,” said the ATM, spitting out a tiny plastic drawer. Billy placed the twig down, and a few more numbers appeared on the screen. Although Billy could not understand why those particular numbers had appeared and were changing so rapidly, it

seemed the ATM was trying to calculate the weight of the twig.

“24 pounds of miscellaneous wood,” said the machine finally. “Valued at two thousand Diaraman scarabs. Continue with the transaction?”

Billy clapped his hands uncontrollably. The confusing metrics from the El Tuna Café’s asteroid were working to his advantage for once! Billy pressed “Enter” to agree to sell.

The drawer slid into the machine. “Checking wood authenticity,” it said. Billy hoped it didn’t realize the true value of the wood. “Authentic,” it said. Billy jumped into the air with glee. “Please give the currency denomination for your payment.”

Billy looked greedily at the screen. He had choices from one scarab denominations to five hundred scarabs. Not wanting to have suspiciously valuable scarabs, he selected twenty.

“Gold or plastic?” asked the ATM finally. It took Billy a little bit to realize the meaning of the question. Billy selected gold, and the machine began to make clinking noises. A second, larger drawer popped open, and a plastic bag filled to the brim with one hundred small scarab shaped pieces of Ba-ing-go came out. Billy picked up the back and slung it over his shoulder. With the machine working as badly as he did, he thought that the wood in his pockets could be worth as much as thirty thousand scarabs, but having so many scarabs already was suspicious – not to mention heavy – enough.

Billy was happier than when he had first met the Mr. Parrots, and also felt much more carefree in spite of the fact that he still had to get disguises. Billy looked down the street

again. Now that he didn't have Toby to worry about he could see much more clearly that they had turned the crumbling buildings of Diaraman culture into an ugly sort of strip mall. Past a few more banks he could see a cheap sports shop, and across from that he could see a Tuna Bell restaurant. Billy figured he would pick up some tuna sandwiches after getting the group's disguises.

Billy slipped past some people into the sports shop, looking admiringly at his spacesuit as if it was store merchandise. It seemed to be a busy day in the shop, so the cashier didn't notice him, and the spacesuit trick seemed to be working. Billy, feeling secure, looked around. He could see some shoe polish on a rack, which could help Toby and him to have hair that looked more like a Space Monkey's, and by the beginner's Squeenball set were some comfortable looking sets of clothing that he could buy for the three of them. Billy slipped some shoe polish into his pockets, and while trying to decide which clothes to get for the three of them, he suddenly realized that he would have to cover his horns, so he grabbed a hoodie for himself instead a jogging suit like what he had selected for the Mr. Parrot and Toby. Satisfied with his choices, he grabbed a hat near from a rack near a row of doors and headed into the changing room.

Billy didn't actually intend on trying on the outfits, certainly not the two for Toby and Mr. Parrot, but he needed the room so that he could disguise himself. He carefully put on the shoe polish where he thought his hair needed it to look more like a Space Monkey's, and removed the price tag from the hat so he could cover his horns. Then he realized, though reluctantly, that he would have to leave behind his spacesuit. It was one thing to go into a store with a cap on, it was

entirely another to go into a store holding a spacesuit. Billy thought about it one more time and figured that it was the safest thing to do, so he left the changing room without it.

The line had disappeared in the time that Billy had browsed and put on his disguise, and Billy was able to walk right up to the only cashier in the small store.

“Is that all you’re going to be buying?” asked the Jelly Blob cashier.

“Yes,” said Billy, placing the clothes on the counter and pulling out a twenty scarab figure. It felt cold in the palm of his hand because of Billy’s body heat. At a certain temperature Ba-ing-go, oddly enough, uses the energy of its heat to carry heat away, causing the Ba-ing-go to get colder when heated.

“I’m working on commission, you know,” said the Jelly Blob.

“I’m sure you are,” said Billy.

The Jelly Blob gurgled. “Fine. That’ll be fifteen scarabs,” he said, putting the scarab figure into the cash register and pulling out some smaller figures for change.

Billy took the clothes and slung them over the bag of scarabs. He was glad the purchasing had been so easy. He hoped it was because his disguise was working so well, but then again Jelly Blobs don’t have the best eyesight. He wondered if he should test the disguise again, and remembered he wanted to go to Tuna Bell. That seemed perfect. Most of the employees there never really paid attention to their surroundings, but they had better eyesight than Jelly Blobs. He could test the disguise again without much risk, and still be able to get food for everyone. Billy

walked out of the sports shop and headed towards the Tuna Bell across the street.

“Welcome to Tuna Bell,” said a dreary teenage Space Monkey when Billy entered the restaurant. “Our special today is three tuna sandwiches for a scarab.”

Billy thought to himself that it would be fun to try to spend twenty scarabs in such a cheap place. “I’ll take that,” said Billy, coming closer to the cashier.

“Would you like it in a meal?” the teenager asked. “That’ll only cost half a scarab extra.”

“I’ll take three meals,” said Billy, studying the menu. “What kind of side dish do you recommend?”

“You get fried tuna cakes with every meal,” said the teenager.

“What does it cost to get an extra side dish?” Billy asked, still studying the menu. All he could see was tuna in its various forms.

“Another half a scarab per side dish,” said the teenager.

“Hmm...I’ll take the tuna salad with each meal... and the tuna casserole with each one too. Oh, and some tuna delights.” Billy was disappointed. The total was only nine scarabs and already each meal had more tunamatic material than one should have in an El Tuna Café day.

“Your total is, um, uh....” The Space Monkey thought hard. The door made a pinging sound. “Welcome to Tuna Bell! Darn, where was I?”

“Doesn’t it say the price on your computer screen?” asked Billy impatiently.

“Well, so it does! You’re order is 239 scarabs.”

“That’s the order number!” said Billy.

The Guinea Pigs

“If you’re so good at this, why don’t you do my job?”

“Because I don’t want to end up to be a brain-dead slob with tuna poisoning, that’s why!” Billy exclaimed. “Here’s a hint: it costs nine scarabs in all.”

“Maybe this is the wrong place,” said a distantly familiar voice behind Billy. Billy turned around.

“You’re Margusean Guinea Pigs!” he exclaimed. There were five dog sized Guinea Pigs, belonging to the same species that his mother had created with some of Roy’s money and brought up on the same ranch Billy had grown up on. Four of the Guinea Pigs were dressed in blue jumpsuits and one in a green jumpsuit, who was probably the leader.

“What of it?” said the leader.

“Well, uh,” Billy looked around the Tuna Bell. There was no one other than them and a few brain dead teenage Space Monkeys frying tuna. He pulled his cap off. “I’m Billy. I grew up on the ranch that created your species.”

“Well, there’s no way of us knowing that, is there, Gotithian?” said the leader.

“I recognize him,” said one of the Guinea Pigs in a blue jumpsuit. “I was young then, but he’s definitely Prince William of Margues.”

“I’ll have to take his word for it,” said the leader, turning again to Billy. “We’ve wanted to locate you since we escaped, but you were hidden very well and by the time the Gotithian slaughter started we assumed you were dead.”

“What brings you to Tuna Bell?” asked Billy.

“Oh, I figured out your order,” said the Space Monkey cashier. “That’ll be nine scarabs.” Billy ignored him.

“We’re just here to ask for some directions. The Diarama City base called us in, but thanks to some recent

problems with the new asteroid around the El Tuna Café our ship landed in the wrong part of town,” said the Guinea Pig who had recognized Billy.

“Base? So you’re some of the soldier Guinea Pigs occupying Diarama?”

“Yes,” said the leader. “Do you know where the base is?”

“I think I saw it on the map,” said Billy, trying to remember a base.

“Map?” asked the leader.

“Yeah, there’s a map outside of the tallest skyscraper in Diarama City,” said Billy, pointing out a window to the skyscraper looming over the old part of town.

“That’ll do,” said the leader. “William, would you like to come along with us to the base?”

“Sure!” Billy exclaimed. “Diarama City’s turned out to be pretty dangerous. I’ll need to get my friends, though.”

“Friends?” asked the Guinea Pig who had recognized Billy, “There are more Gotithians?”

“No, there’s a human and, er, Mr. Parrot.”

“Mr. Parrot!” exclaimed another Guinea Pig.

“Yes,” said Billy. “I traveled back in time to a cocktail party Mr. Parrot was holding, and a lot of other Mr. Parrots were there too, since they were visiting from other times. Some weird stuff happened and there was a space-time knot, and when a quantum firework hit the knot one of the Mr. Parrots got flung with me and the human into Diarama City.”

“How’d you find out how to travel through time?” asked the leader.

The Guinea Pigs

“Well, I used Mr. Parrot’s notebook,” said Billy. He briefly summarized what had happened with him, Toby, and Phil, and how they ended up at the cocktail party.

The leader Guinea Pig had no comment other than, “Interesting.”

“So, should I go get the others?”

“Yes, we would certainly like to have you in the base, and Mr. Parrot could prove useful. He has experience with managing Diarama, and he could help us against some mafia that’s been secretly controlling the planet. You know the one that’s supposedly got Roy and Simon?”

“Roy and Simon!” Billy exclaimed. “I never knew that! I just got out of the knot! Why are you fighting them?”

“That Roy and Simon are in that are just rumors,” said the leader. “We would be fighting them even if they didn’t have the two. That’s not to say we don’t hate them for plunging the Universe into so much chaos, of course, but after some investigation of Diarama we discovered this ‘society’ of con artists is controlling much of the economy. As the new leaders of Diarama we have to do something about it. Where is Mr. Parrot?”

“In the bathroom complex,” said Billy, pointing out of the window again. The leader of the Guinea Pig group opened the door and motioned for the others to come out.

“How’ve you been staying alive?” asked the Guinea Pig who had recognized Billy.

“I’ve been staying hidden,” said Billy, putting his cap back on before he left Tuna Bell. “But after that visit from Earthland it’s been pretty difficult.”

“You must be tired,” said the leader.

“You have no idea,” said Billy. “You’ll be able to keep us safe, though.”

“Yes,” said the leader. “Safe and comfortable. Like I said, you and Mr. Parrot will be a great help.”

“How will I be a great help?”

“Our troops weren’t exactly delighted when, after such a long siege, the cockroaches blasted Graceland into some unknown part of space.”

“Are you guys Presleytarian all of the sudden? Why do you want Graceland?”

“We’re far from Presleytarian,” said the leader, squeaking in laughter a little, “in fact, most of us hate Presleytarianism. Our leaders have discovered the power of religious influence and hoped to use Graceland as well.”

“What do you mean by ‘the power of religious influence’?” asked Billy, pointing the door leading to the hall Mr. Parrot and Toby were in. “I would think that you would only make the Presleytarians angrier.”

“Anger worked to our advantage, but that anger was directed to the cockroaches, who had originally stolen Graceland from Earth.” The leader stopped as Billy opened the door to the hall and the group entered. “We were supposed to be more like unofficial bounty hunters. The leaders knew that we would be lionized and rewarded for recapturing Graceland, and we would offer a low price for the sale of the holy land, but competition between even the Pious Presleytarians and the True Presleytarians would drive the price up to a point where we would truly benefit from the capture.”

“Wouldn’t Dave also be bidding?” asked Billy as they reached the fountain with Mr. Parrot and Toby’s bathroom.

The Guinea Pigs

Billy could see at the receptionist's desk a few butlers debating and pointing at their group. It seemed that they didn't want to mess with the Guinea Pigs.

"We aren't sure what would have happened with Dave," admitted the leader. Billy pointed to which door was theirs. The Guinea Pig nodded, but didn't open it. "Our best guess is that Dave would have bid if the Pious Presleytarians were outbidding the True Presleytarians, since the True Presleytarians believe in restoring The King to his proper position for some reason, but Dave might not have bothered at all with Graceland. The real damage was done when the cockroaches trespassed on Earth and interrupted life on Earth, and his biggest concern now is probably keeping the stinking Presleytarians away."

"That seems right," said Billy. "He's got mimes all over Earthland. Something's definitely up."

"I'd like to know where he got those mimes," said the Guinea Pig.

Mr. Parrot poked his head out of their door. "Billy?"

"Mr. Parrot!" cried out the Guinea Pig leader happily. "It's so nice that you're alive!"

"Why?" asked Mr. Parrot angrily. "What do you want? Who are you?"

"We're part of the group that controls this planet," said the leader, looking to Billy for an explanation of Mr. Parrot's hostile behavior.

"So you want me to help you manage Diarama?" asked Mr. Parrot.

"Not quite," said Billy. "They're willing to protect us and keep us safe. This is great in times like these."

“I won’t be exploited any more!” Mr. Parrot shouted, and slammed the door shut.

“Exploited?” asked Billy, trying not to sound rude. “What do you mean? You became the richest, most powerful person in the Universe!”

“Well, I’m dead now, aren’t I?” said Mr. Parrot from the inside.

“Maybe so, but at least *you* are alive.”

“I heard how I went down,” said Mr. Parrot. “Roy stole my power, half of my money, and made me make him a moose tranquilizer, and he thought it was generous of him! He forced me to retire, but he still wanted to take care of his moose problem. Then he taxed for being so rich! I worked all of my life, died tragically, and now you expect me to work again?”

“But you’ll be so safe and comfortable at our base!” protested the leader. He pulled out a gun from the inside of his jumpsuit to scatter the gathering crowd.

“So you’re not going to exploit me?”

“Um, of course not,” said the leader.

“Um?” demanded Mr. Parrot.

“We won’t,” said Billy.

“I can’t be so sure of that,” said Mr. Parrot. “If this base is really my only way to be safe in the Universe anymore, I’ll be forced to stay there, won’t I? That’ll give you quite a bit of a bargaining leverage.”

“What do you want?” asked the leader desperately.

“I want to be able to choose what I’ll do. Billy, you have the disguises?”

“Yes,” said Billy.

The Guinea Pigs

“Come inside then,” said Mr. Parrot in a softer voice. The door opened up slightly. Billy gestured for the Guinea Pigs to stay outside, and entered the bathroom.

“What do you have?” asked Mr. Parrot, closing and locking the door.

“Toby!” exclaimed Billy. Toby, who was crouched down next to some of the plants in the bathroom, smiled weakly at Billy.

“What’s going on?” he asked in English.

“What do you have?” asked Mr. Parrot again, this time more loudly.

“Oh, yeah,” said Billy, putting his bag of scarabs and merchandise onto the sink. “This jogging suit is for you,” he said tossing a jogging suit to Mr. Parrot. “I slipped some shoe polish into my pocket so you and Toby could make your hair look more like a Space Monkey’s.”

“I am a Space Monkey,” Mr. Parrot reminded Billy, reaching his hand out. Billy put a glob of shoe polish into it. Mr. Parrot looked into the mirror and placed the shoe polish on the most feathery parts of his face. He looked down at the bag.

“The machine I sold my wood to weighed it wrong. That bag’s filled with one thousand nine hundred and eighty scarabs!”

“What is this?” Mr. Parrot asked, pulling up the hoodie. “I remember seeing some Diaraman youth wearing this.”

“That’s for me,” said Billy.

“I’d rather have it,” said Mr. Parrot.

“It’s a little small for you,” said Billy.

“Not quite,” said Mr. Parrot, slipping on the hoodie with some difficulty. Billy had to suppress a laugh. Mr. Parrot looked ridiculous. “It covers my boxy head nicely,” he reasoned, putting up the hood in front of the mirror.

“It looks ridiculous with your cocktail party suit under it,” said Billy.

“I guess you’re right,” said Mr. Parrot, taking off the hoodie. “I want one in my size. I can use your cap until then.”

“I need that,” said Billy as Mr. Parrot took his cap off of his head.

“Why? You’re safe with the Guinea Pigs. I need to get to the store somehow.”

“Neither a cap nor a hoodie is going to cover your nose!” Billy exclaimed.

“Hmm, you’re right,” said Mr. Parrot. “I guess I’ll have to get plastic surgery on it soon.”

“So, you’re going to come with us to the base until then?” asked Billy hopefully.

“No. I’m still going shopping with your scarabs. An ugly nose never killed anybody.”

“There’s always a first time,” said Billy. “Maybe we can play it safe and keep you at the base until you get plastic surgery and a proper disguise?”

“I’m not going to let myself get captured,” said Mr. Parrot.

“Captured? They could capture you right now if they wanted to!”

Mr. Parrot leaned down to Billy and whispered. “That’s because they think that I’ll go to the base. They’ll

think that even if I run off with your scarabs. Don't tell them I'm escaping."

"You're underestimating Guinea Pig hearing," said Billy. "And you can't leave! What're you going to do?"

"Well, I'm going to have some fun for once," said Mr. Parrot. "Maybe get that shiny new microwave I saw in a store window on my way over here."

"Shiny microwave?" asked Billy, worried. "Why do you need that?"

"I *don't* need it!" said Mr. Parrot. "That's the whole point of buying it! I want to be impulsive!"

"You're planning ahead a little too much to be impulsive," said Billy.

"I need practice," said Mr. Parrot.

"And what happens when you run out of money?"

"I'll make do without it," said Mr. Parrot. "That adds to the adventure. I don't need that much money anyway. Just enough to get me plastic surgery for my nose — there's a discount surgeon down the street — and a shiny new microwave. Maybe I'll get a kidney if I have any money left."

"A kidney?" Billy screeched. Toby crawled back as far as he could from the others. To him, it must have sounded like a fight.

"To keep as a pet," said Mr. Parrot. "I saw a great price at the commercial morgue the discount surgeon shares a building with."

"I think I know where they get their kidneys, then," Billy half-joked.

Worship your Vermin

“I guess that is a little suspicious,” said Mr. Parrot. He jumped in the air with glee. “Hey! I made my first irrational plan!”

Billy gave up. “I’m sure the base will welcome you when you come to your senses.” He turned to Toby and said in English, “We’re going to meet a few old friends of mine. The Guinea Pigs that I grew up with have bred themselves an army and we can visit a base of theirs.”

“What about Mr. Parrot?” asked Toby.

“He’s going through a phase,” said Billy. “I don’t know. He’ll get over it. Let’s go.”

The Cockroach

Simon carefully lifted the tube of Ba-ing-go from the heater and dumped the ice cold material into the solution. The color changed to the desired blue. To be sure that he had it right, Simon swirled the beaker around a little and placed it in front of a laser. Too cloudy. Simon, frustrated, recorded the amount of Ba-ing-go he had placed in and poured the useless stuff down the drain. As he washed the beaker he thought to himself how pathetic it was that he had spent the whole morning on getting the ingredients right and hadn't even started on the potency of the tranquilizer. Worse yet, mimicking Mr. Parrot's tranquilizer and even his methods would only get him so far. He would have to test the solution eventually, and it could take awhile for them to find a moose-that-looked-like-a-turtle especially nowadays when Loothpit had united them. The warning message might have been misleading – a cockroach had only showed up to tell them about Loothpit, not Loothpit himself – but it still went to show how Loothpit could come at any time and there was virtually nothing that they could do to stop him. He was a Class B member, after all, and if the society were to refuse him to enter but allow other Class B's like WonderClaus, he would surely attack. Roy and he seemed to be more trouble than they were worth, Simon thought, unless of course the society really did choose to use his moose tranquilizer. Roy's political abilities were limited and probably worse than Warren's, and neither brother really had good public relations. If that were the case, then Loothpit would see the

society as a threat immediately upon the news that they had a moose tranquilizer, so as long as he and Roy were here an attack by Loothpit seemed inevitable.

Not only that, but the cockroach had said that Loothpit was becoming more and more powerful. He claimed to have control of the army of cockroaches the leaders had frozen when the Guinea Pigs had besieged their fort on Diarama, and that could prove to be useful blackmail if there were enough other Margusean cockroaches out there that still believed in a cockroach faction. If the rumors were true that the frozen army had been stored in the El Tuna Café, then that was probably true, considering that Loothpit had been able to get Roy and him out of there. If Loothpit was getting power outside of brutally invading with an army of moose-that-look-like-turtles, which he may be doing to grow his power, then the Loothpit related worries wouldn't stop with moose tranquilizer, even if it did ever get made.

Roy opened the door. "Simon, come into the break room!"

"Why?" asked Simon, carefully putting down his chemicals.

"There's a rumor that Mr. Parrot is out in the streets!"

"That wouldn't be the first Mr. Parrot sighting," said Simon, annoyed. "Remember what Warren said? I'm not going to waste my time on that."

"This isn't a 'sighting,'" protested Roy, "It was a pretty credible story. At the bathroom complex in Diarama a bunch of Guinea Pigs and either a Space Monkey or a Gotithian crowded around a room and seemed to be pleading for Mr. Parrot to come to the Guinea Pig military base. Lots of people heard it."

“Well, they couldn’t get the story right, so why should I believe them?”

“What do you mean?”

“You said ‘either a Space Monkey or a Gotithian’. If lots of people saw it, how could they be undecided?”

“Gotithians nowadays come in disguises, Simon! This could have been a Gotithian in a disguise!”

“But I don’t think Gotithians walk around in the middle of Diarama City and talk to dead people!” said Simon.

“Just...come on, Simon! You never know. The Gotithian or Space Monkey was said to be fairly young, so maybe it’s Billy!”

“You go and believe whatever makes you feel better, but I have some important work to do,” said Simon.

“This is important work for me, Simon. If you remember, Warren put me in charge of managing the political aspects of the society. Imagine, if Mr. Parrot really is in Diarama City, or at least some people took the story seriously enough to believe it, wouldn’t a couple of factions attack the planet to get hold of him?”

Simon thought for a moment. “Mr. Parrot’s not a relic like Graceland. He’s a person. People may want to use him to advance their own technologies, but he’s too smart to allow that to happen.”

“You’re missing the point,” said Roy. “If people want Mr. Parrot, and they think that they can get him, don’t you think they would fight over him?”

“You can figure out that for yourself,” said Simon. “To me it sounds like gossip.”

“You’ve been working on that tranquilizer pretty much since we met Warren. You could use a break. It could help boost your productivity.”

“That’s loser talk,” said Simon. “I need to spend as much of my time as possible working on this thing. This is a life and death situation for sure. Mr. Parrot isn’t.”

“Well, you missed lunch, so maybe you could get something to eat while you’re up there.”

Simon couldn’t say no to that. “Is the break room far from here?”

“Not really,” said Roy. “So you’ll go?”

“I might as well,” said Simon, pulling off his gloves and washing his hands. He slipped off his lab coat and followed Roy through the wide tunnel. “What’s the cockroach said since I went into the lab?”

“He said that Loothpit refuses to fund that stupid ship WonderClaus is trying to build, and then we discussed the possibility of the Cube People having made a Gotithian. When a hobo told us the Mr. Parrot story he suggested that the Cube People could want Mr. Parrot to help with the improvement of their Gotithian.”

“I suspect that Mr. Parrot would go into hiding,” said Simon again.

“Maybe, but if the Guinea Pigs forced him to go to their base, he’s a sitting duck.” The two of them passed the intersection containing Warren’s and their offices and entered the hallway with the hatch to the outside world. The break room was at the end of that hallway in order to give hobos doing research out on the streets a rest. Roy opened the door. “Darn!” he exclaimed. “The guy’s gone. Well, the cockroach is still here. What is your name anyway?”

The Cockroach

“John,” said the cockroach, hovering his hoverboard above the refrigerator Simon was opening. “But most people call me Jon, I think.”

Simon pulled a deli sandwich from the refrigerator. “Why are you here?”

“I’m a fugitive,” said the cockroach.

“Who are you hiding from?” asked Simon.

“Loothpit,” said the cockroach.

“Loothpit’s after cockroaches? Why’s that?”

“I don’t know,” said the cockroach. “But I’m here to stay.”

“So you’re a member? Why’d the society let you in so easily?”

“The cockroaches and the Hobo Society have a common enemy, the Guinea Pigs. Few know the Guinea Pigs war tactics as the cockroaches who experienced the siege firsthand.”

“You were in the siege?” asked Roy. “Why didn’t you didn’t get frozen? You’re not a leader, are you?”

“Far from it,” said the cockroach humbly. “I’m just lucky I guess. So what’ve you been doing, Simon? You missed a great discussion on Loothpit.”

“I think that I need to get back to my work,” said Simon, putting the rest of his sandwich into his mouth. “The mixture still isn’t dissolving enough. I’ve got lots of work to do.”

“Have you tried heating it? That always works for me,” said John.

Simon laughed. “Do you even know what I’m making?”

“No,” admitted John.

“Right. Heating would ruin the chemistry.”

“I’m just trying to make some conversation,” said the cockroach.

“Well, that isn’t going to help me very much,” said Simon, downing a glass of water.

“Aren’t you interested in anything I told you?” asked Roy.

“Well,” said Simon, thinking. “I would like to know what’s happening to WonderClaus right now.”

“Oh yes, WonderClaus,” said John, “Loothpit’s furious that you and Roy got away so quickly, and he’s doubtlessly suspicious, so he cut funding to WonderClaus’s ship. He’s really strapped for cash now; he’s raised the Presleytarian Trade Commission and is even selling wood from Presleytarian buildings just to make the final payments to the Cube People. I think that the Cube People will stop that ridiculous Gotithian recreation project of theirs now, so if there’s any clamor for getting Mr. Parrot I doubt they’ll be in it. Dave’s starting to get suspicious of WonderClaus’s plans with the ship. He thought it was just a way to slight the Pious Presleytarians, but that much desperation for continuing the project combined with the fact that the True Presleytarians believe in restoring The King to his proper place is making him put a few things together. There may very well be a mime attack on him.”

“Which is going to affect the Hobo Society,” said Roy. “It may have to choose allegiance between WonderClaus and Dave. WonderClaus can probably influence the Guinea Pigs the most, but Dave’s the one who’s supplying us with mimes and anti-mimes, which are vital to the security of the society.”

“Why don’t we just keep the mimes we have?” asked Simon.

Roy shrugged. “That’s a weird thing about mimes. They come and go as they please. They’ll normally hang around their ‘owners’ but they tend to disappear eventually. Dave’s got some source of mimes – probably the Cube People – so he’s the one we can count on to restock our supply. Besides, who really wants to fight a guy with a huge amount of mimes on his hands?”

“And the two of you don’t want WonderClaus to have his say around here as long as Loothpit’s out and about,” said John. “He’s planned to come back and pick you guys up for his theology class as soon as things clear up with Loothpit, which isn’t going to happen. I’d say your best bet is to side with Dave if a conflict comes up.”

“With all those mimes, Dave sounds pretty strong” said Simon. “Why’d he put up with the theft of Graceland when he’s got access to an army no one else does?”

“He probably used all his mimes to tighten security around Earth after the Graceland incident,” said John. “That’s why WonderClaus is incredibly stupid. For one thing, bigger ships are bigger targets, not more powerful weapons. There’s no need to make a ship larger than the Squeenborg just to bring it down. For another, even if he could win in a battle against Dave, if Earth’s crawling with mimes he doesn’t stand a chance. He just thinks he stands a chance because he’s following ‘divine orders’.”

“Where are those kinds of doctrines, anyway?” asked Simon. “Are there Presleytarian holy books?”

“Lot’s of them,” said John. “WonderClaus is officially the author of them, but there’s really a ghost writer that used to be a marketer.”

“A marketer is writing Presleytarian holy books?” asked Simon.

“Well, wouldn’t you want to make your religion appealing?”

“Well, I guess. So what’s in the holy books?”

“Lot’s of strange things,” said John. “And not all of the scriptures are holy *books*. There is a holy encyclopedia, a holy dictionary, and even a holy newsletter – that’s filled with weird junk like what’s the divine stock recommendation and the best places to find bargains – so that people don’t lose interest. Also, people tend to buy the scriptures, so it makes a pretty good source of revenue for WonderClaus. I haven’t heard anything on raising the prices on them, but it may happen. WonderClaus publishes new editions once in a while, so he could just make a new edition and raise the price there.”

“Why are there editions to holy books?” asked Simon.

“That’s the thing that perplexes me too. Presleytarianism’s gone through a lot of changes since the cult years. If the scriptures are the truth, it wouldn’t make any sense for there to be changes, would there? WonderClaus reasons that he’s doing it because the original texts have been corrupted, but that’s a fairly hypocritical thing to say if you ask me.”

“I need to get back to work now,” said Simon. “It’s very important. What’re you doing here, John? Didn’t you say that you worked with chemistry?”

“What? Oh yeah, the heating thing. I’m mainly an information guy, like most members. Cockroaches can spy more easily than most creatures, you know. I do know about chemistry in case you need any help.”

“No need,” said Simon. “It’s my own project.”

“Working on the moose tranquilizer?”

“Yes.”

“You’re going to need to test it on a real moose-that-looks-like-a-turtle.”

“I know. Do you know of any pet shops were I can get one?” Simon joked.

“No, but you could check out the Moose Rehabilitation Center. It’s supposed to be a center for moose-that-look-like-turtles to go if they’re ill or don’t want to join Loothpit. Of course, Loothpit doesn’t like anyone who helps his deserters, so he’s forced it to become a retirement place for soldiers who can’t fight anymore or are too ill or injured to.”

“How do you know all of this?” asked Roy.

“I’ve seen a lot of stuff in the Universe,” said the cockroach simply.

“Where’s the center located?” asked Simon. “You might want to tell Warren about this.”

“It’s a floating center located in the Gotithian Nebula. It orbits the Sightsee Resorts structure for that nebula. I’m not so sure you could just walk in there and expect to get a moose-that-looks-like-a-turtle, though. Loothpit might be guarding it to prevent moose tranquilizer testing.”

“Well, then what’s the point of mentioning it?” asked Simon, who’s hopes had crashed.

“It might not have that tight of security,” said John. “For now, at least. Maybe Loothpit will only think of tightening security when he draws the connection between you being a colleague of Mr. Parrot and the possibility that you’ll try to create moose tranquilizer. It’s something to consider, but you’ll have to hurry to get it.”

“I guess,” said Simon. “You should definitely tell Warren about this.”

“Could you test moose tranquilizer with only blood?” asked John.

“Moose tranquilizer *does* work by causing an allergic reaction,” said Simon. “Of course I can’t see how the reaction affects the moose-that-looks-like-a-turtle – if it kills it, knocks it unconscious, or nothing at all – but at least being able to see if there’s an allergic reaction is better than no test at all. Do you know the security of the center well?”

“Not really,” said John, “but I am good with security systems. I worked with security for the fort that the Guinea Pigs attacked, and before that I worked with secure circuitry so that rival cockroaches couldn’t destroy our systems.”

“What do you mean by that?” asked Roy.

“Some buildings have circuits in places that a cockroach can easily squeeze into. If a cockroach is brave enough oftentimes he can destroy the wires and, in extreme cases, cause an explosion. I had to secure some of our ships so that cockroaches couldn’t get in there and destroy them.”

“Stay on topic,” said Simon, annoyed. “So you think you’d be able to get into the center and get me some blood?”

“I have no duties at the moment, so sure,” said the cockroach.

“Wonderful!” exclaimed Simon.

“I said you would be able to get something out of this,” said Roy.

“I’d better get back to the lab,” said Simon. “This is good. This is very good. I was beginning to worry about what we would do with Loothpit.” Simon filled his glass of water again and gulped it down, then headed out the door. John floated on his hoverboard with him.

“How long do you think it’ll take for you to finish the moose tranquilizer?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” said Simon. “I’ve only been working with the ingredients and dissolving them properly into the solution. I haven’t even started on the chemistry it takes to make the moose tranquilizer effective. Blood will help a lot.”

“What would happen to the society if Loothpit comes before you develop the tranquilizer?”

“I try not to think about that,” said Simon. “You said that the society has mimes, so I guess they would try to use them, along with whatever else there is. Hopefully it won’t come to that. That’s why I need to work so hard.”

“Okay. Hmm. Warren’s out of his office,” said the cockroach. “I’ll go look for him.”

“Okay,” said Simon, leaving the office intersection. His head was swimming with thoughts from that encounter. What if Loothpit did show up too soon? Would mimes be enough to hold them back? He had never seen a mime actually fight someone before, so he had no idea how it would hold up against a moose-that-looks-like-a-turtle. What if someone, say the Cube People, were to attack Diarama? Worse yet, what if Mr. Parrot really wasn’t at the base, and they – whoever they were – searched through the planet and

found the Hobo Society? What would happen if WonderClaus showed up, wanting Roy and him back?

Simon entered the lab and put on his gloves and coat. He needed to concentrate on the task at hand, but his worries were preventing him from doing it, making him more worried. Perhaps he could get started and momentum would carry him forward. He opened the miniature refrigerator in which he could several copies of the formula he had mastered so far. It wasn't too hard, Simon thought, looking at his ledger. One time his solution was too cloudy and once not cloudy enough, so he could try the middle of the two and work his way from there. He took a deep breath. The air was refreshing. As long as he kept his mind off of his worries, he would be fine. He unscrewed the cap off his jar of bottled Ba-ing-go and scooped some up into a test tube. Making sure that the amount of Ba-ing-go in the tube was the same as it had always been, he smiled at how the metal glimmered against the florescent light of the lab. He turned on Bunsen burner and secured the test tube of Ba-ing-go over it. The Ba-ing-go began to make popping noises as it got hot and made itself cold in an accelerating cycle. Now he had nothing to do but wait, and that knowledge caused his worries to flow into his head again.

WonderClaus visiting; Dave battling; tranquilizer not ready; mimes not helping; John not returning; Guinea Pigs attacking; Mr. Parrot searched for; it all gave Simon a headache. He shut off the lab's lights, leaving only the soothing glow and crackle of Ba-ing-go in the lab. That was much better. He could simply watch the Ba-ing-go until it was ready to be added to the current solution. The concentration required to focus on the Ba-ing-go tube was

The Cockroach

enough to get some worries out of his mind – it seemed to be working. If he could just keep focus on the Ba-ing-go and it's crackling, it's movement, it's glow that twinkled like the stars of some distant galaxy.....

Simon's Trip

Yes, the glow of the Ba-ing-go was very soothing to Simon. It brightened, dimmed, and bounced playfully as if it were alive. Simon knew that it was imperative to clear his thoughts, especially with such tasks at hand. He suddenly remembered the first time that he had fought Roy to restore the position he had stolen from Mr. Parrot, when he had to find a way to disable Gotithia – a vital part of Roy’s tactics – from fighting the war. If he hadn’t thought clearly his forces would have been severely outstretched and his forces might have fallen. They did fall eventually, but not without a fight. He also needed to think clearly when his last weapon against Roy, using Billy as blackmail, wasn’t going as planned because Billy had become seriously ill and if he didn’t end the war quickly he might have died, which would ruin Simon. He had devised a plan for a direct assault on the El Tuna Café, which wouldn’t have failed if not for the Squeenburg’s unexpected break through the El Tuna Café’s security fields. Yes, clear thinking had done him much good.

Now, what was it that he had to think about? He needed to concentrate on how he would work with the moose tranquilizer. He had left the Ba-ing-go sitting for long enough so it was probably cold enough by now. Once he could dissolve the Ba-ing-go effectively into the solution, he could work with the finer details of the chemical structure of the tranquilizer. If it didn’t work he would have to see if it was on the side of being too cloudy or not cloudy enough, and because of his other data he would be able to determine a more precise middle range from that information, and

depending on his next results he could determine another more precise range and repeat the process until the proper dissolution was achieved. He probably would need to make more copies of his current solution just to do all that experimenting. Good, he had a plan. Anything is possible if you have a plan. Where had he heard that? Somewhere. Someone had said it....Simon thought it was an old man he had once met. The old man's house was interesting, Simon thought. It really reflected his queer personality. The floors were red carpeting laced with a floral design, and he had oddly soft pink curtains around some sort of great bronze table. Odd sort of thing to have. No, it was coming back to him. It wasn't a table; the bronze thing was a coffin! He was remembering the old man's funeral! Who was the old man anyway? Of course! Roy's father! Simon hadn't seen much of Roy's father. Their mother had been ashamed of Simon, being an illegitimate child, and had sent him off to boarding schools since he was just three Gotithian years old. He remembered how much he resented Roy for having a proper childhood. How had the old man died? He thought he had heard it in some biography....Loothpit! Loothpit had killed him! Of course! No, it wasn't Loothpit. But Simon remembered Mr. Parrot saying that Roy's father had worked with him in biotech, so it was quite possible that he had created the moose-that-looks-like-a-turtle by accident just as a fish can be born with three hearts. No, that was a bad analogy. Bad analogies came from unclear thinking, which he didn't want, because unclear thinking lead to irrational thinking and irrational thinking lead to horrible accidents like creating moose-that-look-like-turtles that do nothing except kill you!

Simon turned his head back to the test tube of Ba-ingo, knowing that it was time for him to concentrate again. The tube's flicker was now in a distinct pattern, starting in a dim glow from the bottom and brightening until about the center, where it began to dim again, forming a barrel shaped stream of light. That, combined with the sparkles and humming crackles, was beautifully mystifying to Simon. It reminded him of the enormity of the Universe, of how insignificant the mere thirty or so inhabited planets were in comparison to the enormity of a single star, and of that star to a galaxy, and of that galaxy to its cluster, and of that cluster to the Universe. All of his suffering throughout his life, all of his worries, all of his troubles – they were so meaningless in the grandest of things. He didn't want to think of the science behind it, of the facts such as that the Universe was based on stupidity, or that it had a beginning and probably an end, and some other things he had forgotten about as he watched the stars, which was probably a good thing. He wanted to actually be with the Universe itself, where there wasn't anything but that ignorant beauty, but he was isolated. It was so much more spiritual and superior to the moose tranquilizer problem that it made Simon want to spit in disgust at his devotion.

His headache returned. It must have been coming from overwork and the stress of his pitifully insignificant project. He needed to leave it immediately. Here a chance to explore the Universe was right in front of him. It would be sick not to take it. Of course, it suddenly occurred to Simon that he was not in fact in the Universe at all. He was instead in a laboratory inside a sewer of the capital of a planet that was completely insignificant in the Universe. Ah, but he really

Simon's Trip

was in the Universe, then, so he *could* explore it. The galaxies made sense! Ah, he could abandon his project, and enjoy the beauty of the Universe, from the Universe, without actually being *in* the Universe! It was unfortunate that he had his thoughts still with him.

“I can’t enjoy this with so many thoughts swimming around,” said Simon out loud. He waited for a response, but none came. He suddenly realized how alone he was in such a large Universe, and how depressingly silent it was. Eternity was depressing, no matter how beautiful it was.

“It shouldn’t bother you,” said a serene voice. Simon sighed with relief. He wasn’t alone. Or was it his imagination? That depressed him again.

A faint image of a ship came and covered up the rest of the Universe. Simon’s headache returned, and as he clutched his head he wondered what the ship was there for. Was it there to bring pain? It certainly seemed like it. He couldn’t take the headache. “Come and see the Universe in my ship,” said the voice soothingly.

“Sorry,” said Simon, covering his eyes over the bright light. “I...I just can’t think anymore. It’s too painful.”

“Don’t you like my ship?”

“Don’t make me think!” Simon exclaimed.

“Just take a glance at it. It’s not so bad,” said the voice again supportively.

Simon rubbed his eyes. “Where’d it go?” he screamed desperately, clutching his forehead.

“Simon, does it matter where it went?”

“Of course not!” Simon screamed. “Nothing matters! Don’t you get it? We’re in the Universe!” Simon had to stop. He felt like he was being choked. His lungs burned for air.

“Help!” he cried out. He tugged at his hair and his throat simultaneously and came down, expecting to hit solid ground. He didn’t.

“Look at it this way,” said the voice again. Simon’s headache faded away, replaced by a new sense of lightness. Colors danced around playfully and the ship appeared again. “If I replaced one part of this ship, would it make a big enough impact to make the ship a totally different ship?”

Simon couldn’t think of what to say, so he stuck out his tongue. Or, at least, he thought about sticking out his tongue. He had no idea if he had actually gone through with it, as he had no mirror with which to judge whether or not his tongue was sticking out. He decided to smile instead, as it was even less of an energy waster. Did he go through with it? He couldn’t tell, as he wasn’t paying attention. Without proper concentration nothing is achievable, he realized. Everything requires concentration, including the ship in front of him. Focus....

“Replace a part with a puppy,” the voice said flatly. “You still have the same ship. Replace a part with a puppy, and you still have the same ship. Replace a part with a puppy, and you still have the same ship.”

“Yes!” Simon exclaimed. He was concentrating! He was going to make it!

“Someday you’ll have a pile of dead puppies, you’ll see,” said the voice again. “And when that day comes, you’ll wonder ‘why do I have a pile of dead puppies?’ and when you do, you’ll realize it was your own ship all along. One change can’t change a ship, even if it is replacing a part with a puppy. So come on, let’s fly my ship!” A pile of dead puppies came into Simon’s view.

Simon's Trip

Simon wanted to agree, he wanted to raise his hands up and cheer – anything to let the captain know he was attentive, but he just couldn't. There was no escaping it. Simon understood that his only hope was that despite not being able to get on the ship, he was already on the ship, much like how he had been with the Universe.

Simon began sweating. His serenity was gone. The pile of dead puppies disappeared and the vast nothingness of the Universe appeared. The pure darkness was penetrated only by a faint glow of stars, but the stars were starting to dim. He was falling further into the bleak darkness, and there was no way he could get back. He screamed at the top of his lungs for help, but he only fell further into the darkness. He screamed again, and again, and again, and again, and again, and finally he didn't have enough energy to scream any more. The darkness engulfed him, and he disappeared.

Some sort of light broke the darkness. Simon briefly wondered where he was now. Perhaps he was on a planet, at sunrise? He poked open his eyes, but the flood of light caused him to shut them immediately.

“What happened?” asked a voice – it sounded like Roy. Simon didn't answer. “I heard screaming from the lab. When I went in I felt lightheaded. You weren't breathing, and you had no pulse.”

“Roy called me and I sent someone in to check it out,” said Warren. “The room was flooded with Ba-ing-gas. It's a little-known nerve gas that can shut the connection in your brain between reality and your imagination, which probably

means you were screaming at hallucinations. It can also shut off your circulatory system in large quantities. You were hallucinating, weren't you? Simon?"

"Yes," mumbled Simon.

"Thought so," said another voice. It was familiar. Who was it? WonderClaus! He was coming to pick them up? "He was working with Ba-ing-go, after all."

"He had been working with Ba-ing-go all morning," said Roy irritably. "That had never happened to him before. Besides, Warren told us you can't make Ba-ing-gas from just heating Ba-ing-go. I say someone tried to murder him."

"There wasn't anyone around but you and John," Simon forced out of his mouth.

"John!" exclaimed Roy. "Ah, yes, that does seem suspicious! He did say that he had defended the cockroach fort against the Guinea Pigs, and that Loothpit supposedly had control of the frozen army...it all makes sense! He just wanted to find out about moose tranquilizer so that he could strengthen the only one who's able to bring back his species!"

"His suggestion to fetch blood for Simon's experiment seemed sincere enough," said Warren. Simon opened his eyes again. He could see now. "But it's more than likely that it was just an excuse to get away from the society."

"But before he left he had to kill Simon," said Roy.

"It happened right when I got in, though!" said Simon. Just saying that exhausted him.

"I was out of my office," said Warren. "John could have gone 'looking for me' and then leaked Ba-ing-gas into the room."

Simon's Trip

“He did say that cockroaches were good at sliding through walls and such,” said Roy. “So it’s possible he had leaked the gas directly from the ventilation system. Simon would have no chance.”

“Great....what are we going to do?” cried out Warren despairingly and a little angrily. “Simon’s bedridden and thought to be dead by Loothpit, and even if by some miracle we do get Simon well again we’ve got no way to test his work!”

“You’re forgetting me,” said WonderClaus.

“I don’t think you can help us,” said Warren. “You’re so strapped for cash with your stupid ship project anyway. The only way you could fight Loothpit is if you were to get financial support from Loothpit!”

“I’ve abandoned the ship project,” said WonderClaus, twiddling his beard nervously. “You see...I’ve abandoned Presleytarianism.”

“So you’ve finally come to your senses,” Warren jeered.

“What?” exclaimed Roy.

“It’s true,” WonderClaus said, his facing turning red. “Well, the theology students continued bombarding me and I continued giving reasons that I thought were pretty unarguable – like the fact that the Universe is too perfect for it to have been created by chance – and I was pretty smug about it for a while, but then I realized that I really had no concept of what I had been arguing for. I’ve never seen an omnipotent being or even a cause that can be directly related to it one, so how was I to know that the human I was keeping frozen was omnipotent? I realized I had no concept of a god of any sort, and my arguments were only led to a god’s work

because there wasn't adequate explanation for the argument. There wasn't a single scrap of evidence that pointed to a god of any kind without the imaginative process of elimination. I had heard of The King's sightings on Earth and other miracles, but could anecdotal evidence really allow me to believe after what I had just explained? It's like what Roy and Simon told me about – it's all to feel good about yourself – and I realized it was also about fear. I mean, with all the obvious pressure as the head of a church to believe, I believed partially out of necessity. But there was also pressure for me to tweak the most fundamental doctrines to satisfy followers. With adequate knowledge, how could we tweak things?"

"Okay," said Warren, who had calmed during WonderClaus's monologue. "But how are you supposed to help us at all without the True Presleytarians behind you?"

"I'm still doing lip service to The King," said WonderClaus in a somewhat hushed tone. "I'll be willing to donate resources to the society. I've got lots of high tech weapons to take from the ship. I could also provide you with an army if, and only if, it's absolutely necessary. Dave's gotten suspicious of the ship and may attack out of self defense, but hopefully it won't come to that if he sees I'm scrapping it. I have an idea for how to help you. I think with this new rumor of Mr. Parrot being on Diarama, the Guinea Pigs are at least considering an attack for the esteemed scientist. If not by the Cube People, then probably someone else like the Pious Presleytarians, who practically believe Mr. Parrot is The King's right hand man. They might not be so eager to attack you until this whole thing blows over. We might have a chance to form an alliance with the Guinea Pigs

at this time and join together to fight a mutual enemy like Loothpit.”

“And what if they don’t agree to that?” asked Warren.

“Then it’s likely that they want to attack you, in which case we can use the negotiations as a declaration of war and I will have an excuse to use my forces against the Guinea Pigs.”

“I don’t think you have the ability to take out the Guinea Pigs,” said Warren skeptically.

WonderClaus nodded his head. “Of course not, but the society will also be fighting. I’ll be leading the attack from the outside while the society takes the Guinea Pigs down from the inside.”

Warren was still skeptical. “With all of the trouble you’re into already, why in the Universe would you want to go into an all out war just to save us?”

“It’ll save me too,” said WonderClaus. “You see, if all goes well, we all can form an alliance against Loothpit, who I think is a bigger threat to me than Dave, and if we don’t agree, a war will grab the attention of Presleytarianism’s patrons.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” said Roy. “If they’re not funding you now, why what’re the chances they’ll fund you sufficiently in an emergency like a war?”

“Many of the patrons are interested in Mr. Parrot,” said WonderClaus. “Many of them are Space Monkeys too, who would like Diarama to be wrestled away from the grasps of the Guinea Pigs. Many are also simply seeing True Presleytarianism as a crumbling force and are either joining Pious Presleytarianism or abandoning Presleytarianism altogether. If we can shake the Guinea Pigs with this war and

save Roy, Simon, and arguably Diarama itself, don't you think that we would be considered noble? Also, to be honest, it would do me a lot of good to have access to some of your mimes and anti-mimes."

"I guess so," said Warren, unable to exert any more hate towards WonderClaus after such an argument and such an offering, "Well, then how are we supposed to get around to doing it?"

"For it to be most effective I believe the negotiations must take place somewhere public. Perhaps the Honky Donkey Café?"

"You could never get any faction to join in serious diplomatic negotiations in public," said Roy.

"We could if you were there," said WonderClaus.

"Now you're just being ridiculous," said Warren, turning belligerent again. "You can't expect to walk into the Honky Donkey with a Gotithian like Roy...no, *especially* Roy, considering the fact Loothpit's after him."

"You're forgetting that at any negotiation there's a large army coming from each participating state. If Loothpit were to show up we could fight him off."

"Not effectively without moose tranquilizer," said Roy.

"Moose tranquilizer's not going to ever come into being anyway," argued WonderClaus. "Remember? Simon's bedridden and it can't be tested anyway. We might as well go out there and settle the Guinea Pig situation. Maybe our boldness will keep Loothpit away."

"It could be tested," Simon whispered. The three others turned their attention back to his bed. "If it's true....Roy's father died from a...moose....that....looks...."

Simon's Trip

“We understand,” said Roy.

“Is it true?” asked WonderClaus. “It could be just one of the hallucinations Simon had.”

“I don’t know,” said Warren. “Simon was fairly young when Roy’s father died, and the gas has been known to bring back forgotten memories. Roy’s father did die in a lab, and the cause wasn’t disclosed. It’s possible.”

“But could we even find a trace of moose venom or whatever by now?” asked Roy.

“The venom is very potent, so it’s possible. It’s our best shot anyway, so we might as well try. Roy, do you know where your father’s buried?”

“Of course I do,” said Roy nastily. “But we should have some moose tranquilizer before we go and dig up my father’s grave.”

“That’ll depend on when Simon recuperates,” said WonderClaus. “And this whole Mr. Parrot thing could blow over before that. We really should go as soon as possible.”

“How soon is that?” asked Warren.

“As soon as *possible*,” said WonderClaus. “This isn’t some sort of formal tea-party where guests have to be notified two weeks in advance. As soon as it is physically possible to arrange the meeting. If we had a time machine I would even advise using that!”

“Don’t joke,” said Warren crossly. “Fine. If you really think that it’s that urgent, I could probably get the Hobo Society together right now. How long would it take for *you* to get ready?”

“I’m already ready,” said WonderClaus. “I’ve got a small army ready to go to the Honky Donkey, and with a single phone call I could reserve room enough for the groups.

If you really are as ready as you say you are then I say that we make a call to the Guinea Pigs right now. Jumping an alliance negotiation on them when they're this jumpy will really help us."

"Okay, but would it really be good for us to call so soon?" asked Warren meekly.

"How much preparation do you need? I thought you just said you were ready!" roared WonderClaus.

"I just thought that we should think this over a little more. You know, to make sure that it's a good idea."

"I've been mulling over this idea for quite some time. We need to act while we still have time!"

"You've been known to be a waffler," said Warren.

"Fine. How much time do you need to think about this? Until the opportunity disappears?"

"Not for too long, just to –"

"You don't get it!" WonderClaus exclaimed. "You don't seem to understand that the Guinea Pig's fear of attack could disappear at literally any second! Why should we wait when we can act now?"

"Fine, fine," said Warren. "We can make the call in my office. Or do you think they could change their mind in that time?"

"You know you two are reminding me of a turkey who once worked for me," Roy said, "When he found out that there was a probability of anything happening, he started to worry that at any moment something would happen that would kill him – like the Universe would suddenly turn into chocolate cake and eat itself. He lived in constant fear."

Simon's Trip

Warren left the room without comment, and WonderClaus followed him. Roy faced Simon. “How do you feel?”

“Really tired,” said Simon. “Worried.”

“Don’t worry,” said Roy. “I know that we’re pretty much at Loothpit’s mercy now, but there’s nothing we can do about that now. Perhaps the Honky Donkey meeting will make Loothpit hesitate. Perhaps Mr. Parrot really is in the hands of the Guinea Pigs and we can use him. You never know. Just remember that you can’t work on the moose tranquilizer in the state you’re in.”

Simon nodded. “When will I be better?”

“You were very close to death,” said Roy, scratching his head. “And naturally you’re body and mind are traumatized from the experience. The doctor said you’ll be dead tired for at least two more El Tuna Café hours, and however you recover after that is unpredictable. You could be fine after the rest, but it could also be that you’ll require some rehabilitation – having your circulatory system shut down can really hit your brain hard, you know.”

“I am dead tired,” said Simon, his head to its side and pushing it into his pillow.

“Then I’ll leave you to rest,” said Roy.

The Honky Donkey

Toby and Billy sat in the Guinea Pigs' roomy ship, thinking about the meeting that lay ahead. Billy, who knew the Universe better and knew Gotithian, knew much more about the meeting than Toby, who knew little more than they were going to the Honky Donkey Café to see Roy and the leader of Presleytarianism to discuss politics which he did not know enough about to understand. He was sure that Billy knew all about it and was thinking to himself what he would say to Roy and maybe even how he would help the Guinea Pigs handle the negotiations. Toby, however, didn't have the knowledge to think about such things, and just wanted to break the long silence of the trip. "I know you told me Head Trauma performed a wide variety of music, but how many genres do they really cover?" Toby asked, burdening Billy with yet another meaningless Head Trauma question.

Billy didn't seem surprised at Toby's question. Perhaps he thought that a simple minded human would be prone to ask empty questions about a subject they were excited about. Toby was a little excited about seeing *the* band, as much of the Universe seemed to refer to it as, though after hearing about his near death experience with Liquid Turtle and miniature hamburger poisoning he silently wished that he could just stay at the Guinea Pig's base for a while, where he was safe. "I don't know, really. They're always trying new types of music, along with the ridiculous stunts that music appropriates, to keep the attention of their fans. I heard a rumor that at the Honky Donkey performances they're introducing a new band member who's a mime who

The Honky Donkey

plays the air guitar. I never really took it seriously, of course, but it gives you an idea of how suicidal they are.”

“Ha! I’ve seen bands on Earth that have been more destructive than that,” said Toby, although he doubted that the self harm inflicting bands of Earth could really do something quite as stupid as bringing a mime onstage.

Billy didn’t seem to think so either. “They’ve done stuff that really sounds dangerous, so you never know if the mime rumor is true or not, although I don’t think it is.”

“What kinds of stuff have they done?”

“Well, at one of their earliest concerts the drummer used a live Zebonian snapping turtle’s head as a drum. Quite obviously he’s no longer in the band.”

“I’m pretty sure that they could bring a mime onstage if they’re that stupid,” said Toby.

“I don’t know, the mime thing really threatens the safety of the Honky Donkey.”

“And the snapping turtle thing didn’t?”

“Well, the band manager had the drummer put into a Ba-ing-go cage. He thought that the stunt would be good for the band’s publicity, you see. Being eaten alive during a performance normally doesn’t go unnoticed.”

Toby gave an obligatory laugh and the two went back into their old silence.

“The screen says we’re heading into the donkey breeding grounds,” said Billy, pointing to the large, nice screen built into a long wall of the ship.

“How do they survive being in space?” asked Toby.

“I don’t know. Their size and strength might help. They seem to be able to handle anything. Did you know that

they use a distant relative of the Giant Space Donkey for Willy Lemoniod's Hell?"

"What exactly is Willy Lemoniod's Hell?" asked Toby, happy to have a more meaningful question.

"It's a part of Willy Lemoniod's Afterlife, which is sort of like a computer program where dead people go, only people have been able to physically go into Willy Lemoniod's Hell, so I really don't know what it would be considered, or how it works. Anyway, the afterlife was designed and created by Willy Lemoniod, who first ruler of the Universe, in case you've forgotten. He wanted more control over his subjects, since his power was waning, and controlling where people would go after they died would certainly make him seem divine, don't you think? But all of their plans were so insane that it really ruined the divine image he was going for. Where you end up in that afterlife depends on how many sheep or goats you have there, for example. Yeah, it's pretty weird. Everything has one sheep lying in Willy Lemoniod's Heaven by default, but seriously bad deeds will cause you to lose a sheep, and if you don't have any sheep to lose when you do something bad, you get negative sheep. You get sheep by doing something exceptionally good or by going through Willy Lemoniod's Hell and fluffing up a goat. The donkeys are in the first level of Hell – there are eight, you see – and they spit out pretty much everything that's been annihilated in the Universe, unless of course that stuff is supposed to go into Heck or Heaven. Heck's where you go when you've done nothing bad but you're sheep die, or you don't have sheep for some reason but no real excuse to go into Hell. Heck's actually an uninhabited planet, and underneath Heck is Hell, and above a

The Honky Donkey

portal comes Heaven. So if you can get through the vicious donkeys you'll have to cross a river of pure alcohol, and then go down a complex maze of rickety stairs, which is the third layer. The next layer is the field of goats, and you have to grab a gloat to fluff into a sheep to make up for your misdeeds, but pretty much the only place you can do that is in the eighth layer. The fifth layer is a marsh of choco-latte, some sort of weird tunamatic material that only exists there. The sixth layer is a river of Boomwater, remember that? Yeah, that would be really hard to get across. The seventh layer is the land of the falling cats – that's the place where you can fluff up your goat, provided that you don't get hit by a falling stone and glass cat and around there the Boomwater river flows into two waterfalls, causing some tremendous explosions, which you'll have to survive too to get to the eighth layer, a tall Ba-ing-go ladder – very cold with all that heat, you know – that you have to climb up with your sheep. If you die at any time during that period you'll get spit up by one of those donkeys at the beginning and you'll have to start the whole thing all over again. It's sort of like some weird video game.”

Toby hardly understood what Billy had explained to him so rapidly, but he got the main point that Willy Lemoniod was out of his mind. “Who are ‘they’?”

“You know, I don't really know,” said Billy.

“Also, how are they able to get you into the Afterlife? Do you have a soul or something? If so, why are there so many atheists in the Universe, like the Guinea Pigs?”

“There's no soul involved,” said Billy. “I don't know how they do it. But yes, the life after the afterlife is still a big question for some of the new religions that have sprung up.

Presleytarianism kind of avoided it and said that rather than an afterlife you have a pre-life – no doubt that decision was influenced by the presence of Willy Lemoniod’s Afterlife – and somehow that evolved into a place where you are all the time, even in this life.”

“But you’d think that there’d be some sort of concern about the end of the afterlife! I mean, the Universe isn’t going to last forever,” said Toby, remembering what Phil had said about the Dimension of Nothing and equilibrium being restored.

“I don’t have any answers for that either, but there’s no time anyway. We’ve parked at the Honky Donkey,” said Billy, pointing at the screen. “And I think we’ve been here a long time. Pretty polite of the Guinea Pigs to wait for us to finish talking, isn’t it?”

Toby said nothing. He merely followed Billy out of the ship and into the Honky Donkey Café.

“This is almost as good as those bathrooms,” said Billy. Toby laughed a little, remembering Billy’s description of the bathroom complex. The atrium of the Honky Donkey was grander than anything Toby had ever seen, and it was hard for him to believe that a bathroom complex could be fancier. The domed ceiling was made out of well polished, shining wood that looked lively under the almost sun-like artificial light streaming in from the hole at the top of the dome. The walls were unseen behind lines of waterfalls, the water of which collecting in a pool that surrounded the walkway. At a closer look Toby could see fish swimming around in the water with heads bearing disturbing resemblance to donkey heads. Another genetic modification idiocy, thought Toby.

The Honky Donkey

A well dressed PufferFish came into the atrium. “Hello, I’m Peter, founder of the Honky Donkey Café. Are you gentlemen here for the meeting?” Billy and a few Guinea Pigs nodded. “Right this way then,” said Peter. The party moved with Peter.

“What’s going on?” asked Toby quietly in English.

“Nothing much. We’re just going to get our reserved tables.”

“They’re going to be away from the rest of the restaurant, right?”

“It doesn’t look like it,” said Billy, scanning the tables they were passing. While there were a few startled casual diners, there were mainly soldiers of different species seated. The group moved closer to the large T-shaped stage at the center of the base of the large semi-circled shaped dining room, and Billy saw the unmistakable face of Roy.

“Billy!” Roy exclaimed, jumping up to greet him. Billy made his way to the Guinea Pigs’ side of the table – opposite that of WonderClaus, Roy, and another Space Monkey – and shook Roy’s hand. He sat down and Toby followed.

“Hi, Roy,” said Billy simply. “This is Toby, a human I brought along.”

“How have you been?” asked Roy in a friendly voice.

“Fine, I’ve had a lot of trouble, though. I’ve been attacked by a mime, robbed and left to die at the bottom of the El Tuna Café, caught in a space-time knot, and quite obviously always in fear of being attacked for being a Gotithian.”

“You were in the El Tuna Café?” said the unknown Space Monkey. “Oh, I forgot to introduce myself. I’m

Warren,” he said, shaking Billy’s hand and, probably only to be polite to Billy, Toby’s too.

“Please, we can hear about their adventures later,” said WonderClaus. “If you remember, this is a rather important conference.”

“All you’re doing right now is looking at a menu,” said Warren.

“Speaking of important conferences,” said the Guinea Pig leader, who was seated across from Roy and next to Billy, “Why in the Universe did you schedule one in a restaurant?”

“I think we can all agree that we don’t know the other parties well enough to have them host the meeting,” said WonderClaus. “Besides, the Honky Donkey’s a pretty fun place, not to mention secure, because of all those Giant Space Donkeys flying around.”

“Can I take anyone’s order?” said Peter, who had stood there the whole time. “Or would you gentlemen need more time?”

“I know what I want,” said WonderClaus, handing his menu to Peter. “I’ll take a two inch steak, some bacon and eggs, and a milkshake as a drink.”

“Why?” asked Roy in disgust.

“I’m protesting the eating of animals,” said WonderClaus proudly.

“By eating nothing but them?”

WonderClaus let out a small laugh. “Why of course! A vegetarian diet isn’t going to get people’s attention! I’m going for a whole El Tuna Café day eating nothing but animals and their products. When people see what a horrible

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state I'm in by the end of it they'll surely think twice before eating meat!"

"We'll take the salad of the day," said the Guinea Pig leader.

"So will I," said Warren.

"I think I'll have a salad too," said Roy.

"Wonderful!" said WonderClaus. "See, Roy? I've made you disgusted with meat already!"

"I'm not that hungry," said Billy. "So I'll take a salad. I think Toby would like one too."

"Is it safe for humans to eat salad?" asked WonderClaus. "I thought they were restricted to hamburgers and fries."

"That's just Dave's nonsense," said Billy.

"Should I call off the Head Trauma concert so as not to disturb you?" asked Peter.

WonderClaus and Roy looked around the table for decisions. "I'd like to see Head Trauma," said Billy.

"Perhaps people will be offended that we took Head Trauma away," said WonderClaus.

"So we shouldn't cancel Head Trauma?" asked Roy.

"Do you want to offend them?" asked WonderClaus. He turned to Peter. "Don't cancel it."

"Should I at least delay it? They're performing soon," said Peter.

"Will our food be there by that time?" asked WonderClaus.

"Yes."

"Then we'll be able to fit two time wasters into one time. That's how it should work."

“Good, good,” said Peter, walking off.

A very formal looking waiter, with a bowler hat, a suit, and one hand behind his back approached them. “Are you gentlemen the party that reserved all this space?”

“Yes,” said WonderClaus. “What if we are?”

The waiter smiled, and pulled a bottle of wine from behind him. “It is customary for us to give those who spend so much money on reservations some of our finest wine.”

“Why didn’t Peter bring it to us?” asked Roy.

The waiter did not hesitate to answer. “It is easier to appreciate our wine when another person brings it to you. If Peter had given it to you while taking your orders, it would have seemed like a less thoughtful gift, no?”

“I guess so,” said WonderClaus, taking the wine and putting it at the center of the table. He looked at the waiter. “Unfortunately I can’t have wine for...dietary reasons. Do happen to have any alcohol that’s made from meat?”

“We have three different flavors,” said the waiter. “Normally our policy would be to bring a bottle of wine for the adults and one bottle for the children, but with such a large group I think we can add another bottle. Do you want your meat wine from a chicken, cow, or fish?”

“Fish,” said WonderClaus.

“And for the children?” the waiter asked, turning his head to Billy and Toby.

“We can drink this one,” said Billy.

“No, I insist!” said the waiter. “You can get yourself a bottle!”

“No, we’re fine,” said Warren.

“Very well,” said the waiter, sounding disappointed. He left.

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Warren picked up the bottle of wine and threw it onto the stage. Red splattered everywhere. Some of the casual diners cheered, perhaps thinking that Head Trauma was starting.

“What did you do that for?” WonderClaus asked, surprised.

“It’s too suspicious,” said Warren. “I think someone’s trying to poison us.”

“Someone could poison our food!” said Roy.

“We’ll make Peter eat our food then,” said Warren.

“Why couldn’t you have just made that waiter drink the wine, then?” asked Roy.

“I want him to continue serving us.”

“What?” asked WonderClaus.

“Have you ever heard the legends of Bob the Butler?” asked Warren.

“Of course I have,” said WonderClaus.

“I haven’t,” said Roy.

“Well, there’s a rumor that a well dressed Gotithian jumps from restaurant to restaurant to be a waiter and to houses to be a butler. What if that ‘Space Monkey’ really is Bob the Butler?”

“That’s stupid,” said Roy. “Why would any Gotithian go around in public these days just to be a waiter or butler? What are the odds that he wouldn’t be found out?”

“He was wearing a hat,” said Warren. “How many of you have seen a waiter wearing a bowler hat?”

“I don’t think that he’s a weird Gotithian wanting to serve people without authorization,” said Roy.

“I’ve seen my share of disguises,” said Warren, “and I don’t think that he’s actually a Space Monkey. His facial characteristics resemble a Gotithian’s a little too much.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said WonderClaus. “It doesn’t explain why you had to throw the wine onto the stage instead of just letting it sit on the table!”

“I guess it doesn’t,” said Warren. “But people have done weirder things to a Head Trauma stage. I’ve been to their concerts. Watch how they’ll integrate it into the performance.”

“Quit chatting and let’s get to work!” said the Guinea Pig leader angrily. “Or were you intending on this being a date rather than a negotiation?”

WonderClaus sighed. “Okay, where do we begin, then?”

“You were the one who organized the meeting,” said the Guinea Pig, pointing to Warren. “Where do you think we begin?”

“Oh yes,” said Warren. “Well, your government and my society have their differences, but –”

A bottle of wine dropped from the ceiling and shattered onto the stage. The casual diners cheered again. “Ladies and gentlemen,” said an unseen announcer, “I bring you Head Trauma!” The crowd cheered, and more bottles of wine smashed into the stage. The lights dimmed.

“I told you they would put it into their act,” said Warren. “They’re good at it, aren’t they?”

“Quiet,” said WonderClaus.

The stage lit up brilliantly, and the curtains opened, revealing the band. The crowd went wild. Toby studied the band carefully, but didn’t see a mime. There were four

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members of the band: two Space Monkey guitarists, a Jelly Blob drummer, and a PufferFish that appeared to be the lead singer, but no mime. Toby was a little disappointed.

“Hellohonkydonkeyareyoureadytorock?” said the PufferFish quickly. The crowd cheered. Toby could not understand Gotithian, but he had a feeling that the crowd couldn’t understand what the PufferFish had said either. Just a feeling. The PufferFish went on. “Aoneatwoaonetwothreefour!”

The Space Monkeys began strumming their guitars and the Jelly Blob began softly beating on its cymbals. Toby could sense a tension in the crowd, waiting for them to build up, but finally the crowd groaned. Head Trauma was playing elevator music.

“We should have called this off,” said the Guinea Pig quietly. “This is just annoying.”

“Feel free to talk as loudly as you want,” said Warren. “Everybody does during the elevator music anyway. But eventually they’ll be back to their normal selves. So, as I was saying, we have our differences, but I think we can all agree that the Universe is getting too unstable for us to continue fretting over these little things. Fretting over power is, after all, what got the Universe in this state in the first place. It would be best for us to form an alliance.”

“I would be happy to be the intermediary,” said WonderClaus. “I have had success before helping Presleytarian states work out their differences. Before I wouldn’t have considered helping secular states, but I think a strong confederacy will help Presleytarianism more than my previous exclusiveness.”

“An alliance would be useful,” said the Guinea Pig leader. “Diaramans are too happy with our control over the planet, and I don’t know how much longer we can hold onto Margues. We don’t really need either planet, but they would ensure our place in the Universe.”

“I think we all have common enemies too,” said WonderClaus. “For example, both the society and I are enemies with Loothpit, and we can all agree the Cube People are a little too powerful.”

“Why’s that?” asked the Guinea Pig.

WonderClaus seemed surprised. “Well, um, for one thing, as war rages on we continue to become dependant on them, and a free Universe cannot let that happen.”

“We’re not dependant on the Cube People,” said the Guinea Pig.

Warren snorted. “Oh, but with all the people that are dependant on them, they’re getting more power over the Universe. If we don’t rise up against them, they could take over the Universe again.”

The Guinea Pig leader seemed unmoved.

“Have you heard,” said Roy, “Of how far ahead they are of us technologically? They’ve made a Gotithian.”

“What!” Billy yelled in spite of himself.

Roy nodded. “It’s true. Somehow they’ve developed a Gotithian, but they had to use some of their knowledge of their own biology, so it came out as a cubed Gotithian. They’re still working on it, but it really shows how good they’ve gotten, doesn’t it?”

“It’s much worse than that,” said Billy, covering his face with his hands. “Elvis, I’m such an idiot!”

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“What do you mean?” asked WonderClaus. “You didn’t have anything to do with it, did you?”

Billy looked up and nodded. “I think I did. We found Mr. Parrot’s notebook at the bottom of the El Tuna Café. That was how we got out, and we used it to get to a cocktail party where we met Mr. Parrot. Something went wrong with the time travel, though, and we were trapped in a space-time knot. That must have been when it happened: when we got out of it. I must have left the notebook somewhere, or it slipped away from me when the knot snapped, or something stupid, and then the Cube People ended up with it!”

“You mean they have access to all of Mr. Parrot’s work?” asked the Guinea Pig.

“I don’t think so,” said Warren. “Otherwise they would have gotten it right, don’t you think?”

“They did get it right,” said WonderClaus. “It’s just that they used technology they use on themselves, so the Gotithian was a cube.”

Warren shook his head. “It can’t be that. The Cube People would want the Gotithian to be as perfect as possible when they showed it to you, so that they could mess with you.”

“Maybe they thought the suspense of whether or not they were going to improve it was going to get to me,” said WonderClaus.

“I don’t think that they have the notebook. They would have made moose tranquilizer with it, don’t you think?” said Roy.

“Why would they bother going out and killing moose-that-look-like-turtles? They’re hardly involved in the Universe’s politics for the moment, and besides, moose-that-

look-like-turtles are so destructive that they would weaken the Universe!"

"What's going on?" Toby whispered to Billy in English.

"There are....issues we're discussing," whispered Billy back. "Very bad things are happening." Billy turned from Toby and glanced at Head Trauma. They were still playing elevator music, but doing it with a surprising amount of energy. The two guitarists were shaking their heads wildly and the PufferFish was doing a moonwalk. One of the guitarists lit his guitar on fire and showed it to the unimpressed crowd.

"There's still a risk from the Cube People," said the Guinea Pig. "And I suppose you're right about the other factions being weak from having so many enemies. All right. I think I can arrange some sort of alliance with you. What do you expect from me?"

"Little more than to leave my society alone," said Warren. He leaned in further into the table and whispered, "We're trying to develop moose tranquilizer."

"That would be very useful for the –"

There was an explosion. Toby instinctively ducked under the table. The remaining guitar onstage suddenly became excessively loud, and WonderClaus gave up on speaking. Warren tried to tell them that the good part was coming but, as their table was right next to the stage, no one could hear him. The six of them had nothing other than to watch the band.

The lead singer and the Space Monkey who had burned his guitar were singing, but only the guitar could be heard. That is, until the Guinea Pig, who was covering his

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ears as hard as he could, squeaked in horror. Toby, who was also covering his ears, and Billy, who only had his hands slightly over his ears, looked in the same direction the Guinea Pig was. They too did not like what they saw. The drummer had thrown away his drum sticks and instead held in his hands microphones.

They could faintly hear a wave of excited shrieks from the crowd, as well as some horrified screams from the Guinea Pig soldiers, but not for long. The drummer held his microphones in anticipation, time enough for the whole table to take cover, and then pounded the microphones mercilessly. To be heard, the singers turned up the volume of their microphones. Now the refrain could be distantly understood.

“Moose looks like a turtle! Moose looks like a turtle!” the singers chanted over the almost deafening sound of the drums and guitar. Toby was dizzy and had a horrible headache. Billy seemed braver, keeping his eyes on the show.

There was the boom of an explosion, and the drum went silent. Toby strained himself getting up to see what had happened. Sparks were flying around and there were parts of what was probably the drum’s amplifier all over the stage. Toby wondered whether the amplifier’s destruction was an accident or if it was all a part of the show.

It seemed to be a part of the show. As if the destruction of the amplifier was a cue, the two singers exited the stage, leaving a somewhat relieving guitar solo. Toby still felt worse than he had when he had awoken from Liquid Turtle and miniature hamburger poisoning, though.

The two singers returned pushing up a stage ramp what looked like a giant pressure cooker on wheels. The Jelly Blob leapt up from his drum set and the guitarist chased after it, still strumming his guitar. Toby really hoped that it was all part of another stage antic. The Jelly Blob tripped over a wire and the music stopped temporarily as the Jelly Blob, gurgling and wriggling in protest, was lifted up by the guitarist. The two singers began beating on the pressure cooker in a rhythm, and the guitarist pushed the Jelly Blob into the pressure cooker. There was a gurgling scream, and the guitar strumming started again. The singers turned on the pressure cooker and returned to their microphones.

“Smells good!” they said in unison. “Moose looks like a turtle!”

The music got louder and louder to drown out the gurgling sounds coming from the pressure cooker, and Toby fainted.

The music died down, and the lead singer opened up the pressure cooker, letting out steam and the smell of burnt jelly. “Tastes good too!” the lead singer said obnoxiously. The crowd applauded.

“We really should have called off that concert,” said the Guinea Pig quietly.

“What?” asked Billy, hardly able to understand him with all the ringing in his ears.

“Hehe,” said WonderClaus. “The human’s fainted. He lasted pretty long for a first Head Trauma concert, though.”

“That was horrible!” said the Guinea Pig. “It disrupted a good diplomatic discussion! Now I don’t know if I have the energy to continue it!”

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“They’re not going to do an encore, you big baby,” said Warren playfully. “We’re not that bad off.”

“I’d better get Toby checked out,” said Billy.

“Come on,” said WonderClaus. “Lot’s of people faint during Head Trauma concerts.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t know how humans might handle it. He just had Liquid Turtle and miniature hamburger poisoning, after all.”

“I guess it would be safest,” said WonderClaus. “Do you need help carrying him?”

Billy thought about it, but shook his head. “I’ll be fine,” he grunted as pulled Toby over his shoulders.

“Are you sure? He looks about your weight.”

“No, this discussion’s important,” said Billy generously. He took a deep breath, and began walking towards the entrance.

“He’s right you know,” Billy heard the Guinea Pig say. “We’ve had enough distractions. So, with the alliance, moose tranquilizer is a good idea, and we should also probably join forces in the production of it. Knocking out such a feared enemy is certainly going to win the respect of many more factions, and hopefully their alliance as well. We’re going to need it against the Cube People.”

“Billy!” said a voice. Billy looked around to see the strange waiter getting up out of a seat next to a table not far from theirs. “Let me take him for you.”

He took Toby off of Billy’s shoulders and onto his own, but Billy was too suspicious to be grateful. “Have you been watching us this whole time?”

The waiter pointed to his table. “I’ve wanted to deliver WonderClaus’s meat wine, but all of you seemed engrossed

in an important conversation, and then the Head Trauma concert had started, so I decided to sit here and wait.”

“And listen to our conversation,” finished Billy. “Well, don’t try any tricks now. I can go get Peter or even one of the soldiers to take care of you.”

“Billy,” the waiter said, trying to ignore the watchful eyes of the casual diners and soldiers. “You have to trust me.”

“Toby’s not in that bad of shape,” said Billy. “I don’t need to go with you. Give him back.”

“No, Billy,” the waiter said, crouching down slightly to Billy’s height. “All right, I lied. I was listening to your conversation. But I want to tell you that there are other Gotithians around.”

“Why don’t you tell WonderClaus and Roy?” asked Billy. “They’d be more than happy to meet them.”

“Let’s move to the other side of the stage,” whispered the waiter. “They’re watching us.”

“No,” said Billy.

“Please,” pleaded the waiter.

“Fine,” said Billy, realizing there were soldiers on that side of the T-shaped stage too. The two of them walked until they were out of sight of WonderClaus and the others. “Now, what is it you want to tell me?”

The waiter put Toby down carefully on the floor. “I’m a Gotithian,” he said nervously.

Billy knocked the waiter’s hat off. “You don’t have horns.”

The waiter hesitated for a moment, and then brushed some of his long hair away. Billy gasped. “I cut them off.”

“Why?” asked Billy, horrified. The soldiers watched them more intensely.

“It was right after the Gotithian hunt started,” said the waiter in a quiet, mournful voice. “I needed to survive. I could cover my legs with long pants and my face with carefully applied makeup, but I couldn’t wear a hat all the time without appearing suspicious. It had to cut them off.”

“Why are you telling me this?” asked Billy, flustered.

“There’s a society of Gotithians that would like to meet you,” said the waiter.

“But why don’t you tell the others?”

“They would make it too well known,” said the waiter. “Come.”

“You might be a Gotithian, but I can’t trust you,” said Billy.

The waiter pulled out a gun. Billy froze. “Don’t worry,” said the waiter. “I’m giving this to you.” He handed the gun to Billy.

“How do I know this works?” he asked, still suspicious.

“It’s loaded,” said the waiter. “You can check.”

“That doesn’t tell me it works,” said Billy. “But I’m keeping it anyway. You can help me carry Toby.”

“So you’ll go with me?” asked the waiter hopefully.

“No. I don’t even know your name,” said Billy.

“Sorry,” said the waiter, reaching out his hand. Billy shook it. “I’m Bob.”

“Bob the Butler?” asked Billy incredulously.

“The legend might have started from me,” said Bob humbly. “But my surname is Rednow.”

“*You’re Bob Rednow?*” asked Billy, even more incredulous.

“Yes,” said Bob.

Billy pulled out Phil’s copy of *The Power of Nothing*. “You wrote this?”

“Yes.”

Billy thought for a moment. Should he go with him or not? He decided not to. “You should come see WonderClaus and Roy,” he said, trying to sound friendly.

“I can’t,” said Bob.

“Why not?” asked Billy.

“I’d be pulling a Roy and Simon,” said Bob.

“Huh?”

“WonderClaus and I are brothers. His name is really Klaus Rednow,” said Bob. “WonderClaus hates me for trying to destroy Presleytarianism. If we were Roy and Simon I would be like Simon.”

“I can’t see why you’re so eager for me to go with you, though!” exclaimed Billy.

Bob sighed. “Because,” he said. He hesitated for a moment. “Because you might be my son.”

Bob the Butler

Toby began to stir, giving Billy a chance to look away from Bob. Toby rubbed his eyes and stood up.

“You seem upset,” said Bob bluntly.

“Of course I’m upset,” said Billy. “I heard my great aunt. She told me that my mother’s husband, Roy, and even Simon have at one time thought that I was his son. Now it’s you!”

“And of course no DNA tests have been taken,” added Bob.

“That was for obvious political reasons,” said Billy.

“Perhaps you would like a DNA test?” suggested Bob.

Billy’s heart skipped. “DNA test? No, not if I have to go with you.”

“Get with the times!” Bob said playfully. Billy wasn’t amused. Bob continued. “DNA testers are everywhere. There’s one in the kitchen for determining whose hair fell into soup.”

“So all you have to do is take a sample of my hair and a sample of your hair and we can find out right now?” asked Billy, his heart pounding.

“Yes, but perhaps you should come along to the kitchens so that you can trust the results?”

“I guess so, if there are going to be other people in the kitchens.”

“There are loads of people in the kitchens,” said Bob. “Have you noticed that your party still hasn’t been served *salads*? The cooks pretend to be overworked while doing nothing so they can get raises or at least clock overtime.”

“I guess I will come along, then. But I need to see a result saying that I’m not related to someone so that I can trust the machine.”

“Of course,” said Bob.

Billy turned to Toby and said in English, “Come on. There’s a DNA test I’m going to take.”

“Why are you taking a DNA test?”

Billy did not answer. He merely motioned for Toby to follow him as he followed Bob. His heart was racing. He really hoped that the test didn’t come up positive, but what if it did? Would he trust him enough to go to the secret Gotithian hideout he was talking about? Would he tell the others?

“It appears that our drummer is temporarily unable to perform,” said the lead singer of Head Trauma, still on the stage. “We are now holding tryouts for anyone who wants to take his place.”

Bob opened the double doors leading to the kitchen. Billy could see that the pressure cooker was back and there were several cooks debating whether or not it was clean enough to use again. “Can I use the DNA tester?” asked Bob.

“Sure. Right after Peter’s done,” said a Space Monkey cook, pointing. Billy looked in the direction he was pointing and saw the owner of the Honky Donkey.

“Well, it looks like Jeffery’s hair this time!” said Peter aloud. The Space Monkey who had been pointing apologized.

“Hand me a hair,” said Bob. Billy obeyed, plucking a hair off of his head and handing it to Bob. “Thanks. There’s no need for my hair to be plucked, since the DNA of each employee is recorded on the machine.”

Billy and Toby watched as Bob placed the hair onto a tray on the machine. The machine's screen asked him if there was a second hair to test from, and Bob selected "No". The machine began studying the piece of hair. Billy's tapped his foot nervously. The machine's screen cleared and wrote "No match".

Billy sighed in relief. "I guess it's not true then," he said, cautious not to say "son" around the other cooks. Now he hated Bob even more.

"Not so fast," said Bob. "That simply means that there isn't an exact match between your DNA and the DNA of any of the employees. Watch this. This feature's left over from the heredity lab from which this machine was bought." Bob entered something into the keyboard and the screen once again showed only the blinking words "Scanning".

"Well?" asked Toby.

"We know that he's not a clone of me," Billy joked.

"What?" asked Toby. "We were testing that?"

"Never mind," said Billy, focusing on the machine again.

"Aha!" Bob exclaimed. Billy's insides turned. "Match: Bob to customer. Relationship: father and son."

Billy looked at the screen. It said that exactly. Billy felt like crying. "I see," he said, trying to swallow the lump in his throat.

"Do you want to come along with me now?" asked Bob.

"I'd really rather tell the others about it," said Billy.

"Please don't," said Bob.

A tear trickled down Billy's cheek. "Fine, then. Let's go."

“You’re going to have to leave the human behind.”

“What?”

Bob nodded. “WonderClaus can speak English. This human speaks English, right?”

“Yes, but I don’t get your point.”

“He can tell the others that you weren’t kidnapped,” explained Bob.

“I don’t know if they’ll believe him entirely,” said Billy. “Much less that they’ll approve of my going.”

“Do you want to go or not?” asked Bob patiently.

“I want to go,” said Billy. He turned to Toby and explained to him the situation.

“I’ll try to tell them that,” Toby said. “You have fun with your dad.”

“It’s not going to be like that,” said Billy unhappily.

“What do you mean?”

“Just go,” said Billy, waving him off. He turned to his father. “Are we going now?”

“Of course,” said Bob, taking something out of a pant pocket. It was a card. “I won’t need my identity badge anymore,” he explained, throwing it behind him. “There’s no way Peter would be able to employ someone he knew was a Gotithian. Follow me to my ship.”

Billy turned to Toby, nodded, and followed Bob out of the kitchens silently. He didn’t feel like saying anything. It seemed that he had finally found his father, and if what he was saying was true, his father was Bob Rednow, the great pioneer in the theory of the Dimension of Nothing. If what his father was saying was true, then it also meant that WonderClaus was his uncle. Billy acknowledged those two facts, but rather than feel proud he felt ashamed of his family

line and his mother's perfidy. He suspected that at the Gotithian hideaway he would be first greeted with cheerfulness, but the atmosphere would quickly become awkward.

Billy was so engrossed in his thoughts he wasn't aware that they were walking through the parking garage of the Honky Donkey, so he was surprised when his father said, "Here it is."

Bob's ship reminded Billy of his own ship. It was also a small, beaten up Jiggy Gas Piggy, though this one was grey instead of hot pink. "What's the Gotithian hideaway like?" he asked as he entered the ship.

"It's hidden," said Bob, starting up the ship. "But for a hidden place it's surprisingly comfortable. If you don't have the safety – and humiliation – of having cut off your horns you can safely stay there forever. I would get cabin fever if I did that, though, which is why I got a job as a waiter at the Honky Donkey. Look how that paid off!"

"What planet is it on?" asked Billy as they began flying away.

"Margues."

"Also, how do I know that you really are Bob Rednow?"

"Well, I knew about WonderClaus's true identity, didn't I? I'm really one of the only people in the Universe who know WonderClaus's family."

"Just because it makes sense doesn't mean it's true," said Billy.

"Well, would I lie to my newly found son?"

"I never knew you. I never even saw you until today," Billy said as polite as he possibly could.

“I had my reasons.”

“What?”

“If I explained them now they would just seem silly.”

Billy sighed. “Does it have anything to do with your work with the Dimension of Nothing?”

“A little. It also has something to do with the fact I was afraid of your mother’s husband.”

“Don’t joke,” Billy said irritably. “But unlike what your book leads people to conclude, I know that you developed your theories before Roy’s time.”

“How did you know that?”

“I went back in time. Mr. Parrot recognized you when I mentioned you.”

“How did you find out about me anyway?”

“A robber gave me a book.”

“Interesting.”

“I said don’t joke.”

“Well, what do you want me to do?”

“Tell me about where you’ve been all this time. If you really did inspire the legend of Bob the Butler, then you had to have been doing some really weird things, like go place to place and be a butler.”

“Yes, I have had an obsession with being a butler,” admitted Billy’s father. “I was even working for Simon at the El Tuna Café’s battle. As a matter of fact, I was the one who took you out of the building and to your mother. I didn’t know at the time that you were my son, but when I went to your mother I recognized her immediately.”

“That was you?” Billy exclaimed. “But how could you not recognize my mother until you saw her in person? Thanks to Roy she was famous! She was all over the media!”

“Well, um, that’s the thing.” Bob stumbled over his words. “You see, I didn’t know her name at the time. Pictures of her looked familiar, but....”

Billy fell silent. He regretted going with his father. He didn’t want anything to do with his father now. Even the slob that his mother had married would have made a better father than the Gotithian sitting next to him.

“Let’s see what’s on the news,” said Bob, probably trying to break the awkward silence. He turned on the radio.

“Jones, Taylor: 309-314-9087-4251. Johnson, Bob: 309-165-4569-008. Johnston, Percy –”

“Sorry about that,” said Bob, pressing another button on the radio. Some news report blared through the speakers.

“What was that?” Billy had to ask.

“That was my audio phonebook,” explained Bob. Billy didn’t bother to ask, allowing the radio to be heard.

“And the poor math abilities of today’s people is easily demonstrated in the fact that over fifty percent of students today perform below average on standardized tests,” said an urbane voice.

“Really?” asked another voice, probably a reporter or talk show host.

“See what I mean?” said the first voice.

“Um, no....”

Bob grunted, and flipped the channel.

“It was quite a big day at the Honky Donkey Café today,” said a cheery voice.

“Ah,” said Bob in approval.

“There were some very important negotiations between some of today’s most influential groups: the True Presleytarians, represented by WonderClaus; the Guinea Pig

rulers of Diarama and Margues; and another less well known but apparently important group hailing from Diarama. Roy and his previously suspected son William were there, but recent reports by employees of the Honky Donkey claim that William got together with his true father and the two have fled. Roy refused to comment on his reaction to such a family shattering discovery. Also, concerning fans of Head Trauma, the popular band has found a new drummer! An accident during their performance at the Honky Donkey has temporarily disabled the old drummer, but almost as quickly they have found a new drummer. When asked if a learning curve for this newest member will delay upcoming performances, the band promised to 'play louder'."

"Oh come on!" Bob exclaimed. "They're all like this! Nobody seems to care for politics!"

"You said it all, Bill. It *has* been an exciting day at the Honky Donkey. I'm there right now. Unfortunately we haven't been able to gather much information about the political meeting going on here, for the group left as soon as they discovered Billy was gone. We have been able to gather a few interesting tidbits on what they were talking about, though. For example, did you know that WonderClaus is starting an all-meat diet as a protest against killing animals?"

"No way!" said Bill.

"It's true. But let's get down to business. The Guinea Pigs and the as-yet unnamed society have reached some sort of agreement on something that is still unknown, and the True Presleytarians have agreed to help."

"The world of politics astounds me," said Bill.

"I know! Anyway, our anonymous informers have also told us that they suspect the group was making plans for

some sort of large scale moose tranquilizer production, and we all know that could radically change the Universe. Not only that, but it seems that they have knowledge of the whereabouts of Mr. Parrot, and that the Cube People seem to be developing Gotithians. Is Mr. Parrot involved? And where's Simon been? Find out after this short break."

"Annoying isn't it?" asked Bob sociably.

"It's not too accurate either," Billy said simply.

"I guess you'd know best," said Bob, flipping the channel.

"I've always dreamed of being in a band," said a dreamy voice. Bob flipped the channel.

"Region 39 of Margues is headed for some mighty heavy rainstorms today." Bob flipped the channel.

"I'm so glad I found my father," said a childish voice. "We're going to have a great time together!"

"Thank you for that touching story, Billy," said a reporter. Bob flipped the radio off.

"The radio's so useless nowadays," said Bob.

"They exaggerated our plans for moose tranquilizer," Billy managed to say. "It's like...we're trying to exterminate moose-that-look-like-turtles or something. This is really bad."

"It could keep Loothpit away, making him think that they've already developed moose tranquilizer," said Bob.

"No, don't you see? Loothpit will think that whatever his losses at the moment may be, they'll be much bigger soon thanks to this alliance. I knew holding a meeting in a public place was stupid!"

"So you think that Loothpit will attack Diarama soon?"

“Yes,” confirmed Billy. He felt a little better talking to his father than before. He figured it would be futile to stay mad at him.

“Well, *does* Diarama have the moose tranquilizer formula? They could mass produce it fairly quickly with WonderClaus’s help.”

“I doubt they do,” said Billy. “And I think that Loothpit’s going to attack much sooner than you think. He’s not doing anything really big now, so he might as well attack before this new alliance is able to defend itself. In other words: as soon as possible.”

“I wish I could do something,” muttered Bob.

“What does the Gotithian hideaway do?” asked Billy.

“Well, its main goal is to of course offer protection to surviving Gotithians, but much of that’s done. We find a Gotithian or two from time to time but it’s not like it was when the hunts began, so now we work with buffing up security. I’ve been busy working at the Honky Donkey and continuing to develop my theories on the Dimension of Nothing.”

“Are you writing a new edition of *The Power of Nothing*?”

“I will. I will,” said Bob, smiling for the first time. “You can see all of that when we get there. We’re about to land.”

“Are others in the society doing research with you?”

“Oh yes. I’d say a healthy tenth of the hideaway is able to work in normal society disguised as Space Monkeys. We’re experienced researchers, as we were the ones who scoured for Gotithians in the early days, so now we put our talents to use on things like finding out about the latest

scientific discoveries. Back at the hideaway we keep those unable to leave busy with putting together books and things to help the society become educated. It's a really nice system for everyone."

"So you know a lot about what's been going on in the Universe?"

"Not much on what's happened most recently, but a lot of our library is dedicated to what happened after Roy's fall."

"I'd like to see that," said Billy quietly. A thought suddenly occurred to him. "Do you think you could get the society to track down Mr. Parrot?"

"That'd be almost impossible to do, but then again so is searching for Gotithians. I think that would be a good goal for us. By the way, should we get your human friend? He's currently with Loothpit's targets, isn't he?"

"Yes," Billy sighed. "But it would be hard to get to him. I'd rather you didn't risk it."

"Risk it? It wouldn't be that hard," said Bob.

"Loothpit could attack at any time. I hate to say it, but letting a Gotithian die saving a human just isn't worth it!"

"I guess you're right," said Bob. "Hopefully Roy and Simon will sense the urgency of the situation enough to save their own skins. We could always go back and get the human after the threat of Loothpit is gone – whenever that may be."

Billy nodded, hardly paying attention anymore. He had just realized that the Jiggy Gas Piggy he was in was basically the same, but the TV screen was flatter than his old ship's had been. It was a subtle and almost uninteresting difference, but it reminded Billy that since virtually all time existed at once, as Billy had seen when he traveled through time, time could change, but any changes in time were not noticed by

most people since it became part of their memories. For time travelers, however, they were stuck in their own reality and could notice when time changed, like how the cocktail party Mr. Parrot held went differently than the other Mr. Parrots had remembered. As he jogged through those facts he realized that Bob Rednow might not have been his father before he traveled through time. That time couldn't even be reached through time travel, as it had technically never happened! That meant that there was a possibility that Billy had had a different father than the father he had at the moment, right? No, that was impossible, he realized, as his DNA hadn't changed since he had traveled through time. It was still a scary idea that his old reality had disappeared forever, though. Scarier still that it could have just happened again, but it would have felt like nothing had happened since all of the past from the new reality was in his memory.

“Billy?” asked Bob.

“Yes?”

“We’ve landed,” said Bob, opening the hatch. “What were you thinking about?”

“What?” asked Billy, as he exited the Jiggy Gas Piggy. He looked around. They appeared to be outside in front of a forest, but when he looked up Billy saw a ceiling of dirt, indicating that they were in some underground thing lit by artificial light similar to what Dave had installed in Earthland.

“You looked preoccupied with something. What were you thinking about?”

“Time travel and how you didn’t think it was possible because you thought the past didn’t physically exist. Mr. Parrot told me about that. I also discovered first hand that

because the past can physically exist, it can change at random just like the present can, and how people normally don't notice it because their memories are changed, but time travelers aren't affected the same way and they end up in a reality different than what they remember. Reality can change at any moment and there would be no way for us to normally know because our memories are changed to fit the reality, and time travelers find that their old time never existed!"

"Interesting," said Bob. "It doesn't make much sense, but if you observed it it's probably true. I think with your interest in science we're really going to get along."

Billy hoped so. He still didn't like his father for his abandonment, but if they could get along then.... "So, what do you want to show me?"

"Well, I think that the hideaway itself is a wonder. Those aren't fake trees, you know."

"They aren't?" said Billy in disbelief. "How'd you get so many trees?"

Bob laughed. "When our species is being hunted down and slaughtered, it's not really a concern for us if we anger Dave by taking a few of his trees. Many times their wood does come in handy when the hideaway needs supplies."

"Where's the library?" asked Billy.

Bob smiled again. "Don't you want to take a tour of the hideaway before sticking your nose into our books?"

"Why would I want to do that?"

"Well, this is your new home," said Bob.

"I never thought of it like that," said Billy. His contempt for his father vanished. Perhaps he really had found a safe home where he could live. Perhaps he had finally

found a comfortable place to grow up. The fact that he would be surrounded by members of his own species was even more amazing. At the suggestion that he might be able to end his hard struggle for survival constantly on the run and have a home Billy was filled with love for the hideaway.

“You don’t have to stay, of course,” said Bob awkwardly, “But it’s a safe place...”

“Of course I want to stay here!” exclaimed Billy. “I’ve been miserable ever since Roy took me away with him! I’ve been kidnapped twice, forced to live with a foster father who was convinced he was dead and a foster mother who wanted to abort me, hunted down like an animal, attacked by mimes, robbed and left to die at the bottom of the El Tuna Café! If you’ve got a stable community here then I’m here to stay!”

Bob’s hands trembled as he tried to find a way to express his joy. He merely said, “Good.”

“What do you want to show me?” Billy asked.

“Well, you’ll be impressed on how earthlike we’ve been able to keep this forest. It has much of the wildlife and even topography that an Earth forest would have. It’s not just trees, you know. Then you’d probably want to see some of our most distinguished members. Members who are fellow scientists, like me, who have helped me with my theories of the Dimension of Nothing, building the forest, organizing the hideaway, and a few historians you might want to ask questions after your studies.”

Studies? Billy hadn’t thought of studying, he had thought of researching. But if he was home then there was no need to research. He would only be studying, wouldn’t he? He suddenly felt a little guilty and a little relieved at his

realization that he wouldn't have to be in the huge struggles that lay ahead for the new alliance.

"There's one person in particular I would like you to meet," continued Bob. "He's helped me develop some of my most recent theories, including that Willy Lemoniod's Afterlife collects the dead from the Dimension of Nothing. I think you'll like him."

"Okay," said Billy, getting lost in the sights of the forest. It really did have the topography of a real forest. There were hills and depressions in the rugged, grassy forest ground and a brook with soft, gentle water flowing from behind tall reeds. "Where does he live?"

"In a hut, like everyone else," said Bob. "We'd be able to make better living spaces, but we've become a little obsessed with the simple life in some ways. Sean's funny, though, because he can't handle it the same way."

"What about me?" asked a Gotithian, peeking up from the reeds of the brook.

"Sean! I want you to meet Billy. He's my son."

"Nice to meet you," said Sean, focusing his attention again on whatever was behind those reeds.

"What are you doing?" Billy asked.

"I'm working with the straw for my hut," said Sean proudly. "The straw must be wet so it doesn't catch on fire easily, but not too wet, because then it'll get moldy. But that's just the beginning of it. The straw needs to be wet in just the right places, and it can't be wet down the center, because rainwater needs to flow down from it and out of the hut. I have a little bit of sandstone to help with the draining job, but that can only go so far. Besides, I can't really have a roof made out of sandstone, can I? Then again, I have

reinforced my mud walls fairly well with stone, so it's probably strong enough to support a dome.... But the dome can't all be sandstone, it would have to be like the walls, as it goes higher up there has to be more mud and less stone, of course, unless I were to reinforce the mud on the sides of the walls. However, with the risk of collapsing, that wouldn't be a good idea. I'm trying to build a better foundation for my hut, since every now and then the ground gives in and my hut collapses, and I can't have a stone dome over my head if the hut caves in. The basement architecture should help, but there is a chance that the basement could cave in too, so I'm going to have to reinforce it with some wooden beams soon. Hut's are so much harder to work with!"

"He was an architect," explained Bob. "He was normal for a while, but when he worked on the Semifinals Squeenball Stadium."

"He worked on that?" asked Billy. The Semifinals Squeenball Stadium was a stadium designed by the first liberated PufferFish Planet leader, who was a very skilled architect. He was bored with the usual, good architecture, so he wanted to challenge himself by making exceptionally bad architecture. He finally designed a building where the individual parts were so leaned on by other parts that even a missing screw would cause the entire building to collapse under its own weight.

"I picked the most destructive shade of pink," said Sean.

"Pink can be destructive?" asked Billy, wondering if Sean was playing a joke on him or just insane.

"Well, it was really more of the paint's properties that would cause the building to go down, but it *was* pink, so

there's a chance that it being pink had something to do with it being dangerous.”

“Whatever,” said Bob. “Billy's interested in the Dimension of Nothing and history. You know about both.”

“Why can't he learn about the Dimension of Nothing from you?” asked Sean.

“He has,” said Bob happily. “He read my book before he even knew me. You're a bit more familiar with your own theories, of course, and you're pretty good at teaching history, which is also something he's interested in.”

“What kind of history?” asked Sean, feeling and sorting his straw by their moisture.

“He just was at the Honky Donkey with the Guinea Pigs ruling Diarama and Margues, the True Presleytarians, and some sort of society that Roy was in. He's really interested in what happened after Roy fell, and he can probably teach you a thing or two too.”

“The Cube People have made a Gotithian,” said Billy.

Sean nodded. “I know. The radio was just talking about it. I don't understand why the Cube People are wasting so much energy on developing another Gotithian race when they could be creating something like moose tranquilizer to conquer the Universe.”

“They could be making that too,” said Bob.

“True, but the Cube People have to have a reason for everything they make. They're not the kind to make publicity stunts for their own sake. Well, the straw's ready. Let's go back to my hut.” Sean lifted up his carefully organized straw piles and stacked them in layers on his shoulder. “This makes drainage better,” he explained. He started walking, and the others followed.

“There’s also a chance that the Cube People really aren’t developing the Gotithians from scratch. I traveled through time out of the bottom of the El Tuna Café thanks to Mr. Parrot’s notebook. I don’t have Mr. Parrot’s notebook anymore, so the Cube People might have it.”

“I heard that on the radio too,” said Sean. “It’s amazing that Mr. Parrot’s notebook was preserved, isn’t it? I wonder what else might be left in the El Tuna Café. Well, we’re here.” The three of them passed through a group of thick bushes and stopped in front of a small crooked mud hovel dwarfed by the trees around it.

“That’s your hut?” asked Billy.

“Yes, what about it?”

“Well, it’s so hard to believe you’re working so hard on things like the ceiling when...well, the roof is made of tin!”

“That’s only a temporary roof,” said Sean. “It’s useful when I need to make more roof quality straw, but I can’t stand it when it rains. All the pinging sounds....you’d think they’d make the hideaway rain a little less hard, but they don’t. I guess they want to water the trees well or something, but the sound’s awful. Come inside.” Sean opened the nicely polished wooden door and let the two others into the one room hovel. Inside the air was stale and the only light came from the open door. “I’ll have to restart the fire,” he said, picking up a few sticks and throwing them in.

“Amazing, isn’t it?” Bob asked Billy delightedly. “We’re actually *burning* wood! Just like our ancestors!”

“I never thought I’d see that,” said Billy.

Sean chuckled. “Well, our ancestors didn’t exactly burn wood as part of their daily lifestyle. They reserved it for

special occasions. We're actually more wood rich than they were. Even though I don't exactly like it, the hideaway has banned most tools from the old life and I'm forced to use wood fire as my source of heat, light, and cooked food."

"Why did the hideaway ban modern tools?" asked Billy.

"They're part of the society that killed the Gotithians," said Bob. "Many of us don't want anything to do with them. Other than tools for research like ships, radios, books and the tools to create books, along with the equipment necessary to expand this underground forest, we have to make everything ourselves. We're allowed a few things from the old life, like our old clothes and things, but it's pretty restricted."

"I've never really been much of a farmer or hunter," said Sean. "And why would I need to be? I never thought that I would live my life in a forest, so I was unprepared. I brought with me a pocket food synthesizer. The leaders either don't know about it or turn a blind eye to it, because I've been able to get by with this for half a million years while others are forced to spend their time growing food. Lucky, I guess, since I've been able to devote that time to more important work."

"Like working on your hut," Billy joked.

"Exactly. Also, I've been a great contributor to the hideaway library's collection of history and science books."

"Sure," said Billy.

"Bob, if you got Billy, why didn't you get Roy and Simon?"

"The secrecy of the society might be at risk if I did that," said Bob.

“Oh. Well, are you planning on ever getting Roy and Simon?”

“I don’t think we should,” said Bob.

“Why not?”

“Roy and Simon have their own things to worry about. They’re running the show at whatever society they’re in. They don’t need us.”

“The mission of the hideaway is to protect every Gotithian,” reminded Sean.

“Yes, but you have to be in danger to be protected.”

“That may work for WonderClaus, but it doesn’t work for Roy and Simon. Roy and Simon are in more danger than anyone else I can think of. They’re in some sort of alliance to fight common enemies, including Loothpit. Loothpit’s going to strike soon in self defense, unless of course he was planning to strike soon. He’s reportedly rescheduling meetings with the Pious Presleytarians. I know because I have a few Pious Presleytarian friends I keep in touch with over my two way radio. That seems a little suspicious, doesn’t it?”

“Roy and Simon don’t need our help,” protested Bob. “They can handle their own problems if they want power. The hideaway’s not going to let in criminals.”

“Just because they got us into this mess doesn’t mean that they’re not entitled for safety,” argued Sean.

“Well, if we’re going to let in every Gotithian, someone’s going to suspect us. Why don’t we let in WonderClaus? Don’t you think he might be in danger if he’s the intermediary for this new alliance that you say Loothpit wants to attack?”

“What’s that?” asked Billy, pointing to a wall of the hovel to stop the altercation.

“That’s my grandmother’s old painting of a mirror. It’s very precious to me. Don’t go near it.”

Billy ignored him, hoping that he would somehow spark a conversation other than whether or not they should save Roy and Simon. “What’s this? There’s something behind it.” He carefully pushed the painting aside. “Does this lead to your basement?”

“No, the basement is elsewhere,” said Sean. “I said don’t go near it.”

“Why not?”

“It’s a passageway to the secret underground writer’s meeting area. No one but writers for books soon to be put into the library may go down there.”

“Wait a minute,” said Billy. “You have a secret underground meeting area underneath a secret underground hideaway?”

“Yes,” said Sean. “We prefer that only writers go down there. There are some things that are still being worked on and don’t make too much sense at the moment.”

“Oh just let him go down there! He should at least be able to see my latest draft of the new edition of *The Power of Nothing*,” said Bob.

“I guess you’re right,” said Sean. “Okay, feel free to go down there.”

“Why do you have a painting of a mirror anyway?” asked Billy with a laughing voice as he went down the trap door. He was giddy again, knowing that his father was the writer of *The Power of Nothing* and that he was entitled to the special privilege of being able to see his work early on in

this new home. His new *home*. The word still flushed him with happiness. Sean didn't answer his question, nor did Billy expect him to. He looked at the tunnel ahead of him. There was some sort of torch light at the end of it – probably where the books were held. Still filled with the joy of the simplicity of the task at hand, and the fact that it was out of his own curiosity, without any danger attached to it, reading his own father's book, in the new forest which he would call his home, he walked down the tunnel. Perhaps he was over exaggerating the pleasantness of the situation, but it seemed too good to be true. He had never had this much easy enjoyment ever, which, although it was fun for that same reason, seemed too good to be true. It couldn't last.

Grave Decisions

“How are you feeling?” asked Roy in a soft voice as he entered Simon’s room.

“Better,” said Simon, sounding tired. “I’m still worried about Loothpit, though.”

“I told you there’s no point in worrying. There’s nothing you can do about it except to rest. If you rest well enough, then you can properly defend us from Loothpit.”

“That’s nice to say for a deadline that can be delayed,” said Simon irritably. “However, I don’t think Loothpit’s going to wait around because I’m bedridden. I think that the fact that I hadn’t attended the Honky Donkey meeting means that he’s more eager to attack.”

Roy shuffled his feet around. That was a downside. “I think he’ll be intimidated by our new, strong alliances. People are less likely to attack Diarama, thanks to that meeting, and we have True Presleytarian support. Loothpit’s supposed to be unstoppable, right? But if Loothpit is unstoppable, why doesn’t he control the Universe? He must have a weakness that’s holding the moose-that-look-like-turtles back. This alliance is a powerful force; I think he’s going to be hesitant to attack us the same way he’s hesitant to attack other factions.”

“That makes sense,” said Simon. “But our weakness is still urgent. Just what happens if we trust your theory, sit around and do nothing, and your theory turns out to be incorrect? Then we lose everything.”

“You’re incapable of making moose tranquilizer now,” said Roy, trying not to lead Simon into an exhausting argument.

“I’ll be even less capable when I’m dead,” argued Simon.

“Well, what do you want to do, then?” demanded Roy.

Simon paused for a moment. He sighed. “I want to dig up your father.”

“Now you’re just getting ridiculous,” said Roy, laughing a little.

“It’s not a joke. The society’s got a crack team of biologists. I don’t see why I need to be doing all the work when the biologists could be examining the moose venom and working backwards. It’s the best chance we’ve got.”

Roy wasn’t moved. “We can’t do something that rash without adequate planning.”

“Now you’re the one being ridiculous,” said Simon, a little louder. “Look: even with your theory, it’s still a good plan. Loothpit will be even more nervous about attacking us if he sees that we’re preparing to test the moose tranquilizer. He’ll think I successfully made it.”

“Then he’ll charge immediately to stop us,” said Roy.

“Not necessarily.”

“Why is it so important that we dig up my father’s grave? There are plenty of people who died at the hands of moose-that-look-like-turtles!”

“Yes, but we happen to know where your father’s grave is. It’ll save us a lot of trouble.”

“We can’t be so sure that the moose venom is still active after all this time.”

“I thought about that. But when you think about it, your father only died seven million years ago. I’m pretty sure the moose venom is pretty powerful still.”

“We can’t take that chance,” said Roy stubbornly.

“Okay. So you know of any fresher victim? How about you? You’re bound to be one in no time!”

“We can find someone.”

“Roy, even if we are lucky enough to do so, do you think it would have the same effect? Do you think it could look like arbitrary grave robbing?”

“Loothpit’s sensible enough to know that we wouldn’t rob graves arbitrarily. Come on, Simon. You seem a little too eager to use my father as a cadaver. Besides, if used him we would look like we were desperate, and we don’t want to look desperate!”

“Roy, we would look prepared, not desperate. You could Warren where he’s buried right now and we could get him just as quickly as you got to the Honky Donkey!”

“I am *not* going to tell you where he’s buried if you’re going to use his body so senselessly!” Roy exclaimed, throwing up his arms. “Maybe if you were considerate enough to remember where he’s buried you wouldn’t have to depend on me!”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Simon demanded. He slumped back into his bed. “I’m not going to argue with you. I just want you to know that all of our lives may be in your dumb little hands.”

“Of course!” Roy shouted, slamming the door behind him. He looked out in the hallway to see Warren with a concerned look on his face. He looked away.

“Roy! What’s going on?” Warren demanded harshly.

“Simon’s egging me on to dig out my father!” Roy exclaimed.

“For the moose tranquilizer? That’s ridiculous!” Warren said. “Please stay quiet around him, though.”

“He claims that your biologists can work their way up from the moose venom in him and find moose tranquilizer! Is that stupid or what? If that worked, why would it take Mr. Parrot to finally come up with moose tranquilizer?”

“Well,” said Warren. “Moose-that-look-like-turtles weren’t exactly dangerous back then. The fear was hyped up, and you were the one to force the tranquilizer’s creation.”

“That’s not true,” protested Roy. “The hype would mean people wanted to develop moose tranquilizer, but they couldn’t! And it wasn’t exactly all hype, as demonstrated by Loothpit’s current power!”

“True,” mused Warren, “But Simon does have a point. With an emergency this urgent, we need to be doing something. The cities of Diarama will notice a sharp decline in the number of hobos begging on their streets, for I’ve sent them on a mission to find Mr. Parrot.”

“All right, now that’s ridiculous,” said Roy. “What are the odds that we’re going to find Mr. Parrot and convince him to redevelop moose tranquilizer in time?”

“Okay, do you have a better idea?”

“Get them to search for recent victims of moose-that-look-like-turtles. They’re more likely to have active venom inside them. We can use Simon’s idea more reliably.”

“All right,” said Warren. “If that’s your idea, why don’t you tell us where your father’s buried, so we can use him in case we can’t find any victims?”

“There are going to be victims,” said Roy stubbornly.

“The only group that’s actually been attacked by Loothpit has been the Pious Presleytarians.”

“Really?” said Roy, stunned. “Why’s that?”

“Well, that attack was the only one necessary to keep everyone in line. People got scared and started to pay protection money to Loothpit. WonderClaus got friendly with Loothpit for the act, and since then Loothpit’s mainly been meddling with Universal politics.”

“But if he’s so powerful and feared, why doesn’t he just take over the Universe?”

“I don’t know that,” said Warren. “It’s possible his followers are afraid of an all out war with the Universe’s biggest political players. The Cube People, for example, could crush Loothpit any day. That I’m sure of.”

“Well, with the new alliance we have, aren’t we considered a big player in Universal politics?”

“I may be wrong,” said Warren. “It could be that Loothpit’s not attacking for the same reason the Cube People aren’t attacking: they want to build their strength up enough to absolutely crush all competition. The whole Universe observed what happened when the Cube People first took over the Universe. Sure, they were more powerful than Willy Lemoniod’s regime, but they turned out not to be strong enough to hold on. The Universe is a notoriously hard place to manage. I’m sure you know all about that.”

“Well –”

“Quit your chit-chat and come up with a plan. It’s not good enough to talk yourself into a sense of security. There’s no reason that Loothpit’s not attacking us that’s not in our control, so we’d better do something if we want this luck to last.”

“I just don’t think that we have to go as far as to dig up my father’s grave! I mean, Loothpit could see it as a sign of weakness, and attack....”

“And there’s a chance that Loothpit will be intimidated by it! There’s no real way of telling, Roy! However, I do know that Loothpit will not be able to crush us if we develop the moose tranquilizer, so find a way to do it!”

“Everyone wants the most radical solution,” said Roy.

“Everyone wants the simplest solution,” said Warren. “Now if you would please stop wasting my time, I have to make a few phone calls.”

“For what?” demanded Roy. “What’re you doing now that’s so much more important?”

“What’re you doing that’s important at all?” countered Warren. “I’m going to be trying to start a search party, seeing that you’re incapable of telling me a few simple things.”

“A search party?” asked Roy.

“Simon’s right,” said Warren. “Or at least, he has a good point. I’m going to give the commands to look for biological traces of moose-that-look-like-turtles. Tell me where your father is when you grow up.”

Roy wanted to protest, but couldn’t. He watched as Warren walked away, feeling dazed. Perhaps he really could help the society out by giving them his father’s body. No, his father had died too long ago. There certainly wouldn’t be any hope of the moose venom working, would there? It was too long of a shot. Then again, Roy thought, the others would say that there was nothing to lose by digging up his father. The only thing that could happen would be for the better, and that was that they might be able to use the moose venom inside him to create moose tranquilizer. No, that was ridiculous too.

What if the moose venom, which was very old, didn't work the same way fresher biological traces would, and it lead them to the wrong moose tranquilizer formula? Would that happen? Simon had made good progress on the moose tranquilizer, and the last part of the chemical composure he was to work on was the Ba-ing-go, and he probably had logged his attempts at Ba-ing-go well enough that the other scientists could work it out with some of Simon's direction. It was the society that was being illogical, not him. Why didn't they work out the rest of the chemical composure when they had only to gain from it? Well, there wouldn't be much point, seeing that there would be no way to test potency even with the chemical composure unless they were to find biological traces of moose-that-look-like-turtles, but still, they shouldn't waste time on it! Warren's search party would find biological traces soon enough and when that happened they would want to be working on potency, not chemical composure!

How were they going to find biological traces anyway? The only biological traces Roy could think of were moose blood and moose venom. Moose blood would probably make the moose tranquilizer process easier, but without John and his retirement home blood it was almost impossible to get. Moose venom could be found in the bodies of moose-that-look-like-turtle victims, preferably Loothpit's victims, since his genes were stronger than the average moose-that-looks-like-a-turtle's, and the same stuff that it would take to knock in out would probably kill a regular moose-that-looks-like-a-turtle. He didn't think his father had died at the hands of Loothpit, which was yet another reason to not use him.

It suddenly occurred to Roy that even if they were able to somehow get desirable moose venom it still wasn't guaranteed that the society's biochemists would be able to produce an effective moose tranquilizer, and even if they were making good progress Loothpit could still show up before they were ready with enough to fight off his entire army. The society was still in grave danger. Plus, he remembered in his sudden panic, John had been able to slip through the ventilation system. He had said that Loothpit had many more cockroaches; he possibly had the entire frozen army at his disposal, so perhaps with a few more cockroaches he would be able to overwhelm the society even with plenty of moose tranquilizer by destroying them from the inside. Could they defend against it all? Maybe, maybe not. With the chances of getting enough moose tranquilizer while Simon was bedridden low, and the many other ways that Loothpit could conquer them, Roy figured that the best thing for him to do was to run away from the society. Both he and Simon were of little use to them, anyway. In fact, they were the reason Loothpit would be attacking the society in the first place! Would they leave publicly, so that Loothpit would know to stay away, or would they leave secretly, so as to save their own skins?

Roy realized that Loothpit would attack the society anyway, now that they were the center of a project to develop and mass produce moose tranquilizer. If his power was threatened, he would put its protection first, and his revenge would have to wait. Roy might be able to escape with Simon and hide just as Simon did, but especially with Simon's health uncertain they would probably be found out sooner or later. It might still be worth it, just to live a little longer. No,

that would be stupid. If he was to take Simon along Simon could die of medical neglect. It would be best for Simon to stay behind and help the society to develop moose tranquilizer by dictating whatever commands he could. That would at least increase the chance that Loothpit would fall. Roy, on the other hand, had no use to the society, so he might as well run away.

There it was. He was going to escape. But how? He had to tell Warren his plans for the society in order to increase their chances of victory, but he couldn't tell Warren he was leaving because he was no use to the society because Warren would say that his use was to tell them where his father was buried so the party didn't have to search for a body. Wait a minute, thought Roy, it was pointless to withhold that information, since Warren could get it himself if he really wanted to. Roy didn't like it, but it was certainly most reasonable to just tell Warren where he was buried. At least then he could escape. Would he escape? What if Warren said no? He would have to escape secretly then, but Warren might try to stop him. Perhaps he could write down everything he wanted to suggest to the society, including the whereabouts of his father, and leave a note at Warren's office, and then escape quietly.

That only left the question of where he would go. For his safety it was best for him to live in the wilderness, but he knew next to nothing about that. It was true he had grown up next to a small forest, but he had explored it little and it wasn't long before the price of wood had risen so much that the forest was scrapped. He wondered how Simon had been able to survive in the wilderness during his exile. Roy thought that perhaps he had enough knowledge of the forest

to survive in the wilderness when his reign had begun, but his incredibly easy life in the El Tuna Café had caused him to forget it. Curse the El Tuna Café! Well, thought Roy, even if he had been able to survive in a forest there were few forests near Diarama to live in, and he didn't know if they were being logged down. He wished that the El Tuna Café's vortex had killed him and Simon. This was all too much. Why did he have the misfortune to survive while his mother, Mr. Parrot, and so many others had died so easily in the vortex? He and Simon had jumped in later, he supposed, since they were trying to save their mother. That short amount of time between his mother's fall and his decision to save her in the new "universe" that was forming underneath him was time enough for the vortex to slow to a point where he could survive.

Roy's heart skipped in his chest. He knew there was a chance that everything that fell in after he had fallen in could have survived! Well, not everything. He was more likely to be an exception, and most things would have been destroyed, but there was still the chance that some things after his fall had made it. Mr. Parrot's notebook had turned out fine, what if the moose tranquilizer he had kept in the El Tuna Café's arsenal hadn't been destroyed? It was more likely than Mr. Parrot's notebook turning out fine, since moose tranquilizer was a liquid. Roy scratched his head excitedly. It seemed so obvious now! He could still tell Warren where his father's grave was so that they would have a back up, but Warren would be able to use the search party to search the El Tuna Café. It was an excellent idea, but still the odds were low. Roy thought again that he should give his suggestions to Warren and writing and then go into hiding.

The Library

The secret author's hideaway was a small room and only contained a single bookshelf, a few desks, a single computer, and a printer. Billy wondered why, when they obviously needed to install electricity for the computer and printer, they had decided to have the room lit by torches. Billy looked around the wooden bookshelf for a copy of *The Power of Nothing*. He couldn't see one. Most of the books on the shelves consisted of Presleytarian holy books and commentary by the Gotithian writers, along with a few history books which recorded what had happened recently. Billy picked up a Presleytarian holy magazine and flipped to a random page. It appeared an urgent need for finances had caused several factions to sell part of their wood reserve, causing wood prices and scarab values everywhere to plummet lower than since Roy's fall. A commentary beside the article stated that the economy would slump as a result.

Billy's ears perked up. He heard a shriek. In involuntary panic, he dropped the magazine and headed for the tunnel from which he had come. The shriek was followed by hysterical sounding laughter. Billy stopped and listened intently. The laughter was coming from one of the other three tunnels leading out of the secret library. It didn't sound too threatening; in fact, it sounded somewhat childish. Billy decided to follow it.

As Billy walked up the tunnel the sound got louder. It was certainly laughter, and it was certainly childish. Perhaps from a Gotithian Billy's age. Billy loved the thought of it. He hadn't seen any Gotithian children since the Gotithian hunts

began. Billy reached the end of the tunnel and pushed the wooden door open. He climbed out.

With only a quick glance he could tell that he was in the main library. He was in a circular loft capped with a very tall dome streaking in the artificial light of the outdoors. Billy looked around the loft, but amongst the encyclopedias, history books, and self help books he couldn't find the echoing laughter, so he looked to the wide, turning hallway in front of the loft. Having his hopes for finding a peer up, he decided to follow the laughter in the hall. The dome made it much harder to tell where it was coming from.

To Billy's frustrations, the laughter stopped when he entered the hall. Billy looked around the shelves against the walls for any sign of someone having been there, but there were no books missing from the shelves or even crooked. Looking down at the floor, he saw two straight indents in the thin carpeting. Strange. He wondered if he should turn back.

“The Gotithian hideaway has a long and memorable history,” an educated voice at the end of the hall began. Billy could faintly hear childish twittering. “Although further underground than anyone would normally dig under, the founders of the Gotithian hideaway realized to ensure the safety of their creation they would have to prevent anyone from coming to above land. Rupert Smith, a well known botanist in his neighborhood, had an idea. Every day he would add a little more manure to his garden and run the sprinkler over it regardless of the weather or condition of his plants. While the behavior might seem odd to his neighbors, he figured, it was nothing too suspicious. Gradually his neighbors became used to it, and gradually his garden started to fail. He publicly reasoned that his problem was that he

didn't take good enough care of his garden, and began to add more manure, water, and chemicals to it. With the continuous failure of his garden, it wasn't long before he was constantly watering, fertilizing, and spraying his garden. He even extended the care to his lawn. Property values in the neighborhood plummeted as houses being built remained unsold and neighbors began to even move away, so he and the other founders began purchasing more houses and the lawn care frenzy spread wildly. Charges of plant abuse among other things were made against the new homeowners, but by the time an actual investigation was underway the hideaway controlled the majority of the neighborhood, and these new neighbors of course didn't have anything against the popular lawn care methods, so the charges were dropped. Soon enough the founders controlled enough land to ensure the hideaway underneath was not disturbed by diggers. When the Gotithian hunts finally came to Margues the Gotithian homeowners had been replaced by hideaway members of different species, so even today we are safely protected by a neighborhood of manure. Proceed to chapter two?"

The tape stopped, and the unseen Gotithian roared with laughter. "Manure!" he shouted. "That's awesome!"

"Anyone there?" asked Billy aloud. He heard the muffled sound of wheels on carpeting and riding on a skateboard appeared a stocky Gotithian boy about Billy's age.

"You're lost too, huh?" he asked, grinning for some reason unknown to Billy.

"I'm not lost," said Billy.

The boy's grin faded away. "What do you mean? There's no way out."

“Yes there is,” said Billy, pointing behind him. He silently wondered what kind of joke the kid was trying to pull on him. “It’s back there.”

“Tuh!” exclaimed the boy. “No it’s not! I’m not kidding you, man. You could walk in the direction for hours and you’ll never find a way out!”

Billy felt ashamed that he was peers with this boy. “Um, you have to have come into this library, so obviously there’s a way out.”

“Come into a library? What do you think I am... a nerd?” said the boy angrily.

“You’re missing my point,” said Billy, wondering why, of all the Gotithians, he had to be spared.

“You just called yourself a nerd, you know,” said the boy.

Billy rolled his eyes. “Look!” he exclaimed, pointing. “There’s a map of the library hanging from the ceiling! Can’t you read?”

“Yeah, but I’m not going to,” protested the boy.

“Elvis, you’re dumb!” said Billy.

“Don’t insult The King!” shouted the boy. Then, in a quieter voice, he said, “He’s watching us, you know.”

Billy wanted to comment, but decided he shouldn’t. “Just look at the map!”

“All right, all right, jeez,” said the boy. He looked up. “Nope, no exit.”

“Are you even looking?” asked Billy, looking up at the map. He studied the oval shaped library and found at the loft he had entered was the official entrance. “See that dome shaped thing? That’s where you leave.”

“No, trust me. I’ve been in here all day and if there was an exit, I would see it.”

“Did you go to the dome?” asked Billy.

“No, I can’t climb up there.”

“El –,” Billy started, but stopped himself. “No, in the room below the dome, I mean!”

“That place is boring. Nothing but textbooks and such.”

“How did you end up in a library, anyway?”

“I dunno,” said the boy, shrugging. “I just woke up and found myself here. Well, I’ve gotta go find something to eat.”

“Where will you be getting this food?” asked Billy.

“From recipe books,” said the boy.

“You need ingredients to make food,” said Billy.

“No, I mean *from the recipe books*. Can’t you understand Gotithian?”

“You’re eating recipe books?”

“No, just the food.”

“Free samples?”

“Recipe books have those? I guess I should read more,” said the boy with a casual shrug. He rolled on his skateboard past Billy.

“I don’t see how it’s possible for anyone to be that dumb,” muttered Billy as he walked in the direction from which the boy had come.

“What did you say?” demanded the boy, wheeling around.

“Did I say that out loud?” asked Billy. He figured there was no use in lying. The boy gave a ridiculously angry

face. “Well, I suppose you could be average. I haven’t been around many Gotithians lately, you see.”

“Average?” laughed the boy. “I’m *smart*. I’ve got straight 1’s in all my classes!”

“Are your classes above, in, or below the average class?” asked Billy.

“I’ve got straight 1’s,” repeated the child. He turned his skateboard around and rolled off muttering under his breath what was probably an obscenity.

Billy didn’t know whether to laugh or to cry at his encounter. He did neither, and simply thought to himself that it was good that the kid was leaving him alone and, considering the kid’s theories on the library, probably would for a long time. He should probably go back to the secret library while he still had a chance and look for *The Power of Nothing* again, but, then again, Billy thought, there was no real urgency for him to do so. He could stick around the library and find out more about the hideaway.

As the hallway began to curve Billy saw along a maze of bookshelves a trail of messes that the boy must have left. As Billy followed the trail he saw it was composed mainly of comic books and open recipe books with pictures of food ripped out. The trail ended in a small corner created by bookshelves that was the audio books section.

Billy opened up the CD player on the table in the center of the section and read the CD inside. “Gotithian Haven”, the title said. Underneath in small print was the table of contents. Billy wasn’t interested, so he tossed it aside. He hoped that the strange boy wouldn’t get upset with losing his precious manure chapter. Billy decided to look through the pile of audio books the boy had made already, and most of it,

like the manure book, was stupid. He even had been listening to comic books in audio version. Strange.

“What’s this?” Billy asked out loud with surprise. The boy had pulled the audio version of *The Power of Nothing* onto the table. Even more surprising was the subtitle: Second edition. Billy had only read the first edition of the book, and figured that it would be better to learn what was new in the published second edition of the book rather than try to read the unpublished draft of the third edition. Billy looked turned the CD case to the back for the table of contents. There were two new chapters; the first one labeled “Plains of Nothing” and the second one labeled “Willy Lemoniod’s Involvement”. He popped the CD into the player and entered in 24, the number for “Plains of Nothing”.

“Chapter 24: Plains of Nothing,” said Bob Rednow’s voice. For the first time Billy swelled up with pride for his father. “If we were to take the previously principles of infinity and applied them to the Dimension of Nothing, we can assume that anything and everything conceivable is happening there. Although I am only writing this in the second edition of this book it is really nothing new. After the release of first edition of *The Power of Nothing* many people were trying to use this implied fact of the Dimension of Nothing as proof that it could not exist, or at least it could not exist beyond anything other than what it really was: nothing.

“Indeed, it may seem like infinite nothingness shouldn’t do anything, but keep in mind nothing is not really nothing. It can consist of a particle and an antiparticle in a pair that cancels itself out so that, mathematically speaking, there is no energy. As the property of infinite possibilities applies to all matter, even matter in a pair that cancels each

member out, it should seem obvious to the skeptics that the property is true and even implied in today's knowledge of science. Skeptics still argue that if it were true that everything could happen that the Universe should be long gone by now.

“The argument really stumped me. It did seem to me that if my theory was true, then it couldn't possibly be true. My scientific peers ridiculed me and told me to go back to studying science when I admitted I didn't have an answer for that one. They said my theories had never been made concrete by experiments and it had been a matter of time before it all fell apart. I knew that I did need concrete evidence for my theories at some point before I got carried away, but I will have to get into that later, hopefully in the next edition of this book. At the time I was determined to use what I had and work out the logical problem of everything happening.

“I figured a good starting point for my explanation of the paradox was at the fact that in a realm of infinity everything must be the same because the probability of anything happening in an infinite world is of course one hundred percent. This alarmed some of my colleagues, and they told me to avoid that principle because it actually worked against me. They were aware that if there was infinite of anything there couldn't be anything but that one thing by definition, and that argument would surely destroy my theory forever. It was only a matter of time. When they gave that ridiculous advice I banned them from my studies forever, but they did have a point. How could anything exist other than what existed in infinite quantities? Did existence not exist because nothing existed? While that may sound like

another ridicule from my peers, it actually was the answer to my question. If there were infinite amounts of everything as a result of the infinite amounts of nothing, it could mean that the Universe in which we live is really just one of infinite versions of the same Universe.

“When I presented my theory to my peers they accused me of plagiarism, for there were already numerous theories that there were infinite parallel universes. I told them that these weren’t parallel – some could be accessed via the Dimension of Nothing by first getting through the Big Brain – and that in fact few other parallel universe theories were really about parallel universes since most asserted that parallel universes could be accessed from other universes, which is geometrically impossible. Furthermore, I said, there was no hope of me *not* plagiarizing since, if my theory was true, there were infinite others who had developed the theory before me. I said –”

“You’re listening to that? That’s one heck of a boring book, you know. You should try ‘Captain Tuna’. It’s a pretty funny book.”

“I already know your type of humor,” said Billy. He paused the CD player, knowing it could be awhile before he could listen again.

“You don’t even know my name,” said the boy. “How could you possibly know my ‘humor’?”

“Okay, what’s your name?” asked Billy, annoyed.

“It’s Chuck. Chuck Linner.”

“Okay, your type of humor’s terrible,” said Billy.

“What?”

“I know your name now. I can say you’re humor’s bad now, right?”

Chuck was flustered. “What? No, it doesn’t work that way!”

“Really? You said that I didn’t know your name, so there was no way I could criticize your type of humor. Well, now I know your name, so I should have a right to criticize you.”

“That’s not how it works,” said Chuck condescendingly, “You wouldn’t understand, I guess. Not too bad, though.”

Billy was annoyed. He tried to imagine himself causing Chuck pain in some way. Perhaps his superior mental abilities could fry the boy’s simple brain? Billy smiled at the thought.

“What are you smiling about?” asked Chuck. “Something dumb, I suppose.”

The smile went off of Billy’s face. It was sort of dumb to think he could do that. The kid’s brain wouldn’t fry. It was as intelligent as a brick wall, so it was most likely just as hardy. Frustrated, Billy said simply, “Leave me alone.”

“Why should I do that? You’re in *my* spot.”

“Who says it’s your spot?” Billy demanded. He thought the counter was childish, but it was the best he could think of. “This is the library, isn’t it?”

“I’ve been here all day! I say it’s my spot!” said Chuck, pushing Billy out of his seat.

“You semi-illiterate moron!” Billy yelled, getting himself up. “If you would just read the map, you could get out of here!”

“Why would I need to do that?” demanded Chuck. “Look, kid, if you had any sense you would know it’s

impossible to walk around forever! If walking to the exit through the hall doesn't work nothing will!"

"Do you seriously think you're going to get to the end of the hall?" asked Billy, worried. It was suspicious that anyone could be that stupid.

"Sounds like you've been listening too much to *The Power of Nothing*," Chuck chuckled arrogantly. "Well, listen up: in the real world, things have to have an end. It's impossible for them not to. The hallway's pretty long, but it's the only way out."

"That's not how you get out!" said Billy.

"Are you saying we shouldn't take the hallway? That's also impossible, genius."

"Look at the – fine, you know what, walk around your stupid hallway. I don't care. Just leave me alone."

"No," said Chuck stubbornly.

"Excuse me?" said Billy, preparing himself for a fight.

"You know something about the hallway that I don't," said Chuck.

"That wouldn't be too hard," said Billy.

"Let it out," said Chuck, grabbing Billy's shirt collar. Billy pushed him away.

"Well, if you would just look at the map you'd see –"

"Shut up and tell me how to get out!" screamed Chuck.

"You idiot –" Billy stopped mid sentence. He had an idea. "Chuck, is there a storage room around here?"

"Yes, why?" asked Chuck, suspicious.

"Storage rooms typically have two ways out. You know, so that stuff can get in and out without much problem."

“Why don’t you just look at the map to see where it is?” asked Chuck mockingly.

“Do I look like I have enough time to read that kind of stuff?” Billy retorted.

“Aha! Do you think I have that time?”

“Well, I guess not,” said Billy. “Did you see the storage room?”

“Yes, it’s down the hall.”

Billy groaned. “That hall? That could take *forever*.”

“Actually it’s not that far from here,” said Chuck, smiling. “You shouldn’t be afraid to walk a little, wimp.”

“You lead the way,” said Billy. “I don’t want to get lost. The hallway’s so long.”

“Hey, wait a minute,” said Chuck. Billy was disappointed. “Something’s fishy. Why aren’t you acting so....so....smart like?”

It was all Billy could do to keep himself from laughing. To prevent the ruination of his plan, he merely said, “Whatever. Just show me to the storage room.”

Chuck pointed towards a bookshelf. “Down there the hallway starts turning, you see? There’s a storage room off to the side there.”

“Okay. You probably should come too. Sometimes there’s a bunch of stuff in the storage room that can get in the way of the door. Pretty dumb, actually.”

“Move it yourself!” exclaimed Chuck. “I’ve got better things to do.”

“Well, you’re going to be doing those things forever if you don’t help me get out!” said Billy. He lowered his voice. “I’m not that strong, you know.”

“I figured that,” said Chuck. “Okay, fine. I’ll go to the stupid storage room with you. But if there’s no way out, boy, you’re going to get it.” The two of them started walking, with Billy leading. Billy thought everything was going excellently.

“Hey,” said Billy as they entered the trail of Chuck’s destruction, “How’d you not get lost in the hall? I thought you were looking for the end of the hall, and it was really long.”

“Oh, I spent practically the whole morning looking for the end of the hall, but I was so hungry I could hardly concentrate, so I turned around and walked back to look for recipe books. It’s insane how many books they have in this library!”

“Who goes here, anyway?” asked Billy. He could now see the storage room’s door.

“Nerds like you,” said Chuck, poking Billy in the stomach. Billy couldn’t wait to have his revenge. “Well, here we are.”

“It looks locked,” said Billy.

“Nah. I was looking in here before for some food. It’s not locked,” said Chuck. He opened the door. “See?”

“I see,” said Billy. Chuck turned on the lights and Billy studied the room for a moment. He smiled to himself. The storage room was round too. Billy pointed to his left. “Well it looks to me like the door’s over there.”

“What makes you think that?” asked Chuck.

“There’s less stuff over there, so it’s easier to get through. Let’s dig through it and find out.”

“Okay, but I’m really busy. You’d better be right,” said Chuck, waving a fist.

Billy began to take boxes out of their stacks and laying them aside. “What’re you so busy with?”

“I’ve got to get to the end of the hall,” said Chuck very seriously. “I got a bit distracted today, but I can’t stay here forever. I’ve got to get out of here before my parents wonder where I am.”

“Parents?” asked Billy. He hadn’t thought that Chuck would have parents.

“Yeah, they were going somewhere last night, and they left me to get my own food. The next morning, I woke up here. But mind your own business and keep digging!”

“This could get faster if you were digging too,” said Billy, annoyed.

“I don’t have that kind of time!”

“Why not?”

“I’ve got to get to the end of the hall!”

“Might I remind you the whole reason we’re in this storage room is to get through the room’s other door?” asked Billy.

“Oh, yeah. I sorta forgot about that,” said Chuck. Billy snickered. “Don’t laugh at me! My mom says that I’m....different....get back to digging!”

“You should dig too,” said Billy. “The boxes are heavier than I thought. Also, the door might be on the other side of the room. I should go over there to cover more ground.”

“I guess you’re right,” grumbled Chuck. “Just let me know when your little baby arms get tired.”

“I wish I was as strong as you,” said Billy.

“That is so gay.”

Billy wanted to punch Chuck but instead said, “No, I mean, you look like you work out a lot. Do you?”

“What, this?” asked Chuck, showing Billy a flabby bicep. “Believe it or not, it’s all natural. I don’t work out!”

“Wow,” muttered Billy, walking away. He turned his head slightly to keep Chuck in view.

“Elvis! These boxes are heavy!” exclaimed Chuck when he grabbed onto one.

“That’s why I wanted you to do the work,” said Billy.

“Yeah, why am I doing all the work and you aren’t?” complained Chuck immediately.

“No, I’m doing the other side of the room, remember?”

“No, I don’t, and I’m different, and you should shut up!” yelled Chuck.

“Okay,” said Billy, at the door of the storage room.

“Where do you think you’re going?” asked Chuck angrily, taking his hands off of the box he was straining himself on. “You’re supposed to be doing work too!”

“You know how doors have a little crack at the bottom and it lets out light?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, what if we turned the lights off so that we could follow the door light?”

“I thought of that,” said Chuck. “Turn off the lights.”

Billy did so. “How’s that?”

“That’s not enough light, idiot. I can’t see the door,” said Chuck, peering through the cracks in the stacks of boxes.

“I’ll close the door too,” said Billy, walking out of the storage room and shutting the door.

“Perfect!” said Chuck. “But maybe you should cover the door cracks on that first door.”

“I’m already doing that!” said Billy from the outside. “I’ll gather some books to do that, okay?”

“Well, duh! It’s a library!” exclaimed Chuck.

“Oh, of course!” said Billy, gathering random books into his arms.

“Hurry up and get back to work!” said Chuck.

“Just a minute,” said Billy, cramming the books into the cracks of the door. “There. How’s that?”

“You need some more to the right a bit,” said Chuck.

“Okay,” said Billy, smiling to himself as he gathered more books. He crammed them into the left side of the door. “How’s that?”

“Perfect. I can’t see a thing. Now get back inside.”

“I’ll try that,” said Billy, walking away.

“Oh I get it! You’re just trying to weasel you’re way out of work! Well, guess what? I’m going to find that door, and then I’m not going to tell me where it is!”

“You do that,” said Billy, laughing hard. He had once hated kids like that. His school had been filled with them. When he had grown used to them, though, he had found that it was actually possible to play those simple sorts of tricks on them. It might be a while before Chuck finally emerged from the storage room. The books stuck in the door might slow his progress down quite a bit.

Billy returned to the bookshelf from which he had taken the books to stuff into the bottom of the door, since he had seen an interesting sounding book, *The Perfect Gotithian*, when he was collecting books to trap Chuck in with. He briefly wondered if he should return to Sean’s

house in case his father was waiting for him, but he decided that, like reading *The Power of Nothing*, there was no urgency. Billy opened the book to the first page. The chapter title read, “*Separation from Nature*”. Another hippy book, Billy thought. He continued reading.

“Nature is virtually nonexistent in the Universe and certainly nonexistent in our everyday lives. The rapid destruction of forests from Willy Lemoniod era industrialization made wood highly prized, which only hastened the destruction of nature. Dave, the inventor of the modern plumbing facilities, was one of the first to recognize this problem, but rather than help with it he bought Earth and made it into a tourist site for those who wanted to see nature up close, so that he could control the rapidly appreciating riches there. Not that any visitors to Earthland actually understand enough about nature to recognize it, however. Dave has represented Earth wildlife as trees in downtown urban centers, but no one has really noticed or cared. Even more distressing is the biological illiteracy of our own wildlife. For example, as a study done recently after Roy’s downfall shows, the average person in the Universe can not tell the difference between the intelligent Margusean cockroach species and the real version of the lowly scarab that appears on our currencies. Such ignorance not only fuels the further devastation of the environment, it probably has some nasty consequences for the civilized, too. For example, the killing of the widespread Blasphemes tiger probably has some sort of consequences on, say, the economy of Margues. Of course such effects are immeasurable, but given the decline in tigers and the recent collapse in oyster prices are probably related in some way.

After all, everything's an important part of the balance of nature, right?"

Billy flipped to the table of contents. It didn't seem worth reading. No, there was an interesting sounding chapter titled: "Teachings of the PufferFish Sage". The PufferFish Sage had been a well known crackpot who insisted all necessary nutrients could come from the pollution in the air. He had also struggled with a placebo addiction that eventually led to his death and the Universe-wide "War on Placebos" campaign. Billy turned to the starting page of the chapter.

"Get in here right now!" Chuck shouted. "If you don't open the door this instant, I swear, I'm going to pound you so hard....just answer me!"

"L —" Billy stopped immediately. If he spoke, Chuck would be able to follow his voice out of the storage room. Maybe he would get a beating. Chuck didn't seem so strong, but Billy didn't want to risk it. It gave Billy had an idea. He walked over to the wall perpendicular to the storage room door and said, "Come and get me, you coward!"

Chuck roared with anger. Billy heard a loud crash, followed by several small crashes, and Chuck's profanities. "You are so dead!" Chuck exclaimed when he pulled himself together.

"Try to get me," said Billy.

Chuck pulled on something, cursed, and there was another crash. This time it sounded like a box rack falling onto him. Chuck threw something, and rammed himself into the wall. He swore louder than ever.

"Loser!" said Billy, egging him on.

"I'm going to get you," said Chuck.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” said Chuck, but he stopped. There was a bang against the door to the storage room, and Billy jumped backwards. “I mean,” he continued, “You can’t continue hiding forever. I’m going to get you.”

“What?” asked Billy.

“Oh, you thought you were so clever,” said Chuck with a forced evil voice. “Well, I’m going to find you! I’ve got eyes like a hawk, you know!”

“Perhaps a blind hawk,” said Billy, relieved. The idiot still thought he was somehow in there with him.

“Perhaps a blind hawk,” mocked Chuck. “What beautiful poetry, poet! Well, time for some poetic justice!” There was another crash.

“Whatever. I’m leaving,” said Billy, throwing a book across the room.

“What? Y-you found the exit? Show it to me, you moron!” Chuck screamed. Billy could hear furious digging coming from the other end of the storage room.

Billy walked to the book he had thrown, and burst out the laughter he had been holding in. Chuck swore and smashed a few more boxes. Billy returned to reading *The Perfect Gotithian*.

“The PufferFish Sage is probably best remembered for his unusual diet of polluted air and his belief in using mind-expanding placebos in order to become enlightened. We are forgetting, however, one of the more key parts to his teachings: reincarnation. Even by the PufferFish Sage’s time reincarnation was dismissed as just another claim by Blasphemers. The PufferFish Sage, who had been the professor of philosophy at Diarama University at the time,

thought otherwise, and convinced the university board to let him have a short paid sabbatical to study the subject. He was careful to use the word ‘study’ but he really meant to discover it. He had the idea that the body does transform immediately upon death, and he wanted to pursue and expand the theory.

“His ‘short’ sabbatical turned out to be a two million El Tuna Café year one and, to the distress of the university, because the agreement had never specified the length of the sabbatical, they could do nothing about it. The university was finally rewarded for its patience with a well developed proof of reincarnation and exact observation of the PufferFish Sage’s famous two step life process, cycling at birth and death. All scholarly eyes were focused on the Sage’s long awaited presentation, so of course the Sage put much effort into it. He showed up not with slide shows and fancy graphics as usual presentations had, but merely a pig and a knife. He walked into the auditorium carrying the pig, and quickly introduced the audience to the finer details of the living stage of reincarnation. Then he slit the pig around the throat and began talking about the death stage of reincarnation. He explained to them that reincarnation was undeniable, as they had just observed a living pig reincarnate into a dead pig. The monumental discovery not only made the PufferFish Sage realize his spiritual side, but it also drew him away from the excesses of society, because the university fired him on the spot, leading to much applause from the audience.

“The PufferFish Sage’s experience at Diarama University and his renewed spiritualism caused him to shun society –”

“Fine. Be a coward and hide. I don’t care. I’m not afraid of the dark,” said Chuck. Billy didn’t respond. “In fact, I’d love it if you’d leave me alone. I’m kinda tired. The library’s such a boring place...”

Billy ignored this blatant reserve psychology and returned to reading.

“...and people in general. The PufferFish Sage would live for one hundred thousand years as obscure as Simon, hardly seeing another soul until one day an eager youngster wanted to hear about his philosophies. The Sage realized what wisdom he had acquired in his isolation and was happy to tell the youngster everything he knew. He and his disciple arranged for more meetings, and the two of them were soon planning massive invitations to lectures by the Sage.”

“I’m taking a nap, okay?” Chuck proclaimed. “Yeah, that sounds great. Don’t bother me, please.”

“The Sage continued to be ridiculed, but as he later put it ‘No matter how much ridicule I got, there was always one youngster who wanted to learn more from me. It was like finding a gem in a rocky cave, an oasis in the desert, or a Gotithian fry at the bottom of a dumpster.’”

Billy put down his book. He heard the faint sound of footsteps. For a fleeting moment he was afraid Chuck had broken out, but when he came to his senses he realized it was coming from the entrance of the library. He could barely hear, but it sounded like there was some sort of laughing. Billy got up and made his way down the circular hallway, trying to act as casual about it as possible, to investigate. If it was Chuck’s parents coming, he was doomed.

As he approached, the conversation became audible. “And Chuck’s a really good team player,” said a Gotithian

woman's voice. Billy looked frantically around. It was at least one of Chuck's parents! Billy looked around the library for somewhere to hide.

"So, he's good at sports?" asked Billy's father. Billy stopped where he was. They were at least far away from the storage room, and with his father there, he didn't want to hide. Maybe he could stop them where they were so that Chuck didn't scream for help from the storage room.

"He does his best," said a male Gotithian voice, probably Chuck's father. "He's really more of a brainy kid than a brawny one."

"You realize intelligence is genetic?" asked Bob. The three shadows of the adults were coming around the curve.

"Why, thank you!" said the father. The three of them were now in Billy's view. Chuck's father certainly looked like an older version of him, except fatter, bald, and wearing a Head Trauma concert T-shirt. His mother looked little like him, especially with the make up she had on.

"Billy!" said Bob warmly. "Come! The radio's updating the current situation of the new alliance!"

"Say, where's Chuck?" asked the father. Billy frantically tried to think of something.

"Well, uh, I don't know. He said he was looking for...harder stuff to read," said Billy, thinking that would satisfy them.

"That's my boy!" said the father proudly.

"He's been in the library all day. He just *loves* to read," said the mother.

"What's going on now?" asked Billy. He probably already knew what they were talking about, but he wanted to

get out of the library quickly before Chuck's parents discovered their wonderful son's true whereabouts.

"Don't interrupt me, young man!" exclaimed the woman.

Billy held in his anger. "Sorry. Go on, then."

"Well, uh," said the woman, flustered. "I don't have anything to say, I guess."

"Well, then I guess I can talk to my father, right?" asked Billy, resisting the urge to smirk at them.

"Yes, Billy," said Bob, apparently relieved to get away from the two imbeciles.

"What's so important now?" Billy asked, walking past the couple.

"I'm not sure yet. The announcement just started."

"Announcement?"

"They cancelled the Squeenbowl tournament coverage. Something's up. WonderClaus is on the radio."

Blockmailing

Roy clutched the golden note tightly in his hands as if he would disappear as soon as he dropped it into the mail slip on Warren's door. It was as if dropping the letter of his advice and his confession to running away would force him to escape the society. He wondered if he really should escape the society. The suggestion was the only useful thing he would have provided to the society when he gave it, and it was probably the only useful thing he could provide to the society ever. If that was true, what was the point of hanging around and possibly getting killed by Loothpit's armies? What if even they were prepared? There would still be a battle, and Roy could die in the battle.

A small voice in his head told him that giving the suggestions and leaving was just his style: sure, he could help organize the battle, but he wasn't fit to actually participate in it. Roy shook off this nagging with another little voice that told reassured him that brains were the thing that mattered in today's combat, and bravery and brawn were things of the past. Why, then, said the first nagging voice, couldn't everyone give suggestions and no one fight? The second voice countered the argument by stating that it was pointless for an unfit person to participate physically in a battle. His brilliant suggestion was enough. The first voice tried to argue further but responded by saying it was only making an observation, and then left in a hurry.

Roy caught himself laughing. He really was thinking strangely. It was probably all from the stress of having to escape the society. He then realized that he had no real plan

on escaping. Could he just walk out? Probably not, when the society was tightening security. Someone would notice he was leaving and, although they probably wouldn't have any suspicions, would report it to Warren. Then Roy would really be on the run. Or would he?

“What are you doing?” asked Warren from behind.

“Ba?” Roy exclaimed, turning around. In surprise, he dropped the letter.

“What’s this?” Warren asked, picking the gold up. He unfolded the letter and read it. Roy stood in silence, wondering how Warren would react.

“What do you think?” asked Roy. Perhaps if he acted like it wasn’t a secretive attempt to desert the society when it was needed most, but the logical decision it was, Warren wouldn’t react as badly. Roy’s heart sank when he remembered he had used the words “secretly” and “skedaddle” in his letter. Bad choice of words, he reflected.

“The El Tuna Café plan is brilliant,” Warren praised, looking up at Roy with a serious look on his face. “But you can’t escape.”

“Excuse me?” asked Roy. He hoped he hadn’t sounded too rude.

“If we’re going to use the El Tuna Café idea, it’s best that you help us look for the moose tranquilizer. After all, you’re the one who knows best where you stored it in that oversized restaurant.”

“But –” Roy protested. He stopped.

“But nothing,” said Warren sternly. “This is our most desperate time, and your whole reason to ‘skedaddle’ was because it maximized your chances of survival when you had no need to stay around, right? Well, now you have a purpose,

and it's extremely important. We can't waste any time. WonderClaus might have been overreacting when he said we needed to go to the Honky Donkey as soon as possible, but I know that this situation is very dire. Loothpit's cancelled an important meeting with the Pious Presleytarians over protection payments, and he wouldn't do that for nothing."

"There's no time at all, then!" exclaimed Roy. "How are we supposed to get a search party together?"

"I'll call everyone I can reach and give my orders," said Warren. "They can't all go formally at once, but they can still go."

"But you can't send everyone out to look for moose tranquilizer," pointed out Roy. "Aren't you going to have to secure the society?"

"In a perfect world I would send the whole Hobo Society to look for moose tranquilizer," said Warren, "But things don't work out that way, unfortunately."

"Why not? That sounds like a great plan," said Roy.

"Are you serious?" asked Warren.

"Yes."

"Then you're an idiot."

"Why?"

Warren thought for a moment. "Well, for one thing, it's impractical, and....for another, we need to stay here so that nobody gets suspicious. You don't want Loothpit attacking the El Tuna Café itself, do you?"

"That sounds stupid," said Roy.

"Well, thinking we could move the whole society over to the El Tuna Café is stupid too," said Warren.

"Well, what if Loothpit does attack the El Tuna Café itself?"

“Then I suggest you bring moose tranquilizer with you. Oh, wait! That’s the whole reason you’re going there! Well, you stand as much of a chance against them as we do, probably a better chance, even, with that huge arsenal of the El Tuna Café’s.”

“Wait a minute,” said Roy, “So moose-that-look-like-turtles can be killed by things other than moose tranquilizer?”

“Explosions will, as with any form of life, kill them,” said Warren. “Of course you can kill them in other ways, but the moose tranquilizer allergic reaction is the most effective way.”

“Why don’t we hunker down with what we have, then?”

Warren rolled his eyes. “Because of their shells, it’s very difficult to kill a moose-that-looks-like-a-turtle without moose tranquilizer. It’s possible, especially with mimes, but I wouldn’t count on that method to hold out for very long against an army like Loothpit’s. I mainly meant the arsenal of moose tranquilizer you were keeping in the El Tuna Café, not the anti-Cube People arsenal. Now please, get to work!”

“Where do I go?”

“Uh, the garage!” said Warren. “I’ll make a couple of calls to prepare some company for you to start the search. Now go! There’s no time to waste!”

“Right,” said Roy, walking past Warren and heading down the hallway.

“If no one’s there, just wait!” Warren said, entering his office and closing the door.

Roy couldn’t believe how stupid he had been. At the beginning of his reign everyone was afraid of the moose-

that-look-like-turtles uniting under Loothpit and bringing havoc to the Universe. During the fear frenzy no one could understand why the moose-that-look-like-turtles hadn't already united and how they could possibly stop them. In part to gain the popularity amongst his new subjects Roy promised to develop a biological weapon against the moose-that-look-like-turtles, and had forced Mr. Parrot to create moose tranquilizer so Roy could capture the infamous alpha male Loothpit. Probably during that time Roy's thinking had been clouded by his ambition and he confused *a* solution as *the* solution to the moose-that-look-like-turtles problem. Ever since Mr. Parrot had recaptured the Universe from the Cube People the Universe had been stockpiling weapons against their foreign enemies, even as they opened trade back up. Loothpit was probably more afraid of the huge and well supplied army under Roy than the moose tranquilizer, and when he escaped he was angry enough not to worry about attacks at all. After all, they had already come in the form of moose tranquilizer, so it was clear they couldn't be avoided. When Roy's regime collapsed and especially when the Gotithian Republic collapsed the Universe wasn't stable enough to fight them with conventional weapons and without moose tranquilizer people felt even more helpless. All Loothpit needed, it seemed, was a little proof that his new army could put up a fight, and by defeating the Pious Presleytarians he had proved it as much as he needed to. Perhaps the fears of Loothpit's attacks were over hyped.

That couldn't be entirely true, Roy thought again. It could be true that conventional weapons protect them from moose-that-look-like-turtles, but the Pious Presleytarians probably had more of them than the Hobo Society did. Like

the Hobo Society, they had had mimes, and they hadn't done them much good. Lack of bravery probably didn't apply in that situation either, Roy figured, since there were probably plenty of Pious Presleytarian zealots who welcomed death in battle. The Hobo Society couldn't provide that sort of zeal. They were an inferior force in all ways; if the Pious Presleytarians couldn't defend themselves against Loothpit, there was no way of the Hobo Society taking down Loothpit without moose tranquilizer. Roy wished he knew how long the Pious Presleytarians were able to hold out against Loothpit before finally surrendering, since he could probably estimate how long the Hobo Society would be able to hold out without moose tranquilizer if they had to. The information wasn't necessary, and certainly now there was no way Roy could obtain it. He would just have to go and get the moose tranquilizer and hope for the best. At least he knew that there was a way for the society to defend themselves for a little while. He had wondered how they would do it.

“You ready?” asked someone.

“Ba?” Roy interjected again, looking around. He found that he had been so deep into his thoughts he had walked into the garage without even noticing it. His greeter was a flabby and out-of-shape Jelly Blob, probably the pilot. There was a single ship with its engine on in the garage, and unlike the other ships it was a Poach-a-tron, a Cube Person made ship originally intended to be a sporty model of the Jiggy Gas Piggy for the recreational sport of poaching primitive life forms. People, however, had found it to be much for fashionable and luxurious than the purely practical Jiggy Gas Piggy, and although at first the police had some objection to

the guns hidden in the ship when Roy bought a model it became immensely popular. Roy thought it was a little ironic that they were flying in a giant cube to take out some supplies from the anti-Cube Person arsenal, but only a little ironic since the moose tranquilizer wasn't exactly an anti-Cube Person weapon. It had only been stored with the Cube Person defenses.

"Are you ready?" the Jelly Blob politely repeated.

"Oh, yes," said Roy. "I've been a little distracted. Shouldn't anyone else come?"

"Of course," said the pilot. "But Warren gave strict orders to fly as soon as possible. Some people have gone ahead of you, and some people are coming soon. Come." The pilot pressed a button on the key in his hands and a door popped out of the gleaming black cube. The door's top fell downwards to the concrete ground and touched it silently, revealing a flight of stairs on the other side of the door that lead into the ship. As Roy stepped in he was for the first time nostalgic for his reign.

"Did you choose this for fire power?" Roy asked as the door closed behind him.

"Yes," said the pilot, sitting himself down. "Of course some of our Jiggy Gas Piggys have added on weaponry, but this Cube People made stuff is better. I called dibs on it."

"So there is a chance that Loothpit will attack the El Tuna Café?"

"Of course!" said the pilot, pressing a few buttons. "If he finds out that the society's sending people to look for the El Tuna Café's moose tranquilizer he certainly will attack!"

"But....that's unlikely, right?" asked Roy, sitting down. They were taking off.

“I dunno. The Guinea Pigs are still in charge of the security around the El Tuna Café, but after the attack on the first asteroid plenty of eyes are on the El Tuna Café. There’s no telling what anybody knows about it.”

“How are people ‘keeping watch’ of something that’s light years away from their planets?”

“I don’t know about that either. You kept watch on planets with the help of the PickleNet. I suspect they’re doing the same.”

“All this time I’ve wondered about what’s happening in the Pickle Universe,” said Roy. “The Pickle People contributed to my downfall, you know.”

“Everyone does. Weirdly enough, the Pickle People aren’t as hostile now as they were when you destroyed Zebus. That’s partially because the Gotithian Republic made an effort to take them down immediately after coming into power. There wasn’t any fight; the Pickle People just gave in. They just said they wanted to get back at Roy for destroying most of their universe. Weirder still, they didn’t put up a fight when the Gotithian Republic wanted to occupy the Pickle Universe. They didn’t occupy it for long, of course. Maybe the Pickle People expected them to fall apart soon, so they just put up with it. Unfortunately for them, there were plenty of other faction’s armies coming to take the Gotithian’s place when it all fell apart.”

“Why hasn’t there been any fighting in the Pickle Universe?”

The pilot punched some numbers into the computer to the side of the dashboard, pressed a few other buttons on the dashboard itself, and then responded. “Well, there has been a little, but a lot of factions depend on the PickleNet. Instead of

trying to control the whole thing they're just dividing it up and there a lot of private PickleNet connections. The El Tuna Café is probably being watched the same way the Cube People were able to watch it."

"Excuse me?"

"Simon had the Cube People help him. The Cube People apparently had some sort of secret pickle connection or something and they were able to watch the El Tuna Café, so when they saw Simon was in distress they found it to be a perfect time to offer their help in exchange for the Universe's power."

"I know that Simon somehow had a PickleNet connection or something, because somehow he was able to send two threatening tapes over to me, but I made sure Pickle connections were fried by security. There's no way the Cube People could have heard Simon through it!"

"Maybe they had some sort of secret tunamatic version of the PickleNet, I don't know."

"There were no Pickle People in the battle at the El Tuna Café," continued Roy. "It's impossible that they could have gone in there because of my security, so the Cube People would have had to have another way."

"Whatever. It's still weird that the Pickle Universe is being divided up by all these factions who aren't even fighting each other, and they're even going as far as to continue to claim the Pickle People are in control. Weird, huh?"

"Yeah." Roy suddenly realized he could use the pilot to get some of the last minute information he wanted. "What exactly happened in the war between the Pious Presleytarians and Loothpit?"

“Ah, that wasn’t much of a war,” said the pilot. “Loothpit attacked the Pious Presleytarian government’s holdings in Oystia, there were a few battles over the mines on Urgrue 27 and 28, and by then the Pious Presleytarians had had enough. They gave in and agreed to pay protection money. Loothpit would have destroyed way more than what they would have to pay, anyway.”

“How long do you think the society could hold out without any moose tranquilizer?”

“They should last long enough for us to get the moose tranquilizer, be sure of that.”

“I’m not so sure,” said Roy.

“Well, there’s no use in worrying,” said the pilot.

“Whatever,” said Roy, annoyed. “How are we supposed to search for the moose tranquilizer anyway?”

“The vortex formed in a cone shape. Everything in the El Tuna Café is in that open cone. I trust you know where the vortex started, since you were actually there. That point is the bottom of the cone, so by determining the distance of the moose tranquilizer storage from that point you can guess where the tranquilizer is from the bottom.”

“The moose tranquilizer was in the outermost part of the center. It’s far from where my mother was hit – that’s about where and when the vortex started – so there has to be a lot of ground to cover, considering that the vortex spins.”

“Oh yes! We’ve got lots and lots of ground to cover! With you, though, the ground we need to cover is only a circle around the cone that covers roughly where the moose tranquilizer was.”

“In old measurements, I’d say the moose tranquilizer was about twenty miles from where the battle was.”

“Good,” said the pilot, punching some more numbers into his computer. “I needed that. Now I’ll be able to land in the right spot.”

“There’s going to have to be digging, isn’t there?” asked Roy.

“Of course there will be. We probably should inspect the whole surface first each time before we dig, though, and then investigate the rubble we pull away. Eventually we’ll find the moose tranquilizer.”

“It makes me wonder how long it’ll take, though,” said Roy solemnly.

“Hey, you were ruler of the Universe. Of all people you should know everything takes patience and organization. This is the best way.”

“I was never much a leader,” said Roy. “I only ruled for a million years, and even then people thought I had stayed too long. My personal psychologist even told me I was anxious of dying because I had ruled for a million years. Mr. Parrot ruled for seven million, and even Willy Lemoniod ruled for five, yet my psychologist apparently thought I was overdue. And, you know what, shortly after that I *did* get overthrown.”

“Sucks to be you,” said the pilot.

“You’re so kind.”

“The history books reveal all sorts of ways you could have avoided your downfall. Did you know, for example, that Simon didn’t have enough money to create the missiles that were vital to his Zebus plan? If you hadn’t taxed Mr. Parrot into disloyalty after Antonio stole all your wood, he might not have funded Simon, and Simon’s plans might have fallen flat!”

“Really? Why hasn’t Simon told me that? How do you know all of this?”

“The historians interviewed the PufferFish King shortly after your fall and he had no reason to withhold such information. But most people have to wonder: why didn’t you just tax Dave and take Earth’s wood to replace what was stolen? Why did you have to tax Mr. Parrot more than the others when his money couldn’t do as much?”

“I’m better friends with Dave,” said Roy. “Plus, the environmentalists would go insane if I took Earth’s wood. Earth is supposed to be a ‘universal treasure’.”

“And instead you taxed the founder of your race so much that he helped overthrow you, way to go,” said the Jelly Blob.

“Let’s not talk about that,” muttered Roy.

“Oh, I’d like not to,” said the pilot viciously.

Roy didn’t understand his tone of voice. “Then, why don’t you stop?”

The Jelly Blob gurgled. “Your downfall has amounted to the downfall of the Universe, Roy.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“No, it’s not,” said the Jelly Blob.

“It’s impossible for the Universe to be destroyed –”

“That’s not what I said, is it?” the Jelly Blob demanded rudely.

“What’s your problem all of the sudden?”

“Don’t you see that your blundering has caused the Universe to fall into a dark age? War’s bankrupting everyone. Under you everyone had to liquefy his membrane just to work hard enough to keep our technology competitive with the Cube People’s, and look what’s happened now! At

least where I come from, workers were required to chip in extra time participating in the war effort by helping produce what the government urgently needed. Of course, the government can't pay us for it, or at least not enough, because nobody's buying war bonds since there's no end to the wars, and the only way the government could afford to pay us if it raised taxes, which are already so high they're bankrupting us! The society's an ivory tower, Roy. You have no idea how bad it is out there."

"I don't think the society really has it easy," Roy argued.

"What? Well, besides the moose-that-look-like-turtles coming to attack us, the society's pretty well off!"

Roy laughed a little at the pilot's observation, hoping it would lighten the mood. It did not.

"What's so funny, huh?" demanded the Jelly Blob, jiggling around in a tantrum. "Roy, that's your problem! You never take things seriously enough! Everything has to be made into a joke of some sort!"

"Calm down," pleaded Roy. "You were fine just a second ago! What made you so angry all of the sudden?"

The Jelly Blob's jiggling slowed down. "The Universe is losing its soul. With the Cube People, and now all these wars, the majority of the population has to slave away for mere survival. Hmm...hasn't this happened already in history? Oh yeah, the Pegs! They had to slave away in order to defend themselves against the rest of the Universe, just like we're doing now. If we're not conquered by the Cube People, we're going to turn ourselves into them."

“Shut up about the Cube People!” exclaimed Roy. “The Boxers, not overwork, cubed the Pegs! Besides, how are the wars my fault?”

“You should have done a better job of holding the Universe together. At least you should have had a succession plan better than bestowing power on a little kid!” said the Jelly Blob, still angry but calming down. “The Boxers coup wanted to cube the planet to solve its basic problems. When General Shish Kay Bob was out with his conquests, they cubed the planet.”

“And how is that related to overwork?”

“The...the overwork was the problem in the first place! The over industrialized, over populated society needed more space, and the Boxers came up because they wanted to solve the problem.”

“It sounds to me like over breeding was the problem with the Pegs, not overwork. Of course, you could argue that their hard work enabled them to survive enough to over breed in the first place,” said Roy.

“Let’s just drop this conversation,” said the Jelly Blob, whose shaking had slowed to a stop.

“Yes. Um, shouldn’t we be landing sometime soon?”

“Yes, of course,” grumbled the pilot. “We’ve been orbiting the El Tuna Café for a while.”

Roy instinctively opened his mouth to laugh but shut it realizing that would only get the Jelly Blob angry again. He had been riled up by the pilot’s outburst and he was trying to calm himself down so he could focus on the task now at hand. He needed to get the moose tranquilizer somehow. He wondered to himself if it would be important for him to know how they calculated the position of a given location in

the El Tuna Café in the new cone shaped void, but dismissed the idea as a waste of time. There certainly wasn't any time to waste. Roy became angrier still when he thought that the pilot had wasted some of their precious searching time with his useless outburst. He felt almost as if the pilot would be to blame if Loothpit obliterated the Hobo Society, which was almost a certainty. He told himself he needed to push those morbid thoughts out of his mind and, of course, focus on the task at hand.

“Spacesuits are in the back,” grumbled the pilot, sliding out of his seat. “I can see that we’re not the first ones here.”

“Yes, and they’ve all had to be waiting around doing nothing because you were ranting,” said Roy bitterly.

“Just take a spacesuit,” said the Jelly Blob, tossing Roy one.

Roy looked at it. “And where are my horns supposed to go?”

“Put it on! You’ve already said there’s no time to waste.”

Roy didn’t comment. He put on the Space Monkey spacesuit, hoping his horns would harm anything. Fortunately the spacesuit was woven with premium Ba-ing-go fibers, so it was durable and flexible enough to handle the unexpected shape.

“Believe it or not, I found these at a scarab store,” said the pilot as he put his spacesuit on. To Roy it looked like an attempt to cheer things up. It didn’t have that effect on Roy.

“You bought vital life preserving equipment at a scarab store?” Roy asked quietly.

“You’ll have to speak up,” said the Jelly Blob. “Or talk through the radio. I can’t hear you.”

“Never mind,” said Roy, turning the spacesuit’s radio on. He would need it to communicate with the other searchers anyway. He pulled the space vacuum switch beside the door, and waited as the Poach-a-tron sucked the air out of the room into a pressurized container. The pilot hurried up with putting his spacesuit on.

Finally, the door dropped down to become a flight of steps. Roy noticed the ship’s strange position for the first time as he looked down and when the ship’s gravity simulation shut off.

Roy stepped out and the Jelly Blob followed. “People are coming over,” said the Jelly Blob, stretching an arm shaped blob from his spacesuit and pointing it. Roy looked to where he was pointing and saw several hobos flying down the tunnel in jet packs. The spacesuits were for species varying from Space Monkeys to PufferFish to some cockroaches and even a frog from Hahaiwontherafflesonenowyouhavetocallyourplanetthis.

“Please explain why you were orbiting around,” demanded a cockroach through the radio line.

“Shut up,” said the Jelly Blob.

Roy watched as the last of the twenty or so hobos flew up slightly upwards and slowed to a stop in front of them. “We shouldn’t be wasting our time on that. We’ve already wasted enough time.”

“Exactly,” said the pilot gratefully. He reached out another arm from his spacesuit and pointed around the cone. “We should be digging around here. First, of course, search the topmost layer. When we conclude there isn’t anything,

then we'll dig down about this much." The pilot reached out another pseudo-pod to indicate about a foot and a half. "Of course we'll search what we dig out. If at any time you find something that might be moose tranquilizer, call everyone else over and we'll help you dig further in that area. Does anything have digging equipment?"

"We were hoping to blast away rubble," said the frog.

"Blast away? Did Warren tell you this?" asked the Jelly Blob.

"He wasn't specific on the digging equipment. He just said to be over here."

"Great! We're terribly disorganized!" said the pilot, frustrated. "So what did Warren expect? Did he think we could dig with our hands if we hurried enough? There had better be someone coming with digging equipment!"

"Should I make a call?" asked the Space Monkey.

"That's not necessary," declared Roy. "We can't wait around anymore. I say we can blast away the rubble, provided that we know approximately how much we'll destroy with each blast. We can drill small holes into the rubble before blasting it away to make sure. Besides, if the blast is small enough, we shouldn't have to worry about destroying all of the moose tranquilizer. Only some."

"With the vortex's spin, it would be easy for the tranquilizer to get scattered around the ring," argued the pilot.

"Well, then what's the point of calling everyone over when you find some?"

"I don't know. Maybe there's more than you think. Well, we need to extract it efficiently, right?"

“It’s near absolute zero here,” said Roy. “I’m pretty sure it’s frozen. We can just dig it out.”

“What if it melts in your hands?”

“The spacesuits are better insulated than that, I’m sure,” said Roy.

“Fine. Let’s just say call everyone over if you find a stash bigger than what you can dig out.”

“Get to digging!” pleaded a PufferFish.

“What’s the hurry?” asked a Space Monkey sarcastically. “Oh, only our comrade’s lives and our livelihoods!”

“Get to work then!” barked the Jelly Blob.

“How are we supposed to get the top of the cone, anyway?” asked another PufferFish.

“Inspect the rest of the first layer of the cone first,” said the Jelly Blob. “We’ll organize some sort of method for getting up there.”

“Whatever,” said the PufferFish, walking away to a part of the cone as most of the others were.

“Hey! Are you and Roy too good for digging?” demanded a cockroach rudely.

“We’re going to dig too,” said Roy calmly. “Stop trying to pick a fight, all of you. There’s going to be plenty of fighting ahead of us.”

“I don’t have the kind of vision required to search,” said the Jelly Blob.

“And you’re a pilot?”

“You don’t need vision to be a pilot when you’re going faster than the speed of light,” said the Jelly Blob.

“You need vision to take off and land,” Roy pointed out. “Plus, if you’ve got the job of pilot, I’m pretty sure you need to have quick reflexes for combat and things.

“I have practice, and those last things are untrue. Weren’t you the one who said not to pick a fight? You go digging!”

“This is childish,” said Roy, turning away from the pilot. He scanned the void for a place that wasn’t being worked on, and made his way to a vacant area.

There was a flash only a few feet in front of Roy, who instinctively ducked down. He immediately suspected that something had gone wrong with one of the blasters they were trying to use for drilling, but those thoughts disappeared when he heard an emotionless “Get up” though the radio line. Roy recognized the tone of that voice. It was a Cube Person’s voice! Roy looked up to see a levitating Ba-ing-go box, inside of which was one of the many creatures that consisted of the Universe’s worst nightmare. A few more flashes appeared around Roy, which, mixed with the surprise and the downright horror of seeing a Cube Person during this vital search, made him dizzy and sick to his stomach.

“What the –” gurgled Roy’s pilot. He stopped, unable to express himself.

“They’re still watchin’ us!” exclaimed a PufferFish somewhere.

“Elvis, oh Elvis,” prayed a Space Monkey silently.

Roy gathered up his courage and stood up straight in front of the unexpected foe. He had talked to the Cube People before, plenty of times. Their presence never was pleasant, even when Roy was the one in power. They only cared for what could get their monolithic nation ahead of the

Universe. They had probably come to negotiate something, and the searchers here had little bargaining leverage. “What do you want?” Roy asked softly. He was afraid, but the Cube People wouldn’t kill justification. He wanted to show himself to still be a good leader.

“We are developing a new edition of the Gotithian race,” said a Cube Person through the radio line, most likely the Cube Person in front of Roy. “You will be useful.”

The majority of the search party was silent, but Roy could hear one or two quiet sighs of relief through the line. He wasn’t pleased with the news, but the Cube People’s demand was less than what it could be. If the Cube People wanted nothing but this at least the search party would be able to continue working, and Simon would be saved. Roy didn’t let himself get his hopes up, though, even as dreary as the situation already was. The Cube People took every opportunity they had; with the search party as helpless as they were, there was a good chance they would ask for more. Roy took a deep breath. “How exactly will you be testing me?”

“I won’t go into details now,” said the Cube Person. “I will just let you know that in the end you will be cubed, so no, there isn’t any hope of you returning. In addition to taking you for our studies I would like to take everything around here as well.”

“We have listened to your conversations here,” said a second Cube Person voice, barely distinguishable from the first. “We know you are vital to the survival of your organization and you are also defenseless.”

“What good could it possibly be for you to take the rest of us?” asked the Jelly Blob.

“Your society is very wealthy, and the tranquilizer the El Tuna Café contains is your last defense. Your society will pay our price for it, or perish.”

“You’re being ridiculous,” said the Jelly Blob, trying not to sound desperate. “Can’t you see that if Loothpit knows we haven’t got any defense he’ll attack us immediately? He might already be preparing to attack us now! If the society doesn’t survive we can’t pay you back.”

“If you don’t depend on us you won’t pay us back either,” retorted the second Cube Person.

“Well, why couldn’t you just attack us if we fail to pay?” asked the pilot, starting to quiver.

“For the same reason we do not use Loothpit’s strategy of attacking states in the Universe and forcing them to pay protection: public relations.”

“Public relations?” said the pilot. “How is blackmailing an organization of the Universe not bad public relations?”

“We are not blackmailing you. We are selling an important protection device that could benefit the entire Universe. That will make people fond of us,” said the first Cube Person.

“If you’re taking the El Tuna Café you’ll cri...anger the Universe,” said Roy.

“We are only taking the area around which lies your important commodity,” said the first Cube Person.

“There is no time to waste,” said the second Cube Person. “We must hurry to make the sale. Check for strays?”

“Deserters mean nothing to us,” said a third Cube Person. “The perimeters are set. I will initiate the inter-universal movement, unless we have further business here.”

Blockmailing

“We do not,” said the first Cube Person. “So initiate the transition.”

“I will,” replied the third Cube Person.

Roy became dizzy and sick to his stomach again. There was no more talking. He was now going to be whisked into the Dimension of Tuna, the universe he had once thought he controlled alongside the Cube People. He had goose bumps from the idea of him being used in all sorts of bizarre and twisted Cube Person experiments. Even the smaller idea of participating in a Cube Person controlled new “edition” of his species was enough to make his skin crawl. And worst of all was the idea that he if he survived the experiments he would be turned into a Cube Person and become a part of the monolith bent on the destruction of the Universe. He wouldn’t remember his old life, he wouldn’t have compassion for the Universe, and he probably wouldn’t have any emotions at all other than a desire to contribute to the Cube People’s machine.

A blinding light surrounded him.

The Attack

“They’re just waiting around outside?” asked Toby to the Space Monkey soldier in front of him who had been kind enough to speak in English.

“No, the mimes have built up some pretty good defenses they’re still trying to get through. Fortunately, the mimes can build defenses faster than the moose-that-look-like-turtles can break through them, but they can’t keep this up forever. They’re working in shifts, so they’ll last a while, but still, they can’t last forever. Loothpit’s army is huge! With luck, it’ll buy us enough time for Roy to come back with the moose tranquilizer. If that doesn’t happen soon, though, we’re going to have to go out there ourselves and try to blast them.”

“What exactly are moose-that-look-like-turtles?” asked Toby.

“They’re monstrous things. They somehow produce their own tar that’s made of the same stuff that’s the Dimension of Stupidity’s purple gas. They can fly faster than light as a result. The tar makes their shells almost unbreakable. They’re fearsome because of their retractable claws and antlers. They look a lot like turtles, but they resemble moose too much. Hence their name.”

“Why would a moose have retractable claws?”

“I dunno. They’re not entirely moose and turtle. They’re also close relatives to the mosquito.”

“That doesn’t explain anything at all,” said Toby.

The soldier shrugged, and put his tiny golden cup next to the water cooler to fill it again. “Well, I guess it doesn’t. You know, you don’t seem so worried about the attack. Why’s that?”

Toby shook his head. “Maybe it’s because I can’t believe what’s going on. You don’t seem too afraid either.”

The soldier drank his water in one gulp. He wiped his mouth, satisfied. “Pretty much the same here. In fact, that’s how I cope. I didn’t always have the easy life here at the Hobo Society, you know. I’ve had some frightful encounters with those Margusean cockroaches. They’re tough fighters, you know. They might be because many of them had families in Zebus at the time Roy blew it up, and they wanted to throw their weight around after his fall. I typically try to imagine myself elsewhere, or just pretend to be calm; both help calm me down in the end and I can focus. But I have to admit that I was very scared just a little while ago. I saw the army. Not only is it enormous, but Loothpit’s apparently trained them to go into formation. They were systematically taking down the mime defenses. I was most afraid of all, though, when I saw big metal gleaming things on their shells. I thought that Loothpit had finally trained them to use firearms. My fear went over when I realized if they really were firearms they would be using them to blast through the defenses. Now I think that they’re wearing radiators.”

“Radiators?” asked Toby.

“I don’t have the slightest idea why,” admitted the soldier.

Toby grabbed himself a golden cup from the upside down stack and took a drink for himself. “Why is it so important that they’re thwarted with moose tranquilizer?”

“They’ve got great reflexes, and when you try to shoot ‘em they’ll normally go into their shells. Hitting the shells with moose tranquilizer’s the only sure way to get them, because that triggers an allergic reaction that will either knock them out or kill them entirely.”

“Why can’t you walk up and shoot into their shells when they’re hiding in them?” suggested Toby.

“They might stretch their legs out and pounced on you if you try that. They’re that good.”

“Is it possible to shoot at them constantly and to keep them in their shells?”

“Yes, if we’re really desperate we might try that. Until the mimes get tired, though, using them is the best way.”

“When will the mimes get tired?”

“Hopefully after Roy comes back,” said the soldier simply.

“What’ll happen then?”

“We’ll get the moose tranquilizer, and we’ll be able to take out those radiator wearing monsters,” said the soldier confidently.

“How are we supposed to get it if the moose-that-look-like-turtles are blocking the way?”

The soldier’s face turned pale. “I hadn’t thought of that. Roy’s going to be way outnumbered! How’s he supposed to fight that big of an army?”

“Why can’t the mimes just make some moose tranquilizer?” asked Toby.

“They don’t know how to, or maybe they don’t have any in their stash of stuff, or something. I don’t understand mimes.” The soldier sat down, looking anxious. “The moose tranquilizer delivery thing is really an issue. Maybe we can

The Attack

intentionally force open our defenses so they're all distracted with attacking us, and then Roy can get them from the rear. Of course we'd have to contact Roy somehow and tell him to tell us he's coming before he actually comes into sight, otherwise the whole thing will fail. I really hope the search party has PickleNet access somehow. But why would they? They're probably all searching furiously for the moose tranquilizer right now. There's no way they could be contacted!" The soldier began tapping his foot nervously. He forced himself to stop, took a deep breath, and straightened himself and his face.

"Why can't we use the PickleNet to get out of here through the Pickle Universe?" asked Toby, now worried because of the soldier's brief anxiety. He attempted to do what the soldier had done.

The soldier kept his face straight. He probably still hadn't overcome his fear, and was still trying to. "Well," he said, staring towards a wall. "I wish it were that simple, but –" the soldier stopped abruptly, and swallowed. He said in a more emotionless voice, "The PickleNet and the Pickle Universe are not exactly the same. The Pickle People want to make sure nothing gets through the PickleNet but electrical information to minimize interference and such, and then there's pickle juice that's connected with the regular Pickle Universe."

"Why doesn't the Hobo Society have any pickle jars or anything to get out of here with?" Toby asked. He had given up on the soldier's method.

The soldier relaxed his face and turned to Toby. "I don't have the answer to that one. Maybe the society was

afraid someone might attack them through the Pickle Universe connection.”

“But didn’t the society know they were going to be attacked by the moose-that-look-like-turtles?” Toby asked softly. “Why couldn’t they get an emergency connection?”

The soldier shook his head. “I don’t have the answer to that either. It really seems like Warren doomed us all by not making the decision, doesn’t it? Maybe someone destroyed the connection at the last minute and Warren didn’t want anybody to know about it, because he didn’t want to cause more panic. We had been planning to have Simon create moose tranquilizer, you know, since Simon was close to Mr. Parrot and although he had never actually worked with him on the moose tranquilizer – the original project was ordered by Roy after Simon had already gone to exile – he had experience with Mr. Parrot’s methods and was a good scientist himself, having worked with Mr. Parrot to create an immortality elixir. He was making good progress, but somebody tried to kill Simon and he’s been in pretty bad shape ever since. We all thought it was the cockroach that had joined the society shortly before, but maybe it was someone else.”

“If only we knew where Mr. Parrot was,” Toby wished.

“What exactly happened? I heard you and Billy were with him, and he fled.”

“I have no idea what happened,” said Toby. “Billy told me something about shiny new microwaves and pet kidneys, but that’s all I remember.”

“That’s helpful,” said the soldier sarcastically. “I’m really wondering if the person who tried to kill Simon

actually is still here. All the signs pointed to that new cockroach John. I mean, he had held up against the Guinea Pigs during the siege, he said Loothpit had control of the frozen army, and he volunteered to go look for moose blood to participate in Simon's experiments, something that could easily have been his getaway excuse after killing Simon. Plus, there was no one else around when Simon entered his office. Not even Warren was in his office. Oh yeah, and John had said that cockroaches are good at getting through tight little areas like the circuitry of some buildings. The poisonous gas that almost killed Simon came in through the ventilation system. It all made so much sense. But what if the would-be murderer isn't John, is still here, and sabotaged our attempts of escaping through the Pickle Universe?"

"Sounds to me like Warren could be the culprit," said Toby softly.

The soldier scratched his forehead as if deciding whether or not to take Toby's remark seriously. "Why in the world would Warren try to destroy the society he created?" he finally asked.

"I don't know," said Toby. "I just was making an observation. You have to admit that it does sound like Warren could have done it. I mean, he wasn't in his office, and someone would have to be around the ventilation area to attack Simon with poisonous gas, he could have brought in John because he was suspicious so as to cover himself up, and if it's true that the Hobo Society did have a connection to the regular Pickle Universe but it was destroyed at the last minute, Warren has to be hiding it, which is suspicious."

"It sounds possible," said the soldier, "But it isn't likely that Warren would try to destroy what he had created,

or that he would have any friendly relations with Loothpit at all, or that he would put himself into the line of fire he was creating.”

“We could investigate it,” suggested Toby. “We need to find out how the ventilation system works, and if possible ask anyone if Warren was in the same room as the controls are at so and so time, and if there would be any motive Warren has....”

“There’s no time for that and it would be futile anyway,” snapped the soldier. “It sounds too much like a silly fantasy to me.”

“Does Warren have any relation to Loothpit?” Toby inquired.

“Well, uh, sure, Loothpit was a supporter of the society, but that doesn’t explain anything at all!”

“If Loothpit’s a member of the society, why would he want to attack?”

“He wanted to take revenge on Roy and Simon. Particularly Roy, because he organized the project, including Mr. Parrot’s development of moose tranquilizer, that ended in Loothpit being locked up in the El Tuna Café for the majority of Roy’s short reign. He’s supposed to be the one who smashed the asteroid the El Tuna Café was orbiting in order to steal Roy and Simon, but he didn’t take revenge immediately. WonderClaus, who was his ally at the time, wanted to use Roy and Simon against his rebelling theology class – or at least that was his story – and Loothpit allowed him to on the condition that he return the two brothers after he had made his point. WonderClaus cleverly let them slip past security and they came to this society. Loothpit was suspicious, and became even more suspicious when Warren

refused to let him into the society for ‘security reasons’. Of course Warren had barred all Class B members to make it less suspicious, but Loothpit’s smarter than that. After Simon was almost murdered the society was in despair. It wouldn’t be able to handle an attack from Loothpit and an attack from the Guinea Pigs, so they gratefully accepted the offer from WonderClaus to either help form some sort of alliance or have the Presleytarians help knock out the Guinea Pig threat depending on how the negotiations at the Honky Donkey went. The negotiations went well, and because the meeting was in a public area people found out they were planning to use the alliance to beef up moose tranquilizer production. That was when it was certain Loothpit would come, because mass production of moose tranquilizer could easily have put him in his place.”

“Sounds complicated,” Toby mumbled.

“And none of it shows any indication that Warren and Loothpit are collaborating. The idea’s stupid,” said the soldier.

“I guess your right. Unfortunately we still don’t understand why there isn’t any emergency Pickle Universe escape route.”

“Or why they’re wearing radiators,” added the soldier jokingly.

“That’s true. We also don’t have any idea of how the little search party of Roy’s could take down the huge army you’re talking about.”

“I should go tell them my PickleNet idea,” said the soldier, standing up. “There’s got to be at least one ship of theirs that has a PickleNet connection to us, and although it’s almost certain they can’t be contacted while they’re

searching, we should be able to contact them when they're coming back."

"You go tell them, then. It's more productive than talking to me," said Toby.

"Yes," said the soldier, nodding. He turned and headed out of the small break room.

Now alone, Toby was left with only his thoughts. He had never found that to be a good thing. It was especially true now, since he had the worry of the impending attack. With the soldier he was more confident, but he still wasn't sure how they could possibly survive the attack for long. Alone those facts seemed real, though. Despite all of it he still felt no regret for coming with Billy to see the Universe. Sure, it had been one thing after another, but he had been able to see what was real. Toby smiled to himself weakly, thinking that that must be how the soldier was able to cope.

The soldier came back into the room.

"Back already?" asked Toby. Although the soldier was a Space Monkey Toby could detect something wasn't good.

"I just talked to another soldier. It turns out we've already tried contacting them."

"What happened?" asked Toby, getting more worried.

"We were able to contact them," said the soldier. "But we got a message from the Cube People."

"The Cube People?" asked Toby.

"It just happened. The Cube People have the moose tranquilizer and they want us to pay several billion scarabs for it. They ignored us when we said we couldn't give them the money because of Loothpit."

"That's ridiculous!" said Toby. His thoughts went immediately to where he might be able to hide.

The Attack

“I know. I’d think the Cube People would be more rational than that. Warren’s just contacted the Guinea Pigs and WonderClaus.”

“They’ll pay it for us?” Toby asked anxiously.

“The only thing the stupid Guinea Pig leader said was that the Cube People wouldn’t accept personal checks,” said the soldier angrily. “He’s actually trying to joke at a time like this! You’d think he’d at least be worried about Loothpit storming around Diarama.”

“What about WonderClaus?” asked Toby.

“He doesn’t have that kind of money,” said the soldier simply.

Toby threw up his arms in frustration. “But isn’t the society rich? Why can’t he do it now and let us pay him back?”

“No, he really doesn’t have billions of scarabs to spare,” said the soldier. “The only way he could get that much money is if he took it from his followers.”

“Why doesn’t he do that?”

“He said it himself: his followers don’t want to keep shelling out money for these little things anymore. They want important actions.”

“What could be more important than saving an ally?” asked Toby.

“Attacking the Cube People,” said the soldier.

Scarabs?

“All my boy was trying to do was study and that thug of yours comes in and locks him up in a closet!” Chuck’s mother said angrily to Bob. Chuck was standing in between his mother and his father with a pitifully fake look of sadness on his face.

“Is that true, son?” asked Bob to Billy.

“No,” said Billy.

“I don’t see what the problem is,” said Bob, sitting down in front of the radio.

“He’s lying!” exclaimed Chuck’s father.

“Shut up,” said Bob, turning on the radio.

“What did you say?” demanded Chuck’s father, grabbing Bob’s collar. Billy wanted to claw the man’s face out.

“WonderClaus is on the radio,” said Bob nonchalantly.

“Oh, well. That doesn’t mean anything!”

“Shut up,” Bob repeated, turning up the radio. “This is important.”

“I don’t mean just True Presleytarians this time,” said WonderClaus in a speech-like voice. “I mean Pious Presleytarians too, and any other Presleytarian sects as well. Although we may have our differences, how can we be enemies if we have the same values? We must realize the Cube People are our true enemies. Jobs disappear to them, and if it hadn’t been for them I can assure you, the Universe would not have fallen into the state it’s in. The Cube People have only one goal: to conquer the Universe. They don’t even stop to reflect why they want to do it, they just have a

hate for all of us wired into their brains. Their most common attack is disguised as peaceful trading, but it is in fact their means of acquiring enough resources to build the arsenal needed to subjugate us. Believe what you want to about Roy's leadership skills, but you cannot deny the fact that they hastened his downfall, maybe I could even say they were the cause, since it arguably wouldn't have happened without them. They control the tunamatic highways that allow businesses to connect, and we frequently forget that they blocked off the Dimension of Stupidity to choke off Roy. What's keeping them from doing the same now? Their most recent attack has been on the El Tuna Café itself. I've received news from the True Presleytarians' newest allies that they've stolen the anti-Cube Person arsenal Roy had kept in the El Tuna Café, most obviously to hasten the weaponry buildup. Why, though, are they doing it just now, and not before? To me, it sounds like they want to launch an attack on us now. They could smash the El Tuna Café itself if they wanted to and permanently disable vital communications systems, they could cut off the tunamatic highways and the Dimension of Stupidity to isolate us from one another, and then they could use their hoards of weapons to destroy us one by one. Presleytarians, I believe that we all have an obligation not to just defend ourselves but to defend one another, for we are all part of The King's Universe. If the Cube People want to destroy The King's Universe, they are bringing a direct attack on The King himself. What's holding us back, then?"

"Yeah!" said Chuck's father proudly. "We need to defend what's right! We need to attack the Cube People!"

“Why don’t you go and join the fight, then?” asked Bob.

“We need to attack the Cube People,” Chuck’s father repeated, then fell silent.

“The Dimension of Tuna is nothing,” continued WonderClaus. “They have nothing but Ba-ing-go, Boomwater, and globs of tunamatic material floating around. Everything else they have because of us. We have more resources than they do. If we were to just muster some of them together we could use them to crush that hated enemy. Diplomatic negotiations won’t work, for no matter what we do they will still have the same mission wired into their minds. Cutting off their supplies won’t work, for they would just attack us then.” WonderClaus’s voice grew weaker. “The only way to rid ourselves of them is to attack them. We have been afraid for too long. There’s no other explanation for it. We’ve been afraid of attacking them, but we can’t hide forever. The more we wait the stronger they get, and one day they’ll use their strength against us on our front. Yes, yes, I know what many of you are thinking. All but the most perverted of Presleytarians would like nothing more than peaceful cooperation, but we shouldn’t delay what we can’t avoid. Many non believers say Presleytarianism has no place in society. Well, I know they’re wrong. Presleytarianism brings people together in ways never seen before in the Universe. So Presleytarians, please, I beg you to get over your differences and overcome your fears, and band together.”

“This is ridiculous,” said Bob angrily. “There’s no way we can take down the Cube People in such a short notice, especially when we just announced such plans!”

“Sounds like someone’s afraid of a little fight,” said Chuck’s father arrogantly.

“It wouldn’t be a ‘little fight’,” said Bob, angrier. “A war with the Cube People could be the most catastrophic event in the Universe’s history.”

“We beat them before,” retorted Chuck’s father.

“Mr. Parrot was still working for the Cube People then,” said Bob. “He caused some major bottlenecks in the Cube People’s systems, and the only influence the Cube People had in the Universe at the time was through the Gotithians Mr. Parrot had made especially for them. All it took was the ousting of those Gotithians, and the Universe was autonomous. If it hadn’t been for Mr. Parrot, the Cube People would have taken the Universe back immediately.”

“You shouldn’t be afraid of a little fight,” repeated Chuck’s father.

“Oh please. You aren’t going to do anything about it, and you’re in a hideaway anyway, so nothing but good could come of it for you.”

“Oh sure, like life’s a real Earthland for me,” said Chuck’s father.

Chuck’s mother sighed dramatically. “If only you were a Presleytarian, Bob. Then you’d understand.”

“Let’s listen to the radio again,” said Bob, turning up the volume even more.

“...the Squeenborg was able to pass through the strong defenses of the El Tuna Café, which was the one hole in Simon’s plan that ended up bringing him down. The barricade between the Dimension of Nothing and the Universe was larger, but it’s still a scientifically made barrier of the Cube People’s. The Presleyship is larger than the

Squeenburg, even though it remains unfinished. With luck that ship could pry open the Dimension of Tuna just long enough to get our forces in. This means that there's only one chance we have at it, and this means that once we're in there's no turning back. Once again, I beg my fellow Presleytarians to consider joining. It's not a far-fetched cause. We already have the support of many True Presleytarians and some of our secular allies, such as the Guinea Pigs. But we have to attack them in a wave, not as drops that can be consumed by the Cube People. One large force can do much more than many smaller forces. We must band together. There isn't much time.”

The radio went silent. WonderClaus was finished, and whatever anchormen were on that particular channel must have been too stunned to make some sort of stupid remark. Billy decided it was okay to flip the radio off.

“I agree with Bob,” he said. “It isn’t going to happen. We’re all still bickering too much amongst each other to unite against the Cube People, and even if we did there’s almost no chance of actually incapacitating the Cube People. Everything on that planet is tightly packed and made with the highest quality Ba-ing-go.”

“Ba-ing-go can be destroyed, you stupid little kid,” growled Chuck’s father.

“Roy sent a huge glob of Boomwater at the Cube People and it exploded harmlessly against the planet,” said Billy. “We would be attacking them with less than Boomwater.”

“We can still do it if we try and we’re not pussies about it,” said Chuck’s father patriotically. He farted a little.

“Billy’s only being realistic,” said Bob. “We really couldn’t destroy them with an armada unless the armada was impossibly large.”

“I just wonder why WonderClaus wants to bring together any army all of the sudden,” mused Billy.

“You idiot!” exclaimed Chuck. “WonderClaus just said it! The Cube People are going to attack us soon.”

“My brother is too smart to act so rashly,” said Bob, quite annoyed.

“No...no he’s not....” said the mother.

“Are you saying WonderClaus is stupid?” asked Billy.

“Shut up, thug,” the mother said.

“Whatever,” said Billy.

“I don’t get why Loothpit was an ally to WonderClaus, though,” said Chuck.

“Chuck! Watch your mouth!” exclaimed his mother.

“WonderClaus is a brilliant man,” said his father.

“That has nothing to do with what he said,” said Billy. “It does raise an interesting point, though. Loothpit was paying the Cube People instead of WonderClaus. He never made the True Presleytarians pay protection money.”

“He wanted to get on WonderClaus’s good side so that he could get Roy and Simon! Duh!” exclaimed Chuck’s father.

“He wouldn’t have had to get on WonderClaus’s good side if he wasn’t WonderClaus’s ally. Billy’s right,” said Bob. “I’ve always wondered why Loothpit was working with the True Presleytarians. I always assumed that it had something to do with influencing the Universe, I guess.”

“Maybe Loothpit wanted to make WonderClaus’s decisions dependant on his actions in the long run so he

could control WonderClaus. He had no other use for the protection money, so if he was to fund the True Presleytarians WonderClaus would widen his budget. Loothpit could then threaten to cut funding once the plans cemented so he could have a bargaining leverage,” suggested Billy.

“While that may be true, it doesn’t explain what Loothpit wanted,” said Bob. “Why did Loothpit give WonderClaus all of his scarabs?”

Billy’s eyes widened at the question. “What if he didn’t?”

“What do you mean?”

Billy hesitated for a moment. “What if Loothpit disguised the frozen cockroach army in the El Tuna Café as scarabs and spent them?”

“Why would he need to do that? He was plenty of money,” said Bob.

“Why does he even bother to acquire money in the first place?” asked Billy rhetorically. “He could have figured people can hardly tell the difference between scarabs and cockroaches anyway, so he could counterfeit by using the army. It’s a possibility.”

“But that’s just trivia,” said Bob. “Isn’t it?”

“Not quite,” said Billy, standing up in excitement. “What if Loothpit gave the frozen cockroach army of scarabs to the Cube People?”

“So you’re saying the frozen cockroach army could be on the Cube Planet?”

“Exactly,” said Billy excitedly.

“I don’t think so,” said Bob. “The Cube People are too smart to fall for that.”

“The scarab designs from each faction are always changing,” said Billy. “Maybe the accountants dismissed it as a change and put it into the Cube People’s coffers without further questioning.”

“But the Cube People would look through the list of every single scarab design in circulation if they saw something strange,” said Bob.

“What if they thought it was something new? What if Loothpit had put some more of the cockroaches into circulation in the Universe, so they were fooled into thinking that it was currency, or at least figured they could spend the scarabs?”

“They’re too smart for that,” said Bob.

“It’s possible,” said Billy, shrugging.

“Well, I don’t know anything about the Cube People, so perhaps it is. They might take the payments and put them in their coffers anyway.”

“Speaking of which, why don’t the Cube People counterfeit scarabs if their technology’s so advanced and they want to get money so much?” asked Billy.

“Maybe they do that and we don’t know it,” said Bob.

“You should tell the leaders about the scarab idea,” said Chuck’s father. “We all need to do whatever we can to help the Presleytarians.”

“What do you plan to do?” asked Bob irritably.

Chuck’s father grabbed his huge pot belly. “I’m way too out of shape to do anything.”

“Even if you were fighting the Cube People it would be a sedentary job,” said Bob.

“Now you’re just getting ridiculous,” argued Chuck’s mother.

“Do you even know what sedentary means?” asked Billy.

“Don’t be so rude, young man!” Chuck’s mother exclaimed, crossing her arms.

“I’ll take that as a ‘no’,” said Billy, turning to his father again. “Well, it does sound like a good idea, doesn’t it? Maybe we should give it a shot with the leaders.”

“What could the leaders do about it? They’d just reveal the hideaway’s location if they did anything.”

“They could suggest it to WonderClaus,” said Billy.

“WonderClaus doesn’t know about the hideaway.”

“Well, he’s probably not going to reveal its existence,” said Billy. “It sounds like a good idea.”

“I’m not going to bother,” said Bob. “Sorry, son, but even if we did convince the leaders, and even if they did convince WonderClaus, there’s no chance of us somehow awakening the cockroaches and making them attack the Cube People from the inside.”

“I guess you’re right,” said Billy.

“Oh, you people are pathetic!” exclaimed Chuck’s father, getting up from his armchair. “I’m going to tell the leaders and do my part for the Universe!”

“I’m too!” said Chuck confidently.

“Bless you, son, you would have lived such a great pre-life!” said Chuck’s mother through tears. “I’m going to!”

“I’d like to hear about this,” said Billy laughingly. Fortunately the family took the remark as encouragement.

“If you don’t have the courage to come up, we’ll tell you when we get back,” said Chuck arrogantly. “Come on! We’re going to save the Universe!”

PiBotQ64

There were a lot of strange creatures out there; as ruler of the Universe Roy had seen many of them. Not a single one Roy had seen could ever match the grotesqueness of the Cube People. The idea of squeezing an entire species into cubes was horrible enough, but seeing them in person was almost unbearable. When Roy had ruled one of the most pressing political topics that was always on the public's mind was the Universe's relations with the Cube People – the public wanted them dead but if Roy wasn't diplomatic with them he could risk war, and the public was addicted to their high quality products anyway – so Roy had to meet with them often. The visits had never been pleasant, but now the idea of Roy becoming one of them in a twisted new way brought back the terrible ideas behind the Cube People to life again. Roy felt sick looking at the Cube People around him, and focused instead on the waiting room itself, the furniture in it, and the fact that it was located on one of the Cube Planet's many moons instead of the Cube Planet itself because it contained round objects.

Roy remembered the stories his parents told him when he was a young kid involving the Cube People. Several of them were ghost stories, but most were serious warnings and teachings about the Universe's worst enemy. Nevertheless, they had all been pure entertainment to Roy when he was young. His favorite story had been of how, after Mr. Parrot had ousted the Cube People, the liberated Universe became obsessed with round objects. Roy even faintly remembered his parents had had one of those ridiculously round

spaceships before it broke down when Roy was about three hundred thousand years old. As it had turned out, the Universe hadn't been too good at developing its own products at first.

It all changed, though, when relations between the Cube People and the Universe opened up again. It infuriated people who had been hoping to close trade long enough to starve out the Cube People, who were incapable of growing their own food in the Dimension of Tuna, but Mr. Parrot had made the decision on the grounds that the Cube People would attack the Universe again if they were desperate enough. The decision almost had cost Mr. Parrot the Universe, but it probably had saved the Universe from a cataclysmic attack from the Cube People. Roy had learned for himself how dangerous it would be to break a war out with the Cube People.

Roy remembered his first job as an accountant for a rounding company. The Cube People hadn't created any round products since before they controlled the Universe, and the sudden trade openings meant they needed to develop rounder and more people friendly products quickly. By the time Roy had his job rounding companies were already dying out, as the Cube People were capable of creating their own round, people friendly products, and many rounding companies had turned more into two way import-export businesses. On the job Roy discovered the trade openings had caused a sudden rise in the price of food, as the Cube People wanted to restock their supplies of it. People were mainly using the price rise as yet another way to complain about how the Cube People were ruining their lives, but for Roy it was a business opportunity. When Roy discovered

some of the tunamatic material floating around in the Dimension of Tuna was almost edible, he quit his accounting job and started the El Tuna Café. People flocked to the restaurant, wanting to get a taste of this ‘foreign food’, and although the tunamatic material sometimes had the nasty habit of destroying customers’ appendixes, with the help of added addictive substances Roy had a very loyal customer base.

As Roy reflected, he realized his entire life had been around the Cube People in some way. It was depressing to think it would end by his becoming one. Roy stretched his short legs across the floor and leaned back. He would sleep his way out of such thoughts if he was lucky.

“We understand you don’t like the idea of becoming a Cube Person,” said a Cube Person next to Roy. The standard emotionless tone of voice gave Roy goose bumps. “We want an explanation for why.”

“Are you actually demanding me to justify my unhappiness?” asked Roy listlessly.

“Yes,” said the Cube Person.

“There’s nothing worse you could possibly do to me than make me one of you,” said Roy.

“Explain why,” said the Cube Person.

“I don’t want to,” said Roy.

“You are afraid that you’ll be brainwashed if you do.”

“Exactly,” said Roy.

“There’s nothing wrong with being brainwashed,” said the Cube Person. “It will help you stay happy until you become a Cube Person.”

“It’s fake happiness,” said Roy.

“Why do you choose to be sad?”

“Because...why don’t we all just take drugs if we want to be happy?” asked Roy rhetorically.

“Oh, I see,” said the Cube Person. “You are afraid that, while you will be happy, you will be dissatisfied.”

“No,” argued Roy stubbornly.

“It has to be the reason,” continued the Cube Person. “People never choose something unless they see it will give them the most happiness. For example, you could experience thrills from taking drugs, but you would not be satisfied with your life, so you did not become a drug addict.”

“That’s different,” said Roy.

“How is it?”

“I could choose to hurt myself.”

“If you chose to hurt yourself to prove me wrong, you would be trying to acquire the satisfaction of proving me wrong. No one ever chooses what would not make them happy in some way.”

“That’s true,” said Roy, seeing that this Cube Person, like WonderClaus, had tricked him into the conversation he had been avoiding. “But I cannot derive true happiness from brainwashing.”

“Why not? We have studied the Gotithian mind very well, Roy, because of Upton Peron.”

“Who?” asked Roy.

“You will find that we know much of what the Universe has chosen to forget,” said the Cube Person, hinting pride in his voice. “That name is the name of what the Universe knows as ‘Mr. Parrot’.”

“Is it?” asked Roy.

“You are afraid of becoming a Cube Person because you are afraid of living a lie,” said the Cube Person. “But you

have to accept that the Universe itself is living a lie. You did not fully accept the fact that every decision is made purely on the wish for happiness until I talked to you. While the Cube People may brainwash to improve the quality of life of its citizens, you must admit the people of the Universe deceive themselves to improve the quality of their own lives.”

“That’s true,” said Roy.

“I will not needlessly ask you questions that I know the answer to, so I will just tell you the answer to further advance to my point. You also are aware people in the Universe are happier in more civilized times than they were in barbaric times, so of course you have to say that the advancing of society is good. Society cannot advance without the truth, of course; in fact, it cannot exist at all without the truth...survival of an intelligent being cannot exist without some truth, and so the truth has to be the ultimate source of happiness. Why should you deceive yourself if deception really prevents you from being happy?”

“But you just said it yourself: the Cube People are living a lie.”

“We are making small sacrifices to advance to the larger truth,” said the Cube Person with unmistakable patriotism. “It is like investing money. It has paid off more than what it has cost us in terms of truth. We live a lie that gives us unbreakable faith in our nation and unwavering loyalty, as well as unstoppable determination and unquestionably efficient minds. We are focused only on one task.”

“To subjugate the Universe,” Roy said wearily.

“No, to advance the truth,” said the Cube Person.

“Why are we, er, why are you so bent on conquering us, then?”

“Yes, it is true that we want to subjugate the Universe,” admitted the Cube Person. “But that was something installed into us by the original Boxers. The mission does, however, instill a sense of national pride and duty into us, though, which is perhaps why we have been slower with the process than we could be. In the meantime we are still trying to fulfill our true duty. What do you know about the Dimension of Nothing?”

“Are you studying it?” asked Roy.

“We have been in it,” said the Cube Person proudly.

“I....I still hate you,” said Roy calmly.

“That is okay,” said the Cube Person. “You will hate us more as we perform the experiments. Be assured that in the end you will be happy.”

“I’ll be trapped in a soulless world of single minded work,” said Roy.

“How are we soulless or single minded?” asked the Cube Person. “Is not everything soulless and single minded when you remove the sentimental values?”

“When you look at everything like that, yes,” said Roy. “But I don’t want to live like that!”

“You want to live a lie?”

“I don’t want to be a part of a machine,” said Roy. “I want individuality.”

“Everyone has individuality,” said the Cube Person. “If we are not satisfied with our individuality we will work harder to produce something of notable value. Everyone has a good time working.”

“But that’s the thing! I’ve visited the Cube Planet before, as you probably know, and I’ve seen the life the Cube People lead! They sleep stacked up on one another in warehouses, they eat one meal on an assembly line in the morning, and the rest of their time is nothing but work!”

“We take pride in our work,” said the Cube Person. “Unlike you weak minded people of the Universe, we enjoy work so much there’s no need for recreation. Recreation is unnecessary and unproductive, it’s a lie. We don’t want to live a lie.”

“But there’s more to life than work!” protested Roy.

“According to your values, yes,” said the Cube Person. “A lowly termite would disagree, saying if it could speak that there is nothing but work, while a pet would say if it could speak that there is no such thing as work. Everything is according to perspective. It is never written how exactly you should live life, otherwise, of course, we would feel like we were living as part of a machine just the same way as you are afraid you will be living as part of a machine, for everything will have rules and limits, and there would be no creativity save for what you could fit into your limited lifestyle. We have chosen this lifestyle of no choices. You people in the Universe have not chosen anything. You have no purpose but to live out your lives on thrills cheaper than the acquisition of knowledge. You are just as much of machines as we are.”

“I’m not going to fight you,” said Roy.

“I would think not,” said the Cube Person. “Would you like to meet the Gotithian, PiBotQ64, now?”

Roy felt nauseated. “No, I don’t. I really don’t want to.”

“You’re going to have to,” said the Cube Person, hovering on its probe out of its seat.

“How are you going to force me?” demanded Roy, looking sternly at the Cube Person’s flat front side. “Are you going to blast me like you blasted the others? Well, then I guess you’d be out of luck with your experiments!”

“I can stun you and pull you there,” said the Cube Person emotionlessly. “It will be very painful for you to defy us, not to mention meaningless. I suggest you cooperate.”

“Then stun me,” said Roy defiantly. “I want to do something with no meaning!”

“Are you sure about this?” asked the Cube Person.

A small stream of electricity left the front of the Cube Person’s probe and surged through Roy’s body for a split second. Roy head pounded, his hands were jittering uncontrollably, and he felt burns all over his body. Tears were coming down Roy’s cheeks partially from the pain, and partially from defeat. “I’ll go with you,” he said.

“Right this way,” said the Cube Person, turning himself around and hovering out of the waiting room. Roy followed with some difficulty.

The two of them entered an oval room with rectangular steel double doors line along the flat sides of the oval. Like every room, the ceiling, wall, and floor were different shades of beige. The Cube Person’s probe made a little beeping sound.

A double door opened. Out came what was impossibly more grotesque than the average Cube Person: a Gotithian Cube Person. It was approximately the same size and, other than the stubby horns sticking out of the top of its head, the same shape as the other Gotithians, but it had Gotithian hair

and skin with melanin rather than the average Cube Person's bald and beige skin. Most different of all, though, was that where an emotionless face would have normally been on the average Cube Person was a face that clearly showed discontentment and despair. Roy felt some of his stomach acid rise up into his throat at the sight of the experiment PiBotQ64.

"I've been waiting for you," PiBotQ64 said wearily.

"He has no other job than to research and work on an improvement of himself," said the Cube Person beside Roy. "There's been little for him to do for a while, which is hopefully why he's so unhappy. Now that you're here, though, he can work on you to research further improvements. I've got duties of my own now, so I'll leave." The Cube Person turned away from Roy and left the room through another double door. Although Roy hated every Cube Person and felt sympathy for his fellow Gotithian, he somehow dreaded being alone with the Gotithian Cube Person.

"They're delusional," said PiBotQ64, coming closer to Roy and lowering slightly so that the two Gotithians were at the same eye level. "They're always watching me through cameras, so I'd expect them to understand me better. I hate that you're in here to."

Roy struggled to find words. His eyes watered up again. "I don't know what to say," he said finally.

"Ever since I was created I've been suffering," said the cubed shaped Gotithian. "They should have been more responsible and made it impossible to feel the way I do. I'll put effort to prevent you from feeling what I feel."

"What do you feel?" asked Roy, horrified.

“Despair, loneliness, depression, anxiety, excessiveness from work. I’ve pleaded the neurosurgeons to alter my mind, but for some sadistic reason they didn’t do it.”

“That’s your only way out,” observed Roy solemnly.

“It’s the only way out for you too,” said PiBotQ64. “Suicide is impossible, as I found out. The Cube People have nearly perfect medical technology. It’s good to have someone to talk to about....anything. I’ll report it under ‘Gotithian socialization and gregarious behavior’ for my supervisors.”

“Sure,” said Roy, swallowing hard. “What do you want to talk about?”

“What’s it like out in the Universe?”

“It’s not pleasant now,” said Roy. “Gotithians are being hunted down and are practically extinct.”

“I wish I was never created,” PiBotQ64 said lugubriously. “And to think, this is all your fault. If you were still in power the Gotithians would still be around, and if the Gotithians would still be around there would have never been a need for me to be created.”

“You have nothing to live for, then, like I don’t either now,” said Roy.

“You have more chance at happiness than I do,” said PiBotQ64 coldly. “Once I’m done with my experiments you’ll be cubed, and if you survive you’ll be in great shape; you’ll have a sense of national pride, and you’ll feel duty bound to work, and you’ll feel happy. Unless the neurosurgeons do anything about me or I’m killed I’ll have practically forever to be miserable.”

“I can’t do anything about that,” said Roy, taking a deep breath.

“I’ve been thinking about escaping, though,” said PiBotQ64 with conviction. “I’ve been thinking that if I don’t have anything to live for, I might as well try to get out or at least try to destroy the beasts that created me. Hey, even if I fail, at least the Cube People will know they have to change my current situation, right? They’d either have to satisfy me or put me down. Tell me, Roy: are there Cube People in Willy Lemoniod’s Afterlife?”

“I don’t know,” said Roy, depressed but mildly excited at PiBotQ64’s ambitions.

“Do you want to find out?” asked the Cube Person, giving a twisted smile.

“What? You mean...now?” asked Roy, startled.

“Why wait?” said the Cube Person enthusiastically. “I have the slight problem of my probe locking down if I do anything the Cube People don’t like, but you don’t have a probe...yet. This is a great opportunity.”

“What do you want to do?” asked Roy.

“I want to go raise some hell while we still can. When my probe locks down, I want you to throw me into something.”

“Throw you into something?”

“Why not? I can do more destruction. When a Cube Person’s probe locks up, there’s nothing the Cube Person can do. All of my body parts are squeezed together into this cube, so I’m only as useful as my probe is. Unless, of course, you can do something such as throw me.”

“You have to be kidding, right?”

“No, I’m serious. You should throw me into something. Hey! Maybe we can attack the museum! Believe it or not, as practical as the Cube People are, they still have a

museum on one of their moons. There's lots of fragile stuff there. You could throw me into Shish Kay Bob's china collection or something. That would get them upset."

"I thought you wanted to overthrow the Cube People, not break their china," said Roy.

"It's revolutionary china breaking. That is, it's pretty much the most revolutionary thing we can do. We're only two Gotithians, aren't we? It'll be the easiest way to escape this horrible place."

"You know, you don't talk much like a Cube Person," said Roy, trying to change the subject.

"I studied the Universe's way of speaking," said PiBotQ64 proudly. "I hate the stuffy and emotionless way the Cube People talk. Of course, I don't have many emotions to express in my speech other than my despair, so most of the time I still sound emotionless and the Cube People haven't been suspicious."

"Didn't you say they were watching you all the time?" asked Roy in a more hushed voice.

"Oh yes. Most of the moons are watched from every inch by security cameras of some sort, but I'm a special project, so they pay extra attention to me."

"Then why are you strutting around and bragging about how you're going to break their china?" exclaimed Roy.

"Because it's easier than actually doing damage," said the Cube Person.

"What?"

"If they take me seriously they'll do something about it, like exterminate me, and I'll be out of here. That's pretty

much the only thing I can shoot for from a riot anyway, so if I can talk my way into it it's a real time saver."

"You have such nice goals."

"Your goals don't turn out right," countered PiBotQ64 somewhat playfully.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you were ruler of the Universe, and obviously that didn't turn out too well, and then you did something that made you end up here. How'd you do that?"

"What?"

"How did you end up here?"

"I was trying to get moose tranquilizer from the El Tuna Café to take back to my society," said Roy mournfully. "My brother's in that society, so even if I didn't care about myself being in here I still have to worry about my brother getting gored by moose-that-look-like-turtles."

"Hey, your life is happier than mine."

"You seem pretty happy now."

"Only as happy as my goals can make me."

"That's true," said Roy. His stomach sickness was slowly returning.

"Maybe we can try to get you out of here with the moose tranquilizer instead of...you know...."

"Trying to kill ourselves as quickly as possible?"

"Yes."

Roy smiled weakly. "That would be nice. Unfortunately, like you said, there's no chance of beating the Cube People."

"You shouldn't be so sure of that," said PiBotQ64 confidently.

“How are you going to get me out of here, for one thing?”

“That’ll come up as we go.”

“What?”

“I’m saying we should act now and see how to get out of here later. An opportunity will come, and if it doesn’t, I’ll still meet my original goal.”

“That sounds wonderful,” said Roy sarcastically, but Cube People don’t understand sarcasm.

“See what I mean? So, the El Tuna Café was stolen, you say?”

“No, just the layer of it that, according to our calculations, contained the moose tranquilizer we were after. They wouldn’t want to steal the whole El Tuna Café because it would anger the Universe.”

“Hmm...there’s been a lot of talk about the El Tuna Café lately. What was it?” said PiBotQ64 half to himself. “I wish I had an efficient Cube Person mind at times like these. Well, there has been the talk of the frozen cockroach army being stored in the El Tuna Café, and then there’s your revival..... none of that tells me where the Cube People might store something from the El Tuna Café, though.”

“Would it be on a moon because it’s not in a cube shape?” asked Roy. He doubted if the question was helpful.

“There are sixty four moons orbiting the Cube Planet,” said PiBotQ64.

“Sixty four?”

“The Cube People have a lot of non-cube business. Many of the rounder products are produced on those moons.”

“Oh. I see,” said Roy, thinking about his first job at the rounding company again.

“Well, there is a sample storage room on the Cube Planet where they contain some pieces of the El Tuna Café. I don’t know why they’d bother to research that, but we might want to look there.”

“We can’t look around much,” said Roy, his stomach getting more upset.

“I don’t know where else to look. Unfortunately, we need a reason to go onto the Cube Planet. I’ve only been there once, and that was when I was created. The rest of the time I’ve been shuffled from moon to moon. The Cube People understand I’m not happy with being a...Cube Person, but the most they’re willing to do about that is keep me away from the Cube Planet. I don’t know if I could find it. I’d have to send a mapping request to the organizational systems, and they might have some sort of special feature set on my probe to withhold that information or send a Cube Person to investigate it.”

“Do the Cube People have mimes?” Roy asked when the question suddenly popped into his mind.

“Yes, and I have deep sympathy for them,” said PiBotQ64. “They’ve been cubed like me.”

“Where do they get them? The Cube Person that escorted me here told me the Cube People have been into the Dimension of Nothing.”

“Yes, I do believe they’re getting them directly from the Dimension of Nothing.”

“What do you mean ‘directly’? How else do you get mimes?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes they just show up.”

“They just show up?”

“I don’t know much about mimes. I’m not interested in them. Why are you?”

“I’ve just always wondered how mimes came into being, and why so many of my peers back at the society were talking about them. I was in charge of the political situations there, you know.”

“Well, politics aren’t going to do anything for us now. Oh, well, excellent. Look’s like the Cube People have finally taken an interest in our conversation.”

Roy’s heart leapt. He looked behind him and saw that there were two Cube People approaching them. He frantically wondered what to do, or if he should do anything.

“Roy,” said the one in front in the standard emotionless tone of Cube People. “We wish for you to take this pill.”

Roy’s heart pounded more, and he felt dizzy. He stuttered, “W-w-why?”

“We are taking you to breakfast,” said the second one.

“Oh. The pill is my breakfast,” said Roy, relieved but still nauseated.

“No. This pill will knock you unconscious,” said the first one.

“You would not enjoy breakfast,” explained the second one.

“What are you going to do to me?”

“We will feed you.”

“No. Well, I guess you would. How’re you going to feed me?”

“If we told you the details, you wouldn’t want to have breakfast.”

“I’ll be unconscious though.”

“You may not enjoy the thought that you had breakfast.”

“I don’t want breakfast now.”

The Cube People looked at each other, perplexed. Then, to Roy’s great surprise, the first one turned back and asked, “Would you like lunch then?”

“Would the only difference be that you’re calling the meal lunch?” asked Roy suspiciously.

“How about supper?”

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes’,” muttered Roy.

“Yes? You want supper? Then take the pill.”

“Why do I need to take the pill?”

“You do not want to know.”

“I don’t want to have supper, then.”

The two Cube People turned to each other and silently discussed the situation through their probes. The second one turned this time to Roy. “You have proven yourself more logical than what we expected, Gotithian. Now please take the pill so we can advance to the next part of the test.”

“How will I eat breakfast unconscious?” asked Roy.

The first Cube Person with the pill advanced towards Roy. “If you do not take the pill, we will have to take serious measures.”

“Your feeding sounds awful,” said Roy.

“We’re trying to make this as painless as possible for you.”

“Has anyone offered to pay the blackmail?” asked Roy, backing away from the Cube Person.

“That is no concern to you,” said the Cube Person patiently. “Take the pill.”

“So it could have happened?” asked Roy.

“It is no concern to you, as you will be cubed.”

“My brother’s life is at stake!” exclaimed Roy, but then realized they Cube People wouldn’t care.

“Your former life is of no concern to us, and should not be of any concern to you,” said the second Cube Person. “Take the pill.”

“What happens if I don’t?”

“We will have to...please wait...” The first Cube Person stopped talking. His probe was blinking in a pattern. “You must take the pill now. We will not feed you, but you must come to the Cube Planet.”

“Why are you taking control of my project so?” demanded PiBotQ64.

“We are under attack,” said the first Cube Person.

“I have been working on the mental process of the normal Gotithian, and if you knock him unconscious for too long I will lose my progress,” said PiBotQ64.

“Then you will have to start over again,” said the Cube Person. “This is no small attack. The moons are in danger.”

“How are they?”

“Unlike the Cube Planet, they are not covered in Banging-go. Your lives are in danger.”

“We will use force if Roy does not take the pill now,” added the second Cube Person.

“Is it possible that you take Roy to where the El Tuna Café is being stored conscious?”

“That is on moon 32, which is under attack. We must take him to the safest place possible. That would be the Cube Planet”

“You are on your own,” said PiBotQ64 to Roy. He turned around and floated towards a double door set.

“Where are you going?” asked the second Cube Person.

“That is no concern to you,” said PiBotQ64.

“You are a valuable specimen. It is very important that you are transported safely.”

“If we reveal where the El Tuna Café layer is stored to the invaders, they will be satisfied and we can spare the moons,” explained the Gotithian.

“Send a request to the systems if you wish to suggest that. Do not act illogically,” said the second Cube Person.

“Very well,” said PibotQ64. His probe beeped.

“Take the pill, Roy,” said the first Cube Person.

Roy turned to PibotQ64 for advice. The Cube Person gave a faint sign of a Gotithian style of winking. Roy interpreted it and turned to the Cube Person. “I won’t take it.”

“There is no time to waste,” said the second Cube Person. “You must take it.”

Roy leapt as high as he could and landed on the second Cube Person’s flat head. The Cube Person spun his hover board around rapidly but Roy held on as tightly as he could. The first Cube Person’s probe let out a beeping signal – probably to contact the systems of what was going on – and raised its probe up to Roy’s head. Roy looked up to the Cube Person and saw a set of double doors closing behind the Cube Person. Roy leapt towards the first Cube Person but, as the second one was still spinning, missed. The first Cube Person hovered down to face Roy and let out a short burst of electricity, rendering Roy unconscious.

Lucky

It was dark. Roy rubbed his aching head. He had already been knocked unconscious twice by the Cube People: the first time when the El Tuna Café was being distracted and just now when he had distracted the Cube People from PiBotQ64. He wondered what the poor Gotithian was planning to do. He seemed very determined to end his own misery, and he wished the same thing for Roy. Roy wondered why he had needed to be knocked unconscious to be sent to the Cube Planet. Perhaps something very painful would happen to him – he may be cubed or something – and PiBotQ64 couldn't bear the thought of Roy ending up like him. Then again, Roy thought, the Cube People had accidentally slipped out the location of the El Tuna Café's stolen piece. Perhaps PiBotQ64 wished to retrieve it and help Roy out successfully, or perhaps he hoped to at least save Simon, whom Roy had mentioned.

Roy stopped thinking about PiBotQ64 briefly to wonder where he was. He shivered thinking the Cube People planned to give him breakfast – or whatever it was they were making such a big deal about. Then again, breakfast would be preferable to being cubed. Nevertheless from the sounds of it breakfast would be very unpleasant. Roy jumped back when he felt something moving underneath him. He realized he was on a conveyer belt leading to something unknown. In his silent panic he was grateful that the Cube People wanted him to be unconscious during whatever thing he was about to experience. He hoped they would stop whatever they were doing and knock him unconscious again if he made some sort

of sound. According to PiBotQ64 the Cube People watched everything, so they should notice him.

“Stop whatever you’re doing!” Roy cried out, standing up and waving his arms. The conveyer belt continued slowing moving along. Roy thought that since he was on the Cube Planet the conveyer belt had almost certainly been designed for Cube People, and its purpose, whatever that may be, was so simple and automated it didn’t need to be watched. Perhaps the Cube People only wasted their precious labor on watching the moons, where visitors would come and where non-cube things existed.

More frightened than ever at his loneliness on the conveyer belt, Roy stretched out his arms to feel for the end of the belt. He didn’t feel anything, so he moved his arms. He felt only a wall. He thought to himself that it should have been obvious to him: something that wasn’t being regulated and that was on Cube Planet would certainly be as space efficient as possible, as space efficiency was the whole idea that had started the ridiculous Boxer revolution. In fact, as Roy thought about the Cube People’s way of sleeping stacked up on one another in warehouses, he was surprised that there was any space between the conveyer belt and the wall at all.

After resolving that there was no way out, Roy’s thoughts were focused entirely on what might lie ahead of him. He was certainly on some sort of assembly line, that he knew for sure, but he wondered what it was for. He hoped with all his heart it wasn’t the cubing assembly line that had produced PiBotQ64. The Cube People might have called it “breakfast” as a way to cover the fact that they were going to cube him ahead of schedule. That would explain, after all,

why breakfast was being served in the middle of the afternoon, which had seemed very suspicious to Roy. He hoped that it actually was the Cube People's feeding line, but that couldn't be too pleasant either.

Roy heard some sort of machinery ahead of him, and he scrambled back. The conveyer belt kept moving him forwards, and he kept crawling backwards. Roy wondered if the Cube People had put in a time estimate for when Roy should come through the line, and if the computer that controlled the machine would decide to speed up the process if it didn't detect any progression through the line. He also wondered what it would do if he tried to run against the conveyer belt and get out of the assembly line entirely. He was somewhat shaky about going through, since he didn't know what he would come across, but it might be more reasonable of a decision than to constantly crawl backwards away from the approaching machinery. He wondered if the systems would contact the Cube People of any suspicious behavior of that sort. Sure, the Cube People might not have programmed their computers to do exactly that, but when it came to artificial intelligence the Cube People were far better than the lousy systems in the Universe, and as Roy had seen on one of his diplomatic visits the central systems were so huge anyway that it was very likely the computers would have the intelligence to track Roy down on their own.

He turned around and began to crawl at a faster pace than before. He hoped that the central systems weren't intelligent enough to track individuals down and do something about them, but it was quite possible. Perhaps, though, this attack that the Cube People were talking about would keep the systems busy enough that he could get away

safely. But get away safely to where? And how would he escape?

Roy bumped into a wall in front of him. As he began to move backwards he briefly felt the ground, and felt that he had reached the beginning of the conveyer belt loop. He crawled forwards again, and stood up. He even dared to jump up, and when he did he discovered there was an opening through which came the Cube People. It couldn't have been that high, as that would be a characteristic of a space-inefficient civilization like one Roy might find in the Universe. Roy was briefly distracted with the thought that he was beginning to think of the Universe as a foreign place, but then made the decision to climb his way up the opening.

Still walking forwards to stay in the same place, Roy felt the walls of the opening. They were made out of the same smooth Ba-ing-go as the walls in the assembly line, and there was no way he could possibly climb up them. He felt a small line through the wall that must have been a spacing meant to help the probe carry down its Cube Person like an elevator. Roy put both sets of fingers tightly into the spacing and painfully pulled his legs up, all the while being supported by the crammed-in fingers. Thinking he was secure, he carefully pulled out his fingers one by one. Unfortunately, there wasn't enough friction on the Ba-ing-go walls to hold him in the same place for that short amount of time, and he fell back onto the conveyer belt.

He noticed the conveyer belt wasn't moving anymore. Roy decided the system must have noticed something was wrong and shut off the line. Normal Cube Person efficiency, Roy thought. They would never want to waste even their plentiful electricity if they could avoid it. Perhaps, though,

Roy thought, the systems were busy because of the attack. Roy discarded the idea almost as quickly as it had come to him. There was no way an attack on the Cube People could possibly be large enough to stall systems as huge as the Cube People's.

There was a whirring sound coming from the top of the opening. Roy ducked down, although he knew if anything was up there such an action would be meaningless. The whirring grew louder, and then an even stranger noise played. "Margaret, we're out of potatoes," an ominous voice complained loudly overhead. Roy could faintly hear the flat cries of the Cube People above, and then all fell silent.

Disturbed, Roy wondered if it would be safe to try to get out of the line or if he should stay where he was. He figured that if the Cube People were trying to lure him out of wherever he was in they would eventually come for him if he stayed down there, and if they were under attack and something had happened to the Cube People's central systems that made the intercoms blurt out such a random sentence then he probably wasn't safe wherever he was anyway.

Slightly encouraged by the screams the Cube People had given out, Roy tried once again to cram his fingers together in the spacing of the wall, only this time he stuck his elbows out against the walls and stuck each of his hooves as much as he could into the spacing. He pulled a hoof out and raised it, then did the same with the other, then leaned against the wall opposite to the spacing and twisted his fingers further by pushing his elbows against the smooth walls. He pulled out his fingers more quickly, and quickly shoved them back in a little higher up.

Roy continued this slow and painful but effective process until he reached for the spacing again and there was none. He almost slipped and fell again when he tried to pull himself up by what were also slippery Ba-ing-go floors, but caught himself in time and instead pushed himself up with his legs.

Roy stood up and saw, much to his annoyance, that there was still no light. "I'm Roy!" he called out, hoping somehow some soldier from the obviously winning attackers would come to his rescue. His cry echoed around wherever he was for a while, making Roy think he was in one of the Cube People storehouses. That meant there must be a large garage-door-like door somewhere, and if he could somehow turn it on...

Roy realized, much to his despair, that there wouldn't be a switch or anything of that sort on Cube Planet. The Cube People operated everything remotely on their probes, and the central computers carried out most of those functions. If the central systems were down, he might not be able to get out at all.

He sat down on the cold Ba-ing-go floor, wanting to cry. He had no idea what was going on or how he would survive it. The thought that the systems were down had given him hope of surviving as something other than a Cube Person, but it seemed now that he wouldn't be able to survive at all. His thoughts turned to Willy Lemoniod's Afterlife. He remembered when he was only eight hundred thousand years old his father had given him the horrible news that his sheep had been sheared. He had been furious for Willy Lemoniod for designing such a stupid afterlife and placement system anyway. With sheep as counters, something was bound to go

wrong for innocent people. He wondered why he had never asked Lemoniod about the system and how it might be reversed. He had found out Willy was still alive only when he discovered that he and Simon had started plotting against him, and when he finally ran across him his mind was too fixated on that and how to get into the afterlife to get some special element from it that didn't exist in the Universe to bother.

"Oh!" Roy cried out loud. He suddenly realized Willy Lemoniod's Afterlife, having real elements that didn't exist in the Universe like choco-latte, and it was inaccessible from the Universe even though it was technically part of Heck, a planet in the Universe, the only logical explanation was that it was in a Universe of its own. This was little new to Roy, he had always thought of it as part of a different Universe, although he never thought of it in those exact terms, but when he had his realization about choco-latte he realized there was the possibility of Willy Lemoniod having used the Dimension of Nothing to store his afterlife. The Cube People supposedly were going into the Dimension of Nothing now. Could they by some chance be trying to enter Willy Lemoniod's Afterlife? It was yet another terrifying thought related to the Cube People.

Roy could hear some faint murmurs from where the giant door to the storehouse must have been. He at first thought it was the Cube People coming to take him, but the murmurs had too many different changes in pitch and tone to be those of Cube People. Roy was ecstatic. He could be saved!

He *could* be saved. That was the thing: if the attackers were somehow against Gotithians.... but if they wanted him

to die, why would they need to go through all the trouble of coming to where he was?

In a flash and before Roy could entirely register it, there was a hole in the darkness. Roy was temporarily blinded by the light, but he was happier than ever to see it.

“The Cube People were honest for once,” said a gruff voice. Roy looked up. He saw ten Space Monkeys and PufferFish soldiers standing in front of the hole.

“What’s happening?” asked Roy.

“WonderClaus has finally done it,” said the gruff PufferFish. “He’s organized a huge army to take out those Cube People!”

“You’ve actually won?” asked Roy in disbelief.

“The battle’s not over,” said the PufferFish. “In this part, sure, the Cube People are down, but there are still two other central systems to take down. We’ve already lost half our ships, but we should be able to take these out.”

“No we won’t!” exclaimed a Space Monkey. “If it hadn’t been for the cockroaches, we wouldn’t have disabled the first system! Our mission was to bring back Roy. Well, we’ve got him, so we need to get out of here!”

“But that doesn’t mean the battle’s over!” protested the PufferFish. “We’ve got to finish off the Cube People while we have the chance! We can’t let the Cube People go and rebuild their systems!”

“You can stay around and fight if you’d like,” said another PufferFish. “We’ve got to get out of here.”

“There aren’t any Cube People around, are there?” asked Roy.

“No. Like Bill said, a third of Cube Planet is defenseless. Sure, the Cube People could probably attack us

with their probes if they wanted to, but they've all fled towards the other two thirds of the planet that are still working. Right now the other systems are busy saving those Cube People and defending against the armada, but that can't last for long. As soon as the armada starts losing more ships the immediate defense needs will decrease and, before you know it, the systems will start picking up the work of this area. That's at least my theory," said a Space Monkey.

"You've got a ship out there?" asked Roy.

"Yes. We're going to take you to the Hobo Society's ship in it."

"The Hobo Society has a ship?" exclaimed Roy, bewildered. Perhaps the society had dealt with Loothpit better than he thought they could, or Loothpit had decided not to show up.

"Well, WonderClaus has set up a ship to send back to the society. He intends on bringing moose tranquilizer. It turns out the Gotithian Cube Person they were talking about wasn't so defective after all. He went to the Cube People's treasury, which the systems had dumped off of their monitoring to put their abilities elsewhere. He must have figured out the frozen cockroach army could pass for scarabs somehow, and he managed to wake them up! They snuck right into the server warehouse for one of the main systems, and the cockroaches were courageous enough to get themselves into the wiring! The whole thing blew to pieces! The Gotithian died in the blast, but one of the surviving scarabs – er, cockroaches – managed to tell some foot soldiers coming in to attack the fleeing Cube People the moose tranquilizer Roy wanted to get was located on one of the Cube People's moons."

Lucky

“We have to go now,” said the gruff PufferFish impatiently.

“Yes,” said Roy, running out of the hole the soldiers had blasted. He saw in front of the storehouse a miniature Poach-a-tron and entered it without further observation. The ten soldiers followed.

Roy collapsed into a seat in the small ship. By some stroke of incredible luck, the brave and selfless Gotithian PiBotQ64 had saved his life and soon enough the lives of Simon and the Hobo Society would be saved as well. He was emotionally exhausted, and could not think further than that. All he felt was a tingling gratefulness.

Toby's Letter

Billy and his father were still sitting in the lounge, waiting for Chuck's family to return. They were sure they would both be entertained enough when they got back to tell of how they failed, but they were finding it hard to pass the current time.

"Have I ever told you about insurance insurance?" asked Bob.

"Of course not. I've just met you today," said Billy.

"Well, I know that, but I meant...well, it's a starting line I use to tell someone...it basically means 'do you know what insurance insurance is' but it sounds more personal."

"I see. What is it?"

"Well, it's a pretty funny story actually. A while ago for a brief time I was working for an insurance company, and they kept getting complaints about how high their premiums were and how they were ripping their customers off. Rather than do anything about it, they ran an ad campaign convincing people that tricky insurance was just a fact of life. That was when the idea hit the executives: what if they sold insurance to insure people in case they got bad insurance? Of course, there was the possibility of that insurance being sneaky, so as a backup they sold insurance insurance insurance. Not too many people bought insurance insurance insurance save for the big companies that wanted to prevent tricky insurance deals by making sure they would have to pay for it if they did anything tricky and pay for doing anything tricky in paying for doing anything tricky. Of course, the insurance companies still were able to do tricky

Toby's Letter

things after that, but it made people feel more secure and as if they had finally fixed that annoying fact of life."

"Here comes Chuck's family," Billy said quietly, hearing footsteps into the room.

Sean entered the room holding a piece of paper. "Billy! I have a message for you from Toby!"

"Toby sent a message? How'd he know where I am?"

"You'd better read it to find out," said Sean, handing Billy the piece of paper.

"Well, we tried," said Chuck's father, entering the room from the other door. Billy put the paper down to watch.

"What did you say?" said Bob.

"Why would you want to know?" demanded Chuck's mother.

"I'm a writer, and occasionally a public speaker, even if only for the hideaway. I think I might be able to help you."

"You're not that bright," said Chuck's father.

"How's that so?"

"Well, there's no way you could explain the idea better than we did."

"You mean my idea?"

"No, it was ours," said Chuck.

"No, it wasn't. But please tell me so we can see for sure."

"Bout what?"

"The cockroach as scarabs idea!" said Bob, trying not to sound rude in any way.

"Oh, yeah, that," said Chuck's father more quietly. "Well, we went into the leaders' lobby room, and they were talking to each other so they weren't exactly paying attention to me. I think that was part of the reason they didn't

understand me, because, believe me, any idiot should be able to understand an idea this simple. To get their attention I gave them a friendly ‘Afternoon!’”

“Go on,” said Bob. “So far it sounds great.”

“Yeah, well, when I got their attention, I said, ‘Those cockroaches could really look alive, you know.’ I figured I should make my point as soon as possible, so they would listen to the details and such instead of ignoring me. Well, one of them didn’t quite understand me, and he asked, ‘Is there a Lesser Cockroach infestation somewhere?’ and I said, ‘No, but there is a good way to take care of them.’ He asked, ‘So there’s a mild problem of cockroach infestation?’ and Chuck, bless his heart, couldn’t stand to see anyone so slow to realize a point, so he said, ‘Enough about the roaches investing already!’ Leanne and I both had a big laugh over that, because, well, it must have been so easy for him to hear it wrong, and then we lost the leaders’ attention. I tried my attention-grabbing summary thing again, this time by saying, ‘We’ve got to get rid of those Cube People!’ Another leader turned to me and said that there was nothing we could do about it, and I should stop bothering them. Can you imagine how rude that was! Well.... wait, I lost my track of thought...well, after that I figured the leaders must know something about the Cube People that I don’t that makes the plan unfeasible, so I gave up and we came back here.”

“Well, first of all,” said Bob with a smile on his face. “It’s good to have an attention-grabbing summary like you did, but you should probably talk about something more personal to completely grab their attention. Try mentioning the weather or something, then slap them in the face and

Toby's Letter

demand them to talk about more important things. That's when you spring your point onto them."

"You can't be serious!" exclaimed Chuck's mother, Leanne. "Slap them in the face?"

"Not literally, of course. I think you should be more subtle than that."

"Oh, so not in the face, just on their hair or horn?" Leanne asked.

"That might work," said Bob.

Billy lost interest in the conversation and began reading Toby's message. It looked like it had been faxed through the PickleNet.

"Billy, that was really close! There were moose-that-look-like-turtles all around the Hobo Society! We had mimes all over the place constantly making walls that the moose-that-look-like-turtles were breaking down, and we were trying to keep it up until Roy came back with the moose tranquilizer, but eventually the mimes just turned on us! The only way we had to keep Loothpit's armies at bay was just firing nonstop at them to keep them hiding in their shells. It couldn't last for much longer, but then Roy sent us a message that thanks to WonderClaus's attack on the Cube People, and something about a brave bunch of cockroaches and Gotithian Cube Person, and he was coming. Well, the society cleverly estimated the time that Roy would return and timed a retreat of forces, so the moose-that-look-like-turtles were advancing towards the inside of the society instead of staying in one place, and they had all bunched together at the one opening in our defenses. It looked really grim then, but Warren gave strict orders for everyone, including me, to somehow man the weaponry so that the moose-that-look-like-

turtles wouldn't spread out looking for anyone retreating. I was scared to death and talking wildly to Jimmy (my imaginary friend if you remember). Finally a big ship came flying down the sewers. The ship fired out a few shots of moose tranquilizer, but all it did was turn the moose-that-look-like-turtles attention to the ship. No one had any idea why the tranquilizer wasn't working, and people starting running from the line." As Billy ready he wildly thought Toby was somehow writing him a letter from a moose-that-looks-like-a-turtle prison, but he thought that was unlikely. He continued reading. "A few loyal soldiers tried to stop them from running, and before we knew it we were fighting amongst each other while moose-that-look-like-turtles were coming and slaughtering. I was hiding and watching Roy's ship, hoping somehow they would find the problem and effective moose tranquilizer would come out. It didn't. Finally the ship stopped firing moose tranquilizer and switched to laser beams, and then a column of moose ripped through it, tearing the whole ship to shreds. To everyone's surprise, when the ship was torn apart a bunch of moose tranquilizer gushed out of it and that finally worked!

"After some investigation afterwards we discovered that the radiators the moose were wearing...did I mention they were wearing radiators?" No, but I just assumed they were, thought Billy sarcastically to himself. He laughed a little out loud. "I guess not. Well, they were wearing radiators, and it turns out it was because Simon had accidentally slipped out to the spy cockroach John that heat would ruin the chemical composure of the moose tranquilizer. When the Ba-ing-go from the ship shattered it fell in little pieces into the radiators, and froze up them, so

Toby's Letter

the moose tranquilizer was able to do its job.” Wow, that’s lucky, Billy thought. He read on.

“We were all really happy that the moose had somehow gone away in the battle, but there was still the problem of the mimes running around the society. After the confused soldiers had finally settled down and realized what they needed to do next, they rushed the passengers of the smashed ship to the society’s hospital and went after the mimes. I hardly moved, because I was afraid of getting attack by mimes, but I had to because some started approaching me. I ran as fast as I could, but then, when I turned around for a second to see where they were, I noticed they weren’t chasing after me after all. It looked like they were showing a murder in a game of charades! I then realized that it wasn’t me they were after, but Jimmy!

“I was devastated and confused at the death of my imaginary friend, but I didn’t do much mourning. The society is preparing some sort of big party to celebrate the defeat of the Cube People and Loothpit on the Squeenburg. You should probably go there. I can’t go there, though, and that’s why I’m writing this letter. After Jimmy’s murder I thought about what Phil told us and I really wanted to go into the Dimension of Nothing to fully understand what was going on and what had happened. Roy was in better shape than the rest of the crew – he only has a broken leg – and he was able to tell about what was going on in the battle against the Cube People. He said he found out that the Cube People have actually been going into the Dimension of Nothing to get mimes, and when that was translated for me by a soldier friend of mine I decided right then and there that I would be going into the Big Brain to try to enter the Dimension of

Nothing. I wanted to bring you along, but I didn't know where exactly you were until now. I've already gone into the Dimension of Nothing with the soldier and we found out from, strangely enough, Jimmy where you are in the Universe. I think your dad's right about most of what he wrote, because I've also heard about his ideas on the Dimension of Nothing. It turns out there are actually infinite Universes and infinite numbers of anyone you could possibly imagine. In fact, I'm writing this letter from the house of a man who runs a rehabilitation center for teacups. How cool is that? Come soon,

Toby.

“Excuse me?” Billy exclaimed, stunned at Toby’s decision to enter the Dimension of Nothing and what he found there.

“You stop being so rude!” roared Chuck’s father.

“What is it, Billy?” asked Bob.

“Read this,” said Billy, handing his father the letter.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it?” said Sean. “I couldn’t believe it when I read it. I still can’t believe it now.”

“I can’t believe it either,” said Billy.

“What?” asked Leanne.

“Nothing,” said Billy.

“Stop being so rude!” bellowed Chuck’s father again.

“Please be quiet,” said Billy softly. “He’s trying to read.”

“Stop being so – oh. Okay. Well, shut up, then!” exclaimed Chuck.

Everyone watched Bob read the letter, Sean and Billy wanting to hear his reaction and Chuck and his family wanting to find out what it was that was so important.

Toby's Letter

“Elvis!” exclaimed Bob.

“Don’t say that!” said Leanne.

“No, this is amazing!” said Bob. “The Cube People have actually been into the Dimension of Nothing, and a human beat me into it! Billy, we’ve got to follow after him!

The Squeenburg

Roy was finally left to himself. He propped his broken leg back up and leaned back. He took a quick glance over at the crowd surrounding WonderClaus, who was about to give a speech. WonderClaus had told Roy ahead of time that he was going to give some very important information to the Universe. Roy just hoped he wouldn't say anything stupid that could ruin him. He scratched his leg.

Roy thought about the letter the human, Toby, had sent to Billy. Warren had received a copy from Bob Rednow himself. It looked like the Dimension of Nothing theory was to be taken seriously after all. Warren had thought it was especially important that the society would start exploring the Dimension of Nothing as soon as possible because of what the Cube Person Roy had talked to in the waiting room had said about the possibility of the Cube People delaying their subjugation of the Universe in order to maximize the patriotic sense of duty war gave them. Now, however, they would certainly feel threatened, and once they were finished repairing the damage they might want to take the Universe out as soon as possible. The Dimension of Nothing could play two factors in their plans, Warren had said. First of all, if the Cube People discover the Universe was really only one part of an infinite number of universes within the Dimension of Nothing, they could obtain a sense of patriotic duty indefinitely through the conquest of those universes. Secondly, if Willy Lemoniod's Afterlife was powered by the Dimension of Nothing, the Cube People could force the Universe's surrender by threatening to shut down the system.

Finding out about the Dimension of Nothing would be essential to defending the Universe.

Roy also thought about a third possibility: the Cube People could possibly harness the infinite resources of the Dimension of Nothing. If Toby had found out about a teacup rehabilitation center so quickly then it shouldn't take long for an advanced civilization to find some sort of package in a post office somewhere labeled "For the destruction of the Universe" or something similar.

WonderClaus cleared his throat, making a sound that could be heard throughout the entire Squeenburg ballroom through the microphone attached to his head. "Ever since that fateful battle in the El Tuna Café," WonderClaus began, "the Universe has seen a lot of historical events. No event, except perhaps the rise of Presleytarianism, however, can be compared to what has happened recently. The Cube People have been defeated for the first time in history on their own planet...no, in their own universe even!" The crowd around WonderClaus cheered.

"The moose-that-look-like-turtles have suffered heavy losses as well," WonderClaus continued, "and with the help of True Presleytarianism the Universe is starting to unify again, although this time through the union of several groups. As anyone who has heard about the conference at the Honky Donkey knows, the Guinea Pigs, the True Presleytarian Church, and a very important secretive organization have made alliances. When the need came, we found we were more unified than that. I would like to thank every good Presleytarian who contributed to the army that made the defeat of the Cube People possible. Who can say Presleytarianism isn't great?" More cheering came.

WonderClaus cleared his throat again, and the cheering stopped. Some people sounded confused. “I can,” he said. The crowd was silent, unsure where the speech was going. “I have seen first hand how Presleytarianism got started, you know. I have seen the basements of the founder’s parents where the original scriptures were written, I have seen the original Presleytarian rites performed, and I have seen as well as – believe it or not – understood why Presleytarianism became so popular. You see, one of the reasons is people like to be lead. It’s easier to be lead and follow other’s rules than go your own way, meaning you can get a sense of virtue much easier by following Presleytarianism than by your self.”

Chattering scattered through the crowd nervously. “Presleytarianism brings everyone together!” Dave exclaimed. Roy could see that he too was afraid of something happening in the Squeenburg. The idea made Roy think again that only a million years ago he had been in the same room of the Squeenburg and had been attacked by Simon’s army of PufferFish, which had caused him to attack the PufferFish and ultimately had lead Simon to attack the El Tuna Café.

“Also, people have always had a fascination for what is beyond our immediate world. This has lead to writing and art as well as religious beliefs. People just have to worship something for some reason. When people worship things together, they feel a sense of unity. The Universe has been always dominated by gregarious species. Gregarious species are the only type of species capable of building civilization, and they are also the type of species that crave unity most. We all want a sense of unity, a sense of a higher being, and a

sense of virtue, don't we? In fact, all happiness that I can think of comes from those three things. Presleytarianism offers all three things. Arguably, then, isn't Presleytarianism a projection of society? Isn't Presleytarianism therefore the truth?"

Some happy chattering went through the crowd now. Roy saw that Dave, flying high on his hover board to see WonderClaus, looked relieved.

"Well, I've had enough excuses," said WonderClaus in a harder tone. "All three of those things also can describe a book club. Should we worship books? Well, Presleytarianism is degrading into a book club, so it shouldn't be too far off. Unless we acknowledge Presleytarianism is about the belief in the factual accuracy of the scriptures – cold, hard, scientific facts, not flexible mumbo-jumbo – then Presleytarianism's nothing but a book club."

"But that's not true!" interrupted Dave. "The scriptures *are* filled with cold, hard facts! Remember the last issue of *The Believing Bargainer*? It was correct about the best value on shoes!"

"You need to be Presleytarian to know where to buy *shoes*?" asked WonderClaus. People gasped. Roy could see a few Presleytarian bishops walking away. "Fine! Worship that junk! Worship your stupid book club and your stupid nonsense! I'm going to leave until people get their act together, and separate fact from fiction. Come on, people! Let go of that pretty junk! I never thought I would say this, but why are we worshipping a human who was probably fiction when we've just witnessed real cockroaches sacrificing their lives for the good of the Universe? You should...you should...Worship your vermin!"

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