



"Black & White"

*A Chip 'n' Dale Rescue Rangers
Fan Novel
by McPoodle,
Erik (Ice) Berg and Roxor*

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A Chip 'n' Dale Rescue Rangers Fan Novel in Three Parts

**By McPoodle,
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To those who remembered while the rest of the world was forgetting.

PROLOGUE: A Dark and Stormy Night

Once upon a time, in a world not too different from ours, four rodents and a fly band together to fight the forces of darkness. For their detective agency, no case is too big, no case is too small. They are: The Rescue Rangers.

A STRONG WIND BLEW AROUND Rescue Rangers Headquarters that fateful night of February 15th, in that dark and uncertain time between midnight and dawn. The old oak tree stood fast against the windstorm. Behind thick walls and tightly secured windows, all was deathly quiet, and the Rescue Rangers were sound asleep.

Suddenly, there was a flash of light and a roll of thunder. Five seconds later, there was another one. And another. And another. A constant stream of lightning bolts, at five-second intervals.

Dale was the first to awaken. He had been fond of thunderstorms since an early age. He also loved sharing the good things in life with his best friend, so he dropped down from the top level of the chipmunks' bunk bed and informed him of the good news: "Wowie, would you look at that, Chip!"

BOOM! went the thunder.

Chip opened one eye and peered at his roommate. "Dale, I don't care what it is . . ."

BOOM! it went again.

Chip continued where he was interrupted. ". . . I don't want to watch a movie, OK?"

BOOM!

Chip's other eye opened. "What *was* that?"

BOOM!

"Do you have the TV up too loud again, Dale?"

BOOM!

"That's no TV, Chip, it's lightning from outside."

BOOM!

"Don't be ridiculous," Chip replied . . .

BOOM!

. . . as he got out of bed. "Lightning doesn't fall regular like that."

BOOM!

There was a knock at the door of the chipmunk's bedroom. Chip opened it to reveal Gadget, fully dressed. "Hi, Gad-"

BOOM!

"Chip," said Gadget, "I think we should in-"

BOOM!

"-investigate this storm. Take a look outside."

BOOM!

Monty jammed into the room with Zipper by his side. “What’s the big idea, guys?” he asked.

BOOM!

“Follow me!” ordered Chip. The group raced out the front door, as that was the direction of the flashes. The gusting wind practically tore the door out of their grasp.

As they watched, a lightning bolt flashed down to the southwest edge of town. The following bolts all hit exactly the same spot, a spot the Rangers knew all too well. The former headquarters of their perennial foe:

“Nimnul,” declared Chip, grimly.

BOOM! the thunder added, dramatically.

“Right,” answered Gadget. “If he’s . . .”

BOOM!

“ . . . behind this, it can’t be good. Also . . .”

BOOM!

“ . . . this is no ordinary lighting.”

BOOM!

“How so?” asked Chip.

Gadget waited for the “BOOM!” before continuing. “If actual lighting was striking that close to us . . .”

BOOM!

“ . . . it would be a lot louder.”

BOOM!

“And it wouldn’t be orange,” she added quickly.

BOOM!

“I guess that means only one thing,” Dale added with a grin.

BOOM!

“Rescue Rangers, away!”

A FEW MINUTES LATER, THE Ranger Wing touched down at the base of the small mountain owned by Norton Nimnul, prevented by high winds from reaching the summit. The Rangers looked up the twisty mountain road with some trepidation, but they had no other alternative, so they began the slow climb.

For an adventure that began with lightning bolts, an endless climb on foot was not what Dale had in mind. Even a lightning flash every five seconds lost its thrill after the first five thousand or so. The chipmunk was bored.

“So,” he asked. “How many years have we been . . . stopping Nimnul now? . . . Four?” The pauses were for the thunder.

“Five,” replied Chip, waiting for the next strike before continuing. “You’re not counting . . . this last year, when he was missing.”

“You know,” observed Monty, “regardless . . . regardless of whether he’s behind this or not . . . I’m not sure I want to be there . . . to find out.”

“Monty scared?” asked Dale. “That doesn’t make much sense!”

“I’m not exactly a fan . . . fan of the high voltages . . . if you catch my drift.”

Zipper shrugged, as if to say “fair enough.”

By keeping to the cliff face, the Rangers hoped to avoid being swept to their doom by the incredibly strong gusts of wind.

“You know,” Dale observed nonchalantly, “I don’t think . . . I’ve ever seen so much lightning.”

Gadget pointed up to the top of the mountain, where the outline of a large domed structure was illuminated by a brightly-glowing orange tower beside it. “And I’ve never . . . seen a capacitor that huge before,” she observed.

Monty scratched the back of his head. “I did once . . . back in the day. I was in Lower Louisiana . . . during a loony lightning storm.”

“What do you think . . . might be causing all of this wind?” asked Chip, raising his voice to be heard. He was carrying a penlight under his arm, and the wind had nearly snatched it away from him several times already.

“Probably all the hot air . . . rushing away during the lightning . . . strikes,” replied Gadget.

“Whatever it is . . . it’s blowing me away,” quipped Dale. “Hey, Chip . . . the answer is blowing in the wind . . . get it?”

Gadget rolled her eyes. Chip raised his fist to deliver swift summary justice upon Dale’s cranium, but in raising it his arm brushed against the “Bonkaholics Anonymouse” badge pinned to his jacket, and with an effort he managed to stay on his twelve-step program.

About halfway to the top, the Rangers came across a pile of debris in the middle of the road. It was made up of the crushed remains of a giant robot, pieces of the load-bearing wall the robot had been tricked into walking through by the Rangers, and some packing materials caught underneath that hadn’t been blown away yet—the remains of the group’s last encounter with the mad scientist. They got around it easily and Gadget used the cover from the wind to improvise some ear protection out of Styrofoam and cardboard. Chip stopped to take a look at the obstruction. “This is a deliberate roadblock,” he declared, “. . . and the police are probably . . . on their way right now . . . but they’ll never get around this.”

Gadget thought awhile. “A couple of sticks of dynamite . . . would probably shift that metal and concrete.”

Chip rolled his eyes. “. . . And you just happen to have some on you?”

He was rather surprised to see Monty produce several sticks as tall as he was.

“No,” replied Gadget, “but . . . nevermind. Monty, since when do you carry . . . explosives with you?”

“Since lightning decided . . . to be the next biggest thing since Constantinople.”

Dale always recognized a straight line when he heard it. “You realize it’s Istanbul, not Constantinople now, right?” He had to rush the joke out to make it between the lightning strikes.

Zipper stared at Dale as if to say “One more song reference and I’ll see that *you* get the works!”

Having finished his preparations, Monty led the group a safe distance away from the landslide and detonated the dynamite. Of course, being Monty, the number of sticks of dynamite was rather large, so . . .

BOOM!

“Thanks, Monty,” announced Chip dryly in the aftermath, “now I can’t hear the thunder anymore.”

“Can we do that again?” asked Dale.

“No!” answered the others.

Chip dusted himself off and picked up the penlight. “Well, if the police weren’t on their way before, they are now. Onward!”

FINALLY, THEY REACHED NIMNUL’S MOUNTAINTOP evil scientist laboratory/Astronomy Science Center [hey, a guy’s got to make money where he can].

“Well,” observed Gadget, “I can see what Nimnul’s . . . using that capacitor for now, but what’s he planning . . . after it’s charged?” The capacitor was so tall its top lined up with the roof of the lab. Every time the lightning hit, a spark could be seen around its terminals.

Dale shuddered. “Real question is . . . do we want to know?”

Chip went up to the front door, and discovered it was unlocked. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this . . .” he said.

The majority of the laboratory was a single circular room with the partially open dome of the observatory as its roof. Visible through one end of this slot in the ceiling was the glow of the city below and through the other end could be seen the capacitor tower, which flooded the building with a blinding orange flash every five seconds. Between those intervals, the only illumination came from the red light bulbs studded along the upper walls that had come with the original observatory, designed to allow astronomers to study their charts without losing their night vision. Giant banks of computers from nearly every era lined the walls under those bulbs, all of them linked to each other. At the far end of the room from the Rangers’ position was a long desk sporting an up-to-date supercomputer, clearly the control center of the entire operation. Next to the computer was a rectangular piece of World War II surplus, so identified by the distinctive loud droning buzz it gave off, the aural equivalent of the red light bulbs to fill the ears between the deafening blasts of thunder.

The Rangers made their careful way around the exposed inside wall of the lab, hoping to find shelter in the shadow of the desk. With the crazy lighting, it didn’t seem likely that they would be discovered, and they could see Nimnul running back and forth between two pieces of equipment checking the displays, too busy to notice their presence.

A little more than halfway to the desk, Chip pointed at a spot just beyond their destination. “I see that Nimnul’s finally repaired that robot-shaped hole in the wall, but who in their right mind would paint the replacement puce? Wait a second,” he said, stopping. “Do you hear that?”

Gadget removed the padding from her ears. “The lightning strikes have stopped.”

The others did the same. “We have to do something,” ordered Chip. “Fast!”

Wires thicker than a human’s arm led from the capacitor into the lab, there to be joined by smaller cables coming out of the bank of computer terminals. Nimnul took off his ear protectors and chucked them over his shoulder, almost hitting the Rangers as they settled into position. “That’s all the lightning I’m going to need,” he told himself. “Now for part two.” With the light bulb near his head tinting his face the color of blood, he entered a few commands in a computer on the desk, then turned to the antiquated army

oscilloscope and started adjusting knobs, the red glow now washed out by the unearthly illumination it emitted. Its angry buzz was now the only sound in the room.

Gadget stood where she was a moment, trying to take in the strange pieces of equipment and how they were connected. Just like every Nimmul invention she'd ever encountered, it was made up of sensible scientific equipment combined in nonsensical ways. The least sensible piece of equipment was apparently the most important, as it was located in the center of the room. It was a block of black obsidian stone, nine feet high by four feet wide by one foot thick. Giant gold-plated studs stuck out of the top of the block and received the wires from the capacitor and the computer banks.

"What should we do?" Chip asked his teammates. "Can we just unplug the computer?"

Gadget shook her head. "That would just cause the capacitor to discharge."

"And that would mean . . . ?" asked Dale.

Monty responded with one word in Dale's ear: "Bzzt!"

"Never mind!"

"There," Nimmul concluded, "the coordinates have been transferred. Just a few minutes for the portal to align and I'm out of here."

He walked over to the edge of the opening in the roof and took one last look at the city below. "The greatest genius in the world, wasting his talents on petty theft," he declared in disgust. "No more!" he cried triumphantly, turning to face the great black block.

A low chorus began to fill the room, sounding like something out of the weird part of *2001*. Nimmul raised his voice to be heard above it. "In just a few minutes," he ranted. "I'm going somewhere where my genius will be appreciated. A new world!"

As he watched expectantly, a massive spark appeared along the thickest cables and vanished into the block before leaving the cables as a rain of molten metal. The block increased in blackness until it was impossible to make out its surface—it appeared now to be constructed of darkest night. "Just a few more seconds . . ."

He looked at the block in anticipation as the sound of the unseen chorus increased its cacophony. Then in an instant, a sound dispersed the chorus:

PING!

For a moment, Dale thought his popcorn was ready.

Chip's head jerked as he caught Nimmul running for the block out of the corner of his eye. "Stop him!" he cried.

The Rangers started forward, but they were too late. Professor Norton Nimmul reached the portal . . .

. . . and bounced right off the solid wall of a block of black obsidian, knocking himself out cold.

The Rescue Rangers came to a sudden stop. Chip shook his head. "Never mind," he said.

JUST AT THAT MOMENT THE front doors were kicked open, sending the welcome white glow of automobile headlights into the scarlet laboratory.

"Freeze!" cried Officer Kirby, gripping his pistol in a Modern Isosceles stance.

His partner Muldoon reached around him to point at the prone body of Nimmul. “Looks like Nimmul froze himself,” he quipped. Kirby cautiously lowered his gun, expressing his disapproval of Muldoon’s wisecrack.

The two beat cops lifted Nimmul up and attempted to revive him. Zipper meanwhile noticed a rather ominous straining sound building in the obsidian monolith, which at this point looked exactly like you’d expect a block of obsidian to look. He informed Monty, who bounced a pebble off Muldoon’s head.

Noticing the danger, the humans exited the room, followed by the Rangers. Shortly afterward, the block loudly fractured, and the red glow from the observatory winked out. A battery-operated clock fell off of the wall and hit the floor, forever fixing its time at 3:14.

“Uh, my head,” Nimmul moaned. He was lying in the arms of the beat cops.

“Well,” said Kirby, “look who returned to the land of the living.”

“Francine, is that you?” Nimmul muttered. “Something’s wrong with my eyes—I can’t see a thing.”

The police officers shared a confused look. “Curiouser and curiouser,” said Muldoon. He shook the scientist’s shoulder. “Professor Nimmul. Professor Nimmul.”

“Huh? Who’s that?” answered the small bald man.

Muldoon rolled his eyes. “You’re not fooling anyone. Norton Nimmul, you are under arrest for the following crimes”

GADGET DIDN’T PAY ATTENTION TO any of this. As soon as she thought it safe, she headed back into the darkened laboratory, past the smoking computer banks, around the shards of shattered red glass and chunks of black obsidian embedded in the walls and floor, ducking to avoid occasional sparks of pale blue static electricity, up the table and past the burnt-out remains of the computer, and straight to the small piece of equipment Nimmul was playing with earlier, the only piece of equipment in the entire room that was still functioning. The object may have begun its life as an oscilloscope, but there probably wasn’t a single wire left in the case that belonged in it. There were several dials with some strange sort of coordinate system on them, but that would mean at least ten axes. Two burnished metal rods as thick as bicycle handlebars were roughly soldered to the sides of the device and protruded a foot beyond the front at about the level of Gadget’s waist. All of these modifications were spattered with spots of rust, signs that this device was older than Nimmul. The remains of an image were still on the screen, but it was quickly fading.

“Ten dimensions?” Gadget asked herself, examining the dials. What intrigued Gadget the most was that this device seemed to make sense to her, yet more proof that Nimmul had not built it. She didn’t know how it worked yet, but she was certain she could figure it out if she had time to study it.

Chip checked to make sure all members of his team were all right in the aftermath of the explosion. He then entered the lab with his penlight to check on Gadget. “Gadget, are you in here?”

“Over here, Chip.”

The small white oval of the penlight searched for awhile before it found the mouse inventor, then Chip cautiously climbed up to join her. “What is that?” he asked.

“I’m not sure. Some sort of viewer. I think we should take it back with us.”

Chip vainly tried to brush down his fur, which had puffed out in all directions in response to the thick atmosphere of static electricity that hung in the room. Dale probably would have burst out laughing seeing that same effect on Gadget's hair, but she was completely oblivious, so Chip decided to not mention it. Instead he looked over Gadget's find. “Take it back with us? Is that so we’ll be ready in case Nimnul figures out what he did wrong? Is it dangerous?” As he asked this, Chip casually rested his arm on one of the bars sticking out of the device. At that moment, the image in the viewer suddenly changed. Chip jerked his hand away in surprise, and the image began to fade like the last one had.

“I don’t think so,” Gadget answered, but like Chip was caught in surprise by the change in the image. “What did you just do, Chip?”

“I don’t know. I just touched it, I think.”

“Did you move anything?”

“No.”

“Hmm,” she thought. “Maybe you didn’t adjust anything after all. Try touching it again, but keep your hand in place.”

“OK.” Cautiously, he placed his hand on the face of the machine. The image continued to fade. “No, wait, I think it was over here.” He touched the bar, and the image sprung back to full intensity, and stayed that way as he kept his hand in place.

Gadget moved around Chip to get a good look at the image. It was made up of thousands, no tens of thousands, perhaps even millions of dots, like pointillism run amok. Each dot was a different color. Indeed, the screen seemed to be using more colors than should exist in the universe. Gadget gasped. “Ludwig Von Drake was right!” she exclaimed.

The entire image seemed to be in constant flux, yet something in the middle remained constant. There was no sound other than the deep buzz that had already started to permanently settle into their minds. Chip squinted. “I can’t put my finger on it,” he said, “but something about that looks strangely familiar.”

“Hmm . . . greens and browns, and that swaying there . . . it reminds me of the view from Ranger Headquarters.”

Chip turned his head sideways. “I don’t see it.” He took his hand off of the bar, and the image began to fade. “Here, you try it. I’ll see if I can round something up to cart this back to Headquarters.”

“Hey,” exclaimed Dale from the lab entrance below, “are we done? I’m missing the late-late-late-late-late-too late movie!”

“Just a minute, Dale,” explained Chip patiently, then he and his light made their way down the table, leaving Gadget lit only by the viewer.

Gadget hovered her hand over the bar. She somehow knew that touching that bar was not an act she could ever undo. Finally after a minute she willed herself to grab it. The image on the screen instantly shifted, bathing her face in its light and casting strange shadows on the wall behind her. This image was much simpler than the last one: shades of gray on the bottom, and more shades of gray above that, but this time the borders were straight lines and right angles, with an arched ceiling, but everything was exaggerated—the corners were more “right” than a right angle should be, and the ceiling was too curved

to exist in Euclidean space. Nevertheless, using her superb powers of analysis she was finally able to identify what she was seeing: "It's an aircraft hangar!"

But there was more to the image than that. In the bottom center was a rounded whitish shape that extended beyond the edge of the screen, its motion animated by a constant nervous energy. If the rest of the image represented Man's inorganic creation (and some of the best of that creation, if Gadget's opinion of aircraft hangers was to be considered), this central feature was separate, natural, alive. "A . . . a mouse?" Gadget pondered. All she could see of the creature was the back of its head and hints of its face as it looked about, but that was enough to conclude that it resembled no mouse Gadget had ever seen: delicate long fur, a snout far too long, eyes a pure deep red the color of the busted astronomy light bulbs. Its ears were far too large, and its head far too small, and it wore no clothing that she could see. It was like some sort of mythical mouse-monster, a mouse conforming to Man's misconceptions of what a mouse was supposed to be. It was Fear battling with Hunger in a desperate battle for existence in a cold heartless world that not only did not care if you lived or died, but worse, didn't even bother to notice your existence.

Gadget knew this creature she was watching on a screen in an impossible number of colors and dimensions. It was the Thing that sat at the pit of Gadget's stomach ever since the day of her father's disappearance, the Hypothesis that could never be fully disproved, no matter how many triumphant experiments had been made to refute it: that Life had no meaning, and that bad things happened to good people. The mouse she was watching was herself, her true self.

As she watched, the mouse on the screen sniffed its way along the aircraft hangar floor, the illumination revealing the hour to be roughly the same Gadget herself was experiencing in Nimmul's lab. Gadget peered closer at the image. The mouse seemed to sense her interest, because it turned to sniff at her over its left shoulder. Gadget started back in shock. She was even more sure now that this mouse was her, but this mouse was clearly a wild animal, devoid of even a hint of intelligence behind those alien red eyes, eyes that seemed to be accusing her of the crime of abnormality, of not being what it was, accusing her of false hope.

Suddenly Gadget was struck in the face by the glow of Chip's penlight. She removed her hands from the bar in panic and stood in front of the fading image to keep Chip from seeing it as he returned with a cart.

"See," said Chip, "I found it." He noticed that Gadget's hair was now static-free.

It took a few moments for Gadget to find her voice and tell Chip how to load the oscilloscope. During this time she tried her best to dispel the images she had seen from her brain, but they kept returning to the inside of her eyelids every time she blinked. She had no answer for the silent accusation of the other-mouse, and she feared she never would.

PART ONE: Tammy

*I wanted to be like you.
I wanted everything.
So I tried to be like you
And I got swept away.*

*I didn't know that
It was so cold and
You needed someone
To show you the way.
So I took your hand and
We figured out that
When the tide comes
I'd take you away.*

*If you want to
I can save you.
I can take you away from here.
So lonely inside,
So busy out there.
And all you wanted
Was somebody who cares.*

*I'm sinking slowly,
So hurry hold me.
Your hand is all I
have to keep me
hanging on.
Please can you tell me,
So I can finally see,
Where you go when you're gone.*

*If you want to
I can save you.
I can take you away from here.
So lonely inside,
So busy out there.
And all you wanted
Was somebody who cares.*

—“All You Wanted”, Michelle Branch

1. HOMECOMING

THE ONLY OAK TREE IN the park, as everybody knew, was the home of the Rescue Rangers. Few of the animals who visited that tree paid much attention to the taller spruce tree next door, its dark green needles intertwined with the long leaves of the oak. While the Rangers had the oak to themselves, the spruce tree was the home of six families of mourning doves and seven families of red squirrels; the doves lived in the crown canopy, and the squirrels lived in apartments carved into the trunk. The families were physically connected in two ways: a common staircase running just inside the bark on one side of the tree, and a common room that took up the top floor of the trunk, with the doves living above and the squirrels living below. The apartment right below the common room was the home of the Chestnutts: Isabel and her two daughters Tammy and Beth (or Bink, as she was known to her oldest friends).

The Chestnutt apartment had been rather quiet for the last week as the family had been out of town, but the calm was shattered with a bang as the door to the staircase slammed open and Tammy stepped in. Several years older than she had been when she had first met the Rescue Rangers, Tammy was wearing a white commencement gown and carrying a stuffed suitcase in each hand. Her long red hair was gathered into two braided pigtails. Putting the suitcases down in the hallway, she announced to nobody in particular, “I’m home! I’m home!”

Her mother, who was right behind her in the staircase, tapped her on the shoulder. “We noticed,” she said gently. “Now could you please let us in?” Mrs. Chestnutt was wearing a full-length lavender-colored dress and carrying an overnight bag. Her shoulder-length auburn hair was styled in a manner reminiscent of the 1940’s. Behind her was Beth, a rambunctious six year old in blue jeans and a pea-green turtleneck sweater, swinging her own overnight bag around and inadvertently hitting her mother’s legs with every swing. Her short blonde hair was somewhat mussed.

“Oops!” exclaimed Tammy, picking up her luggage and leading the way down the narrow semi-circular hallway that surrounded the core of the tree. She walked past open doorways on her left for the bathroom and the kitchen, through the living room, before finally reaching the door to her bedroom. She opened the door and walked in to allow the others to continue on to their own rooms. Putting her suitcases down, she removed the gown to reveal blue jeans and a white tee shirt with the words “Allegheny River Academy” across the back. The shirt had already been signed numerous times in blue ink. Tossing the gown onto her bed, Tammy walked out of her room and strolled two doors down to the room of her younger sister.

“Need any help?” she asked from the doorway. Beth’s bed had an open suitcase on it, small but nevertheless nearly as big as its owner, and Beth was busy transferring items from the overnight bag into it.

“Nope!” Beth said confidently. Then she forgot where she left her favorite hairclip. With a little help from her big sister, that potential disaster was averted, and she was able to finish packing. Donning a large old-fashioned aviator’s helmet that was hanging on her bedpost, Beth picked up her suitcase with both hands. “Tower, this is Captain Beth, ready for takeoff,” she declared in a grown-up voice, looking at Tammy.

Tammy raised an eyebrow.

“*I’m a cargo pilot,*” Beth whispered, putting the luggage down and pointing at her helmet.

Tammy recognized it as one of Monterey Jack’s and smiled. Adopting a Texas twang, she said, “Tower to Captain Beth, you are cleared for takeoff on Hallway 1.”

Beth responded by making the sound of a prop engine and waddled with her suitcase into the hall. Tammy followed leisurely, her hands behind her back. She had to duck into her room as her mother rushed past with at least three suitcases in her arms, forcing Beth to pick up her pace to avoid being accidentally run over. Both Beth and Isabel left their suitcases in the living room.

When Tammy saw Beth returning to her room she held out her hand. Beth took it and looked up at Tammy, a twinkle in her eyes. The girls’ mother, rushing back to her bedroom to get more suitcases, was stopped in her tracks by this roadblock.

“Beth and I were going to catch up on what we missed while I was in school,” said Tammy.

Mrs. Chestnutt turned and pointed at the dial of a human wristwatch that was mounted on the living room wall. “The graduation party starts in fifteen minutes. The party in *your* honor, the party that I got the Rescue Rangers to agree to attend. Do you really have time . . .”

“Oh, I’m nearly ready,” Tammy interrupted. “Are you ready, Beth? Do you have time to talk with me for a bit?”

Beth nodded her head rapidly, her eyes still on her sister.

Mrs. Chestnutt sighed. “Very well, I’ll let you know when the Tanglefoots arrive.” She watched with hands on her hips and a bemused expression as Beth followed Tammy into her room and the door closed. “Well, at least my two daughters get along,” she said to herself happily. Then she remembered with a start how many suitcases still needed to be transferred to the living room, and resumed the dash to her bedroom.

TAMMY’S WAS THE LARGEST BEDROOM in the apartment. It had the disadvantage that the sun always made it too warm on summer afternoons such as this one, but this was more than compensated by its commanding view of the top of the Ranger Tree. The walls of the room were adorned with posters depicting cute animals and affirmative slogans—no cats, though. The bed, converted from a sea sponge, was in one corner next to a small wardrobe, and a desk occupied another. Tammy transferred her suitcases to the bed and began unpacking as Beth wandered around the room, peeking into the wardrobe and looking under the desk. Tammy had to walk around her to get to the wall calendar, which still showed December from last year, as that was that last time she had been home. She removed the calendar and replaced it with the one from her dorm. The date of June 12th was repeatedly circled in red ink. She then returned to the suitcases.

“Is *she* here?” Beth asked.

“Yes,” Tammy said, hanging up the commencement gown and stowing the suitcases between the wardrobe and the wall. She sat down in the desk chair and began to work on her hair with a brush. Looking over her left shoulder at a poster depicting a puffball of a mouse, Tammy said, “I can’t believe it. I don’t really feel any different than before the ceremony, to tell the truth. Maybe it will sink in tonight. I hope you didn’t miss anything earlier. I sensed you were gone during the speeches, but I’d have done the same thing if I were you.”

Beth rushed over to the mouse poster and waved. “Hi, Molly!” she shouted.

Tammy shushed Beth and cast a nervous glance at the door. When she didn’t hear anything from her mother she turned to Beth. “‘Molly?’” she asked.

“Your imaginary friend.”

“Her name’s not Molly! And she’s not imaginary. She’s not quite there in a physical sense, but she’s *not* imaginary!”

“So, what *is* her name?”

“I . . . I don’t know. Our conversations are rather one-way,” Tammy said apologetically.

“Well, *I’m* gonna call her Molly,” Beth said with a note of finality. She turned around and walked over to the desk, the top of which was about eye-level for her. Standing on tiptoes, she tried to see what was on it. The desk was covered with scraps of Post It notes, framed drawings, and a worn but stuffed scrapbook with the legend “Rescue Rangers” on its cover. The scrapbook was open, and Tammy had been idly turning the pages. It was currently open to a sketch of Chip working on his casebook.

“Wait, isn’t *your* imaginary friend named Molly?” Tammy asked.

“*I’m* too old for imaginary friends,” Beth replied proudly, drawing herself up to her full height of two and a half inches. “So you can have the name.”

With a bemused shrug, Tammy changed position and set to work with the hairbrush on her large unruly tail, resuming her conversation with “Molly”, who had apparently moved to the door in order to remain behind Tammy’s left shoulder. “I think you came in while I was talking with Herbie. He told me that Grandpa and Gadget got together and wrote a scientific paper, and one of the animal-run journals had printed it. He showed the issue to me—the thing looked like a mail-order catalog, it was so thick. I only got to glance at the paper, but Herbie has already memorized it, no surprise to you, right?” She waited a moment for a reply she knew she couldn’t hear. “Well, Grandpa got a copy of the published article, and he’s going to present it to her tonight at the party.”

Beth reached out to pick up the lone picture frame on the desk and then climbed up on the bed to look at it. The photograph, clipped as so many animal photographs were from the corner of a human photograph that “accidentally” included him, depicted a male squirrel with fur and hair color similar to Beth, wearing an immaculate white shirt and pith helmet. He was standing proudly at the entrance of a meercat colony and was surrounded by its members, who towered over him with toothy smiles.

“Tammy,” Beth asked, “how long was Daddy in Africa?”

Tammy scratched her nose for a second, remembering. “Six years, off and on,” she finally answered. “He came back for good three months before you were born.” She bent down to work on a particularly bad snarl. “Anyway,” she said to her unseen guest, “the Rangers will be at the party tonight, so this is the perfect opportunity to corner Chipper . . . I mean Chip, and give him the Speech. I’ve been working it over in my head

on the way here, and I think I'm sure that this will have to convince him. Do you want to hear it?"

"Oo! I do, I do!" Beth replied, jumping up and down on the bed. This caused the picture frame to bounce dangerously close to the edge of the bed.

Tammy quickly stood up and grabbed the photograph, setting it back on the desk. "Beth, I need you to promise not to say anything to Chip or the other Rangers about the Speech before I have a chance to give it."

Beth stood up on the bed and put a fist dramatically to her chest. "Is this the speech that goes 'Marry me, you fool!'"

"No!"

Beth fell down on the bed and started laughing, rolling back and forth on her tail.

Tammy scowled. "It's not like that anymore between me and Chip," Tammy explained, at least as much for "Molly" as for Beth's sake. "I got it all wrong last time. I thought I wanted to be like Mom and take care of the house while Chip went out adventuring like Dad. But Chip's not like that, and I eventually figured out, I'm not like that, either. At the Academy I figured out I'm actually more like Dad—if there's adventure to be had, I'd rather be in the middle of it." She looked wistfully out the window at the Ranger Tree. "In fact, I think with everything I've done in the last four years that I might finally have a chance at working alongside the Rescue Rangers. If they'll have me." She looked back at Beth, who was looking up at her with wide eyes. "That's what 'the Speech' is about—it's my chance to correct Chip's misconceptions about me, to tell him that I'm *not* the same silly girl he had to save from the clutches of Fat Cat." Tammy noticed that Beth was not in fact looking at her, but was instead peering over Tammy's left shoulder.

"I think I saw Molly," said Beth, her eyes as round as saucers. "But she's gone now."

"Really?" cried Tammy, jerking her head around, and then turning rapidly in a circle. "She's still here, but I can't see anything. What did you see?"

"It was a reddish blur, and I only saw it for a second. It was when you were getting really worked up."

"I wonder if I can make her appear again?" Tammy asked herself.

JUST THEN, THERE WAS A knock at the door. "Tammy, Beth, the Tanglefoots are here."

"Almost ready, Mom!" answered Tammy in a loud voice. She hoped to get some more time to ask her sister about what she saw.

Beth however had hopped down from the bed and raced for the door with a joyful cry of "Auntie Binkie!" She stopped herself at the doorknob and looked back. "You don't need me in here to make Mommy think you're not talking to yourself anymore, do you?"

Tammy sighed and shook her head. "You can go, Beth; I'll just try to be quieter."

"OK." Beth reached up, turned the knob and let herself out of Tammy's room, leaving the door swinging as she accelerated down the hall, crying "Auntie Binkie! Auntie Binkie!" the whole way.

Tammy closed the door, then moved the chair as far from it as possible and positioned herself so her left shoulder was pointing at the wall. She waited until she was sure there was nobody in the outside hall before continuing in a whisper. "Did I almost make you visible?" She sighed at the expected silence. "Oh, well. Let me finish this up—I'll give you the Speech, the short version. I tell Chip how foolish I was before, how

I'd much rather be helping people than setting tables, mention some of the stuff I've been doing at the Academy, and ask for a chance to prove myself. I mean Chip's got to give me a chance, right? He advertised for another Rescue Ranger, right, so he has to at least give me a chance, right?"

"TAMMY! We're leaving!" cried Tammy's mother.

"IN A MINUTE!" cried Tammy.

2. THE TANGLEFOOTS

A FEW MINUTES EARLIER, TAMMY’S mother Isabel had finally finished getting all of her luggage into the living room. The bags were carefully stacked and lined up to provide the maximum maneuverability while also allowing the fastest possible means of transferring the pile to its next destination. She looked the collection over carefully, certain that she had forgotten something. As she absent-mindedly tucked a loose strand of hair back behind her ear, she noticed out of the corner of her eye that something was indeed askew. Atop a carefully straightened pile of graded essays on the kitchen table, one more entry had been haphazardly dropped.

Sighing, Isabel walked into the kitchen and picked it up, then smiled when she recognized Tammy’s handwriting. Tammy had not been given the assignment of defining the difference between “feral” and “sentient”, but she considered herself a budding writer, and never gave up a chance to challenge herself. Pulling open a nearby drawer, Isabel removed a pair of reading spectacles and began to read:

The humans use the word “feral” to refer to all animals that are not pets or domesticated. In doing this they ignore a fundamental split in animalkind, one far more significant than anything created by a few generations of selective breeding.

For as long as animals have been writing history, there have always been the ferals and the sentients. The ferals, who, lacking self-awareness, live on instinct and raw emotion, without clothes, without speech, without a thought except to eat and to fight and to find a mate. And the sentients, stuck with forms like ferals and minds like humans. Forced to hide from humans, yet choosing to live next door. Forced to live apart from ferals, even when they are family, for feral may bear sentient young and sentient may bear feral young. Yet the line between these two is clear and sharp: from the moment of birth it is possible to see who is feral, and who is sentient, and the category you are born into is the category you will spend the rest of your days, however long (sentient) or short (feral) that span may be. None of the macroscopic species of animal is entirely made up of ferals, and only humans are entirely sentient, so every family knows what it is to have members in each category.

Guardians stand between these groups, allowing both to lead their separate lives. Between feral and sentient stands the Caretaker, a sentient that chooses to live among ferals, the messenger of the feral to the sentient. In the feral habitats set aside for them, the Caretaker ensures that ferals are free to live their wild lives with minimal interference from sentient and human alike, and keeps them in turn from inadvertently

disrupting the lives of sentients and humans. It is the Caretaker that applies the Test of Sentience to every newborn in their habitat, so that new sentients may be rescued and raised among their own kind. Similarly, when a feral is born among the sentients, it is the Caretaker that trains the child in the survival skills that a feral born among ferals would be expected to learn before releasing the child into the habitat.

The sentient that thinks. The feral that feels. The Caretaker that must partake of both. All of these the human confuses with his definition of "feral". In doing this he lumps together the reasonable and the unreasonable, the angel and the monster, and in doing so he makes of a black and white world a whole mess of gray.

P.S. Good luck on the trip, and be sure to write.

Isabel put down the essay, removed her glasses, and tapped them gently on her knuckles. *A solid B+, she thought, pretty good considering she didn't sit through the guest lecturers like the sophomores.* The comparison between ferals and "monsters" disturbed her slightly, and she made a mental note to take her daughter to a feral habitat at some point in the future. Then she looked at the postscript again, and smiled. *Good luck, yourself, dear, both with your summer and with your dreams, and I hope you know what you're doing.* As Isabel turned to put the glasses away, there was a knock on the door to the outside.

"Helloooooo, neighbor!" came a voice. "Is there anybody home?"

"Just a minute please," replied Isabel, pushing the drawer with the glasses shut.

Trying to delay the inevitable as long as possible, she turned to address her daughters' bedrooms. "Tammy, Beth," she addressed the closed door of her elder daughter, "the Tanglefoots are here."

"Almost ready, Mom!" cried Tammy.

A few seconds later her door opened and her sister Beth emerged, racing down the hall to the living room. "Auntie Binkie! Auntie Binkie!" she cried. Without giving her mother a chance, Beth darted around her and opened the front door.

Standing outside on a large branch was a family of four mourning doves. The patriarch of the family was wearing a large, loud yellow Hawaiian shirt. A stick-on nametag announced "I'm Herb Tanglefoot. What can I tell you about Foreverware today?" His wife wore a slim blue dress with a faux pearl necklace straight out of the '50's. Ruining the style somewhat was the large pocket that completely covered the front of the dress, but that was a required part of bird attire, to hold the things a human would hold in their hands when flying from place to place. It was similar to the reason why land animals wore backpacks more commonly than humans—to allow them to switch into "four-paw drive".

"Well," the woman addressed as "Auntie Binkie" said to the girl, "isn't it just delightful to see you again my dear goddaughter. How are you this evening?" Glancing at the suitcases she turned to Isabel and added "Isabel, you really ought to have Bink help you with all this."

"Her name's Beth," said Isabel in a low voice. "She's too old for a silly name like Bink."

Binkie chose to ignore this remark and instead craned her neck to look at the suitcases. “Well it might be me, but that doesn’t seem like near enough luggage for such a huge trip for three.”

“Two,” Isabel said. “Tammy’s not coming.”

“Not coming!” exclaimed Binkie. “Well be sure to tell her that she can come and visit us any time she likes.” She then furrowed her brow and pretended to think. “Hmm . . . I hope you don’t think this presumptuous of me, but this is the *sophomore* class trip, isn’t it? Tammy was a senior, so why was your family coming along in the first place?”

From the exasperated look on Isabel’s face, it was clear she had had this argument before. “I head the sophomore class committee for the Academy, Binkie. And I’m a member of the science committee that picked the Himalayas for the trip this year. Not to mention that my father is leading this trip, and the fact that the funding committee—which I’m also a member of—managed to raise more than enough money to allow anybody remotely interested in that part of the world to tag along.

“As for Beth here,” she said, putting a hand on her daughter’s head with a faraway look, “I made a promise once to not let my daughters grow up without seeing a bit of the world.”

“But Tammy’s not going.”

“That was her decision,” said Isabel, turning to face Binkie. “Her place is still open. Would you like to take it? We will be spending two weeks volunteering at the world’s largest feral habitat.”

Binkie gave Isabel a disapproving look. “There are more than enough feral habitats in the City with Caretaker positions open. In fact, I just heard that the birth ratio of ferals to sentients has been steadily rising over the last few years.”

Isabel continued on as if she hadn’t heard that. “It will be a unique opportunity to witness a solar eclipse, live immersed in another culture . . .”

Binkie shook her head with a grin. “Oh, no. I wouldn’t think of it. Might snag a claw over there,” she said, waving her wing vaguely at that part of the wall that represented the rest of the world. “No, you go along to those mountains and have a good time. I’ll just stay here and run your tree while you’re gone.”

This remark triggered a mini staring contest between the two women. Binkie’s husband looked nervously back and forth between his wife and his neighbor. “Lookie what I brought!” he exclaimed. “Bowls and bowls of goodies for the party! Where can I put them?”

“Why thank you, Herb,” Isabel said, a forced grin on her face. “That’s very kind.”

“I hope we’re not early or anything,” said Herb. “*Gulliver’s Island* was pre-empted today.”

Beth leaned forward. “Did you get me anything, Auntie Binkie?”

Binkie kneeled down to look Beth in the eye. “Only one little thing for my darling godchild.”

“Oo! Oo!” cried Beth. “Can I guess? Is it a Slinky?”

“No, not that . . .”

“Is it . . . an electric guitar?”

“Not quite.”

“Is it . . . a brand new car?”

This caught Herb’s attention. “Oo! Is it? Is it?” he asked excitedly.

Binkie glanced towards Isabel as she answered Beth first. “You certainly don’t think that your mother would have some issue with that?” To her husband she said, “And wouldn’t you know honey? You were with me when I bought it.”

“Aw,” grumbled Herb. “I’ll never get a brand new car.”

Isabel stepped back at this point. “Why won’t you all come in? After all I’d be remiss in not inviting you in . . .”

“Why thank you kindly, Ma’am,” Herb said as he led his family in. Two sons that were previously hidden by their father’s girth stepped into view. The elder was built like a Tank and not surprisingly, that was his nickname. He carried a perpetual frown on his face and he took up a station in a corner of the living room.

The younger son was thin and somewhat undersize for his age. His clothing identified him as a stereotypical nerd, right down to the pseudo-horn rim spectacles that were perched precariously on the top of his round beak. That beak was buried in his current choice of reading material, a couple dozen photocopied pages stapled together and covered in both sides in neat handwriting, frequently interrupted by scientific equations, tables and illustrations. He looked to be three-quarters of the way through it.

Binkie resumed her game with Beth. “Well, Beth, do you have any other guesses?”

“Oh, just tell her!” exclaimed the exasperated younger brother, not lifting his head.

“Like they’ll ever listen to you, Herbie,” grunted Tank. Herbie glared back for a moment, then returned to his reading.

Beth sighed. “Oh, I dunno. A lollipop, maybe?”

Binkie shook her head.

“OK. I give up.”

“How about this . . .” Binkie said, pulling a model of an F-104 Starfighter out of a bag.

In response, Beth grabbed the gift and started jumping up and down so fast that she became a blur. “Eeeeeeeeeeee! Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you!”

“It was the least I could do,” offered Binkie magnanimously, “given your mom doesn’t exactly know airplanes well enough.”

With an effort, Isabel managed to suppress her reaction. Instead she turned to her daughter and said “Why don’t you put that in your room, Beth; then you can take off that hat and finish getting ready for the party. Won’t you sit down?” She addressed this last remark to the Tanglefoots as there was another race of footsteps down the hallway.

“Certainly,” replied Binkie, sinking into a chair.

Herb turned back to the door. “Can’t forget these!” he exclaimed, going outside to retrieve an enormous number of plastic containers.

Herbie looked up and saw where his father was going. After dog-eared the document and putting it in his chest pocket, he followed Herb outside. “Don’t you think you’ve overdone things, Dad?” he asked.

“Never can have too many snacks, my boy.” Leaning in conspiratorially, he added, “I had to bring the whole set. Never know when you can make another sale.”

Herbie just rolled his eyes and continued carting containers onto the living room table.

Meanwhile from a back room came the sounds of mouth-powered diesel engines. “Vroom! Nee-yar!”

Binkie cast a significant glance at Isabel. “I can also see you haven’t communicated to your daughter that aircraft use jets . . .”

Gritting her teeth, Isabel looked at the clock. “Hadn’t we all better be going upstairs?”

Herb immediately began picking up the containers he just put down. “To the party!”

Everyone made their way down the hallway towards the stairway, leaving the suitcases behind for later. All except Herbie, who looked pointedly down the opposite hallway towards Tammy’s room.

Isabel looked back with a guilty start. “Oh for crying . . .” She strode purposefully past Herbie to stand at her elder daughter’s door. “TAMMY! We’re leaving!”

“IN A MINUTE!” cried Tammy from the other side of the door.

It didn’t open.

“Fine,” Isabel said, “we’re going then. See you whenever you decide to come up.”

She left with Binkie and Herb in tow. Tank decided he’d rather be annoyed in company than with just Herbie, so he followed.

Herbie strolled down the hallway to bide time while waiting for Tammy. Opposite her room were a series of photographs. One row depicted the archery team for each year Tammy was a member, while another showed Tammy’s membership in the Allegheny Academy ice hockey team. At first glance, the photos were a record of achievement: Tammy was a bashful member of each team in her freshman year, and a confident team player in her sophomore year, already looked up to in admiration by her colleagues.

Herbie walked by the photos without thinking much about them, then suddenly stopped and back-tracked.

“Hold on, what’s this?”

He looked closely at the junior and senior class photographs, leaning in close with a frown on his face. Not making out much, he pulled a spare pair of spectacles out of his chest pocket, adjusted it so the two lenses overlapped to create a makeshift magnifying lens, and carefully studied Tammy’s face in each picture.

“Watcha lookin’ at, Herbie?”

Herbie turned in surprise to find Beth standing there beside him, minus her helmet and with her hair neatly arranged. Isabel had apparently forgotten about her younger daughter.

“Tammy in these photos,” replied Herbie. “There’s something I can’t quite make out.”

“I can tell you,” volunteered Beth in a low voice, “but it’s a secret.”

“In other words, you’re not going to tell me.”

“I’m not allowed! Tammy would kill me if I told! Well . . . not *kill* kill, but still!”

Herbie turned back towards the photos. “I guess I’ll just have to figure it out for myself.”

Beth snuck up next to Tammy’s door and leaned her head against it, her tongue sticking out as she concentrated on listening. “Shh,” she whispered to Herbie, “she’s doing it again!”

Herbie stood next to her, but declined to listen in. “Doing what?” he asked in a whisper.

Beth’s reply was to point excitedly at the door.

Just then, the door was yanked open and Beth fell to the ground.

“Beth!” Tammy cried. “What are you doing outside my door?” At this point she noticed Herbie for the first time.

Beth popped up. She leaned towards her sister with a smile on her face. “Tammy,” she asked, “are you still talking to Mo . . . ?”

Tammy lightly bonked her sister on the head to shut her up, causing Herbie to grimace from the memory of significantly stronger bonks applied to his own head by his older sibling in days past. Beth’s only response was to turn up her nose and march into Tammy’s room, where she proceeded to climb up on Tammy’s bed and stare out the window.

“Of course I’m not talking to Mom, Beth. She left for the party already.” Tammy was not a good liar.

Herbie looked her in the eyes. “Is now a good time?” he asked.

“A good time for what?”

“At the ceremony you said there was something you wanted to tell me when there were less people around.”

Tammy rushed forward and placed her hand over Herbie’s beak. “Not now!” she hissed in his ear. “Ask me again later, when there’s even less people around!” Herbie gave a confused glance at Beth, the only other person he could see, and Tammy released him. To prevent any more awkward questions she pointed at the bit of paper that was sticking out of Herbie’s chest pocket. “What’cha reading?” she asked.

Herbie pulled out the document. “You remember when I told you that Gadget and your grandfather had published a purely theoretical paper on hyper-dimensional physics in the *Journal of Rodent Astrophysics*? Well, Gadget had a plan for proving that theory, but she needed some help, so she wrote to Pr. Hopperrickel and he wants me to take his place at a demonstration tomorrow, as he’s going on the sophomore class trip and I’m not. So I’m reading the notes Gadget sent explaining what she’s done so far and where’s she’s having difficulties. She’ll bring to the party whatever results she’s managed to get in the last week.”

“Wow,” Tammy exclaimed, “I’m so proud of you! Grandpa could have picked one of his graduate students, but he thought you were the best person for the job!”

“Well,” said Herbie, one wing held awkwardly behind his neck, “I think having Gadget for a next-door neighbor was probably the deciding factor.”

“Nonsense. I bet you could have written the mathematical part of that paper at least as well as Grandpa did.”

In an attempt to change the subject, Herbie produced a folded piece of notepaper. “There was a letter addressed to the Rescue Ranger Fan Club waiting for me when I got in this afternoon. Remind me to show it to you.”

Tammy nodded, brushing aside the slight impulse from “Molly” to grab the letter from Herbie and read it right there. Tammy and Herbie may have founded the fan club three years earlier, but Tammy always suspected that the inspiration for it had come to her from her invisible friend. The club now had nearly two dozen members, most of them living in the spruce tree. Tammy was president of the club, and Herbie was secretary.

Beth peeked over her tail at the two. “Tammy, did you want to give the . . . to say ‘hi’ to Chip before he got to the party?”

“That was the plan, yes.”

“Well, you better hurry,” said Beth, pointing out the window at a broad branch that linked the Ranger tree with the spruce tree, “because they’re nearly here.”

Tammy looked in the direction indicated, to see that the Rescue Rangers were halfway across.

“Eep!” she exclaimed, before grabbing Herbie’s wing and Beth’s hand and making a dash for the staircase.

Behind them, the later pictures of Tammy continued to gaze in fascination over their left shoulders.

3. OUR HEROES

WALKING ALONG THE GREAT BROAD branch that linked the oak tree with the spruce tree came that valiant team of heroes, the Rescue Rangers. Many had been the time when this stalwart band had stood alone against the forces of Evil and time and again emerged triumphant. The group was suddenly brought to a halt by the pronouncement of their wise and unflappable leader:

“We are doomed!”

Chip—for once—was not at the head of the procession. Instead he was at the rear, and was nearly invisible under a pile of paperwork and notebooks that would be tiny by human standards but enormous by a chipmunk’s. The papers had all been neatly typewritten by Gadget, who was leading the procession.

“What is it now?” she asked testily. She was dressed in a white lab coat, her hair in a tight bun at the back of her head. In one arm she carried a clipboard with several abstract printouts attached, printouts that appeared to use more colors than should rightfully exist. She was trying her best to block out a rather annoying buzzing at the back of her skull.

Chip felt a little sheepish under her sharp gaze. “I just realized we’re heading towards a party full of Tammies.”

Dale grinned. “Correction, Chip. *You* are doomed.” Dale was also dressed uncharacteristically, in a full black tuxedo adorned with sequins. In one hand he carried a large black suitcase across which was printed the legend “The Great Dale-Dini”.

“If I didn’t know better, Chip, I’d swear you didn’t like her,” added Gadget.

The other Rangers laughed, which did nothing to improve Chip’s mood. Now *he* began to feel a headache building.

“I’m not the only one walking into a potential trap, here,” he said. “For instance, I’ve seen the way those squirrel boys follow you around when they think you’re not looking, Gadget.” He immediately regretted saying this.

Gadget looked at him with a bewildered expression in her eyes. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Never mind.”

Dale laughed. “It’s almost as if I’m the only one not getting stalked by potential lovers.”

Walking beside him, Foxglove, a “close personal friend” of Dale, rolled her eyes. She was wearing a long red dress with slits for her wings, sequined similarly to Dale’s outfit. Her hair was up in a beehive. She kept fidgeting with the bottom of the dress and occasionally looked down to see how it trailed behind her, as if she thought it had a mind of its own. “I hope nobody minds that I’m tagging along,” she said. “After all, the invitation was for the Rescue Rangers, not ‘Rescue Rangers and guest’.”

“Don’t be silly, Foxglove,” Dale said. “You can’t have a magic show without the pretty assistant, and I couldn’t ask for a prettier assistant than you.” Foxglove blushed at this compliment.

“Besides, you’ve been staying with us so long that you’re practically family.” This remark was made by Monterey Jack and was shortly followed by Zipper’s non-vocal agreement. The two of them were the only ones wearing their normal workday clothes. They also appeared to be rather tired out.

Foxglove blushed again, but for a different reason. “Gosh, I’m sorry to be inconveniencing you so much. I promise I’ll start another house hunt tonight.” She had been staying with the Rangers off and on for the past year while the human church she usually lived in was having its dome repainted, a process run by an enthusiastic artist that looked like it would never end. The longest she had been away from the Ranger Tree had been three weeks in February. Feeling that her over-long stay was unfair on her hosts, the bat had attempted to “pay her way” by helping the group with their cases. Chip had initially resisted, but she had eventually proved herself. Nevertheless, the insecure bat feared she had overstayed her welcome.

The Rescue Rangers shared a significant look at the bat’s remark. “Golly, Foxglove,” said Gadget, speaking for all of them, “what use is a guest room if you don’t have a guest staying there? We’d like you to stay as long as you’d like, but if you really think you need a place of your own, we’ll all help you look for a place tomorrow. No . . . wait, I’m afraid I’ll be busy tomorrow with the demonstration. But I promise we’ll help you look the day after tomorrow, if you haven’t changed your mind.”

Chip refused to ignore his nagging intuition. “Well, whatever it is, I just have this feeling of impending doom. Is today Fat Cat’s birthday or something?”

Gadget shook her head, impatient to get the group moving again. “That was two months ago, Chip.”

Chip tried and failed to scratch his head in frustration. “Right. Why didn’t I remember that? Monty, what did you find on your little mission?”

It took a moment for Monty to realize he had been addressed, as he was busy trying to rub the sudden headache out of his temples. “Huh? Oh, uh, yes.” He looked over at Zipper, who whispered in his ear. “Oh, yes. Professor Nimmul is still locked up, and he shows no sign of ever wanting to leave. There was something else, but . . . no, I think that might have been cheese-related.” A familiar far-off look came into Monty’s eyes as he pronounced his favorite word.

“OK, so that’s not it . . .” mused Chip.

Foxglove suddenly shot up her right wing into the air, hopping up and down on one foot. “Oo! Oo! I know!”

“Yes, Foxglove?”

“Tomorrow will be the one-year anniversary of the day, in an alternate timeline, when the Rangers broke up!”

Chip gave Foxglove a long, hard look as he tried to parse what she just said. The effort made his headache worse. “Foxglove,” he concluded, “the more I get to know you, the more I become convinced that you and Dale are made for each other.”

Foxglove grinned from ear to ear. “Why thank you, Chip! That’s so thoughtful!”

Chip gave Foxglove another strange look, then shrugged and set out to catch up with Gadget, who had resumed walking. As he walked, the pile of paperwork started dangerously leaning, first one way and then another.

Alerted by some sixth sense, Gadget whirled and rushed up to Chip. “Be careful with those papers you fool! Think of the damage you could do to my reputation!” She exclaimed this in a rather odd tone.

Chip raised one eyebrow as he slowed down. “Gadget!” he exclaimed. “Are you feeling alright?”

Gadget gasped and put her free hand over her mouth. “I am so sorry, Chip! I don’t know what came over me.”

“I do,” said Chip. “That wasn’t *you* speaking just now.”

Gadget nodded sadly. “Who knew that phone lines could be so noisy?” she said, half to herself. “I’m still not sure if that paper was my work, or actually *his* work.”

“Oh, it’s definitely yours,” Dale said confidently. “Nimnul was never able to get his ideas down on paper so anybody else could understand them. That’s why he never succeeded as a scientist.”

Chip turned wearily to face the other chipmunk, asking, “And how did you know that, Dale?”

“I . . . I don’t know.”

“It’s because *we all* got a bit of him, Dale.”

Monty sighed. “Even when we think we are rid of him, he still manages to haunt us.”

“There are some things you just can’t change,” Chip concluded.

Foxglove looked on silently, somewhat confused, as she had never been informed about this subject. Nevertheless, she felt like she ought to say something. “Well, you’re the Rescue Rangers, right? You’ll get through this like every other challenge you’ve ever faced. In the meantime, we’re going to a party . . .” (this cheered up Dale) “. . . that’s been catered . . .” (this cheered up Monty and Zipper) “. . . where Gadget will be honored for her scientific achievements . . .” (Gadget brightened a little at this) “. . . and the Rangers and their achievements will be a strong center of attention.” This last bit was aimed at Chip but missed its mark. He decided to smile anyway, for the sake of morale.

“And don’t forget the demonstration,” Chip added. “Just imagine the look on Professor Hoppnickel’s face when he sees . . . Oh, that’s right, Sparky’s machine won’t be here until tomorrow, right? (Why am I having so much trouble remembering things today?)”

Just then, a voice cried out from the opening of the great squirrel and dove hall. “Look, everybody, it’s the Rescue Rangers!”

Dale strode ahead of the group. “And so it begins,” he proclaimed, leading them to the hall.

4. GADGET MAKES CHILDREN CRY

TAMMY RACED UP THE STAIRCASE, leaving Herbie and Beth far behind. In no time she reached the door to the meeting hall. The doors were closed, but the loud buzz of conversation could be heard beyond. She stopped for a moment to rest her paw on the hall's dedicatory plaque on the wall nearby. The plaque featured a portrait of a squirrel that was thoroughly covered by that paw. The words "Richard Chestnutt Hall" above and "... gave his life to save 28 others during the Great Fire of 1985" below were still visible. She took a deep breath and removed her paw as her sister and friend caught up to her.

"Here we go," she said, pulling open the door.

The door opened into a narrow hallway extending a little ways right and a long ways left to open into the hall itself. Herbie and the two squirrels emerged from the hallway to see three large banners extending across the high ceiling of the large room. One read "Congratulations", a second read "Tammy Chestnutt" and the third read "Herbert Tanglefoot, Jr." The two last banners were arranged so there was a 50 % chance which of them you would see first on entering the hall—the result of a careful compromise between Isabel Chestnutt and Binkie Tanglefoot.

Tammy didn't break her stride; making her way past numerous congratulating adults and teenagers to try and reach the open door at the other end of the convention hall that led to the branch the Rescue Rangers would be taking to arrive. Not only the people stood in her way—Tammy also had to fight through strong feelings of nostalgia from "Molly", who kept bringing up the strongest emotions Tammy had felt towards each of the people she was looking at. She finally reached the other edge of the crowd, but alas she was too late, as the Rangers had already arrived and they were fully occupied in being greeted by the Herzogs.

The Herzogs were the squirrel family that lived on the floor beneath Tammy's apartment. The booming voice of Ken Herzog could be easily heard across the hall: "As I was just telling my darling daughter Sandra, these are the brave individuals who diffused that nasty hostage crisis in this very room six month ago while she was at the Academy. What was the name of that criminal running the operation? Spumoni? Mascarpone?" The teenage daughter referred to was standing next to her father, giving Chip a rather predatory look. Tammy had heard stories about the fates of the other poor individuals to fall victim to that gaze. In despair, Tammy stopped right where she was and balled her fists at her sides, saying, "But that's not fair!"

A dove, thinking she was addressing him, glanced from her face back to the sports section of his newspaper. "The Yankees can't win them all, kid."

Just then a paw came down heavily on Tammy's shoulder. "There you are!" her mother proclaimed. "Have you forgotten about your speech?"

Tammy fumed. “Of course I haven’t forgotten—why do you think I’m trying so hard to get to . . . oh. You mean *that* speech. Very well.” She turned reluctantly away from her quarry and allowed herself to be led to the stage.

HERBIE LOOKED DOWN AT THE little hand grasping his wing. “I better get you to your mother,” he told Beth, before leading her up the steps at the rear of the convention hall. These led onto a small stage which had a dual use: one half had a microphone on a stand and a mini-flashlight pointing at it for speeches, while the other half was where the party’s food was being served.

“Well, I suppose I might as well get it over with,” said the gray squirrel at the microphone, squinting out at the crowd. “Could Ms. Hackwrench please join me on the stage?” The speaker was tall, but stooped with age. He was wearing a dark suit and spectacles and holding a faux-leather bound article in one hand. Herbie recognized him as Professor Julius Hoppnickel, Tammy’s grandfather and one of the teachers from Allegheny Academy. The professor had been the one who had convinced Herbie, Tammy and their families to apply for admission to the academy four years ago.

From his vantage point on the stage, the teenage dove had a good view of the Rescue Rangers below. Mr. Herzog was loudly proclaiming his admiration for all things Rescue Ranger to Monterey Jack. Sandra Herzog and her friends were gathered in a ring around Chip that followed him as he carefully made his way to the stage. Gadget was well ahead of him, the eyes of most of the males and many of the females following her. Dale was kidding around with some children, the younger brothers and sisters of the sophomores being honored tonight. Foxglove, as a relative newcomer, was more an object of curiosity, while Zipper, as was sadly the norm, was ignored. In addition, Herbie spotted his mother, trying to use a wingfeather to wipe a smudge off the bill of a squirming Tank. There was an empty spot next to Binkie Tanglefoot to mark the place her salesdove husband had been standing in the split-second before Gadget had entered the room. Herbie tried to spot Tammy as well, but he didn’t have to search long, as Tammy’s mother dragged her up the steps and into the wings. Mrs. Chestnutt gestured to Herbie and Beth to join them as well.

“You two are on as soon as my father finishes with Gadget,” Isabel explained, “and I think it would be distracting to have anybody eating up here while somebody’s talking.”

The moment Beth discovered there was something she couldn’t do, she found she absolutely had to do it. “But Mom, I’m *hungry!*”

“Beth, shush.”

Beth sighed. “Yes, Mother.”

GADGET WALKED ONTO THE STAGE, her lab coat swirling dramatically behind her. The crowd applauded warmly. When she reached the professor, she held her hand out in greeting. The professor stared at it until she put it down.

“Now then,” the professor told the crowd, “you all know Gadget here as a fantastic inventor and an integral member of the Rescue Rangers, but recently she decided to branch out into my field of theoretical physics. Two months ago, the mouse you see here wrote to ask for my assistance on a paper she was writing. She had taken on String

Theory, which attempts to explain the entirety of Creation in mathematical terms that only less than a hundred beings on Earth can comprehend, and turned it into child's play. I wouldn't be surprised if her 'musical method' is eventually used to teach String Theory to high school students." The crowd was having difficulty telling if the professor was praising Gadget or being sarcastic.

"I had the harder job," he continued, "of proving mathematically that her explanation worked as well as the obtuse explanation we physicists have had to labor under for so long, and to 'sponsor' her paper for publication. You see, scientific publications usually do not like to publish the work of people without strings of initials after their name, but one look at Gadget's paper was enough to change their minds, and 'A New Interpretation of M-Space' was published in the June issue of the *Journal of Small Animal Astrophysics*." Professor Hoppnickel turned to face Gadget and held up the object he had been holding. "Ms. Hackwrench, I hereby present you an official bound copy of your article. I guess that makes you a member of the scientific community." The professor quickly joined the others in the wings.

The crowd applauded as Gadget accepted the article and stepped up to the microphone. She took a moment to flip through the pages. "Yup, it's all here! Well, I'm not one for speeches, but I'd like to thank *J'SAAPH*" (which she pronounced "jasaff") "for publishing my work, and I'd like to thank all of you for allowing me to interrupt your party for this little ceremony." She held up the article. "*This* is just the beginning, folks. My next article will change *everything*." She then walked off the stage and into the wings without another word.

Isabel passed her to stand before the microphone. "Well! That was . . . enigmatic. For the next item on the agenda, I'd like to invite my daughter, Tammy Chestnutt, to the stage."

Tammy sighed and pulled a crumpled notecard out of a pocket.

"Good luck," Herbie said.

"Thanks," she replied before walking out into the limelight. In truth, neither of them was worried. They knew well in advance that they would be required to give speeches, and so had helped each other during the week between finals and graduation to work out what they were going to say.

"It's not everyday that a poor city squirrel like myself gets a look at a genuine rodent-scale castle . . ." Tammy began.

AS TAMMY CONTINUED HER SPEECH, Herbie turned to Gadget, who was less than an inch from him, and found himself tongue-tied. "Ccongratulations on the paper, Mmiss Hackwrench."

Gadget's attention was focused on Chip, who was ponderously ascending the steps with the biggest pile of papers Herbie had ever seen in the arms of a rodent. "Hm?" she said at last, looking his way. Even distracted, her beauty was enough to send Herbie's knees knocking. "Oh, well, yes, thank you, and please, just call me Gadget," she said, before turning back and guiding Chip towards Professor Hoppnickel.

"Professor," she addressed him, "I hope you received those notes I sent you last week."

“Yes,” he said, heavily. “I only just finished them this morning. They made for some . . . interesting reading.”

“I can understand if you found the arguments a little hard to swallow. There were certain items I lacked the time, or the ability, to reproduce.” She gestured at Chip’s load. “Perhaps if we find somewhere a bit more private to discuss the offer I made?”

“Hm . . . yes,” Hoppnickel said, frowning. “There’s a dressing room in the back we could use.” He tapped Herbie on the shoulder to get his attention, and then turned back to Gadget. “You don’t mind if Mr. Tanglefoot joins in? As you must know, I will be leaving the country tonight, and will not be available for the next few weeks, so I took the liberty of making a copy of your notes for him to read. That way he can attend your demonstration in my place.”

Gadget looked at Herbie like this was the first time she had noticed him. “Herbie? Yes, I should have thought of that myself. He will do nicely.”

Herbie looked down at the stage in embarrassment. “I, erm, haven’t finished reading your notes, Miss Hackwrench, but I should have them done by tomorrow morning.”

The professor quickly stepped between Gadget and Herbie and pulled the latter aside, a worried expression on his face. “You haven’t, by any chance, started reading the appendices yet, have you?” he asked in a low voice. The question seemed very important to the elderly squirrel.

“No, I’m still in Section Eight,” replied Herbie, puzzled.

Professor Hoppnickel looked relieved. “Good, good.” He pointed at the chest pocket in Herbie’s overalls. “Is that it?” he asked. Without waiting for an answer, he continued. “Do you think I could look at them for a minute? You don’t really need those appendices for the presentation and perhaps . . .”

“Professor, are you coming?” Gadget and Chip had advanced down the hallway that led backstage from the wings and were standing at the door of the dressing room.

“This conversation is not finished,” the professor warned his former student, before turning to the two Rescue Rangers. “On our way!”

“. . . but I swear I have no idea how that got there!” Tammy told the crowd with a twinkle in her eye. As they laughed at her punch line, Tammy’s eyes wandered over to the wings. She saw her mother and sister watching attentively, but there was no sign of Herbie, Gadget, or, most importantly, Chip.

ONCE THE TWO RESCUE RANGERS and the two academics had reunited, the Professor closed the door, blocking out the sound of the crowd laughing at one of Tammy’s jokes. Seeing a sturdy table along one wall, Chip happily put down the several pounds of paper his wobbling legs were barely supporting. “The torture, it’s over!” he announced jokingly. Gadget gave him a hard look.

“Now then,” said Professor Hoppnickel with a somber expression, “I have indeed read your notes about spying on alternate universes, and what you are proposing is far, far beyond what I would be comfortable having my name associated with. Can you imagine what would happen to my reputation if I were to sponsor a paper in support of such an . . . unconventional topic?” His eyes grew distant, as he contemplated the worst fate possible to an astrophysicist: “I’d never be invited to a conference again.” He looked

at her beseechingly. “Surely you can choose a safer line of inquiry? One easier to prove?”

“*Prove?*” Gadget asked in a dangerous tone. “You wish me to *prove* my claims? I may have accidentally given you the false impression that Musical String Theory was devoid of experimental confirmation in my original letter, but in fact the experiments I have performed with the Dimensional Viewer came *first*, and the theory came after. The reason I wanted the theory published first is because that was the only part I was sure the scientific establishment would accept. But *that part*,” she said earnestly, pointing at the piles of paper Chip had put down, “*that* is the vision I had five months ago, a vision I plan to share with *the world!*” She looked up at Chip’s worried expression, and realized she had been wandering into Nimnul territory again. “Yes, well with your help, of course,” she concluded gently.

“And does that ‘vision’ include Appendix A of the notes you sent me?” Hopperrickel asked dryly.

Gadget winced slightly. “Ah . . . well, perhaps I should have waited until after the demonstration to show you that part.”

“Yes, about that demonstration—I don’t think anything less than seeing with my own eyes whatever wonder you claim to have witnessed would be enough to convince me of the truth of what *you’re* claiming. Now if we hurry, perhaps you could show me your device right now, before it would interfere with the class trip?”

“That would be perfect!” exclaimed Gadget, “We’ll just go over to HQ and . . . no, wait. There was some reason why I can’t do that. What was it?” she asked herself in confusion. “Think, Gadget, think!”

Chip stepped forward, although he looked about as befuddled as Gadget. “Wasn’t it a power problem or something?”

“Yes, that’s right. Thanks, Chip! The device currently has a power problem, but I hope to have that resolved tomorrow morning.”

The professor sighed. “I’m afraid I’ll be halfway to Nepal by tomorrow morning. Perhaps you can find another sponsor, someone more sympathetic to your views . . .”

The worried look on Gadget’s face made it clear that all other avenues in this direction had already been followed to dead ends. “No, wait!” she pleaded. “I do have reproduction pictures of its display . . .”

“I’m sorry, dear,” he interrupted, “but you can’t prove anything with ‘reproduction pictures’.”

“These pictures are very conclusive. They are unlike anything possible in this universe. Here, let me show them to you . . .” She walked back to the table, retrieved some photographs, and then presented them to the professor with a defiant look on her face.

The professor looked through the small pile of photographs more than once, first quickly, and then slowly, turning them this way and that. His expression grew more and more confused until, for a brief moment, he broke out into a panic. But he quickly fought that down, leaving a neutral expression on his face.

“While these may be interesting,” he said carefully, “I’d have to see *actual* results in order to make any overreaching conclusions on the validity of your claims. Perhaps after Nepal, we can get in touch.”

Gadget steamed. “Oh . . . oh . . .” she began, but then suddenly calmed down. “Actually, that sounds quite reasonable.” She turned to look at the overflowing table of paper. “I’ve got a few notes I used to write the paper; are you interested in seeing those as well? I’ve got rough drafts, a list of alternate titles by Dale, my attempts to reproduce the images manually before I invented the improved photographic apparatus . . .”

The professor was already at the door of the dressing room, Herbie’s shoulder tightly gripped in his free hand. “Perhaps another time,” he explained, retreating, “as my granddaughter is having a graduation party, you see. So if you don’t mind I think I better locate her and congratulate her on a job well done.” The two exited the room, revealing a long line of love-struck sophomore boys and girls that had tracked Chip and Gadget to this room.

Chip looked at the pile of paper with trepidation. “Will you be needing me to pick those back up again? I’m just beginning to feel my arms.”

“It couldn’t have been that bad!” said Gadget.

“Were *you* holding them?”

“Hmm. On second thought, I better review them for inadvertent errors before the professor sees them.”

“Do whatever you need to. Just please, *please*, don’t make me lift them again!”

Gadget waved her hand absently in Chip’s direction. “You’re free to go.” She advanced on the pile and started organizing the mess as he walked out the door, to be instantly surrounded by Sandra and her two friends. Seeing that she was alone, the entire male sophomore class got into a shoving match to determine who would approach her first. The winner, a towering mountain of a squirrel nearly as big as Tank, came up behind her.

“Hey,” he said. “S’up. They call me ‘Hematoma’. Wanna make out?”

She turned on him suddenly, her eyes bloodshot. “WHAT?”

“Hematoma” bolted, crying. “Mommy!” Gadget returned to her work.

ONCE PAST THE MAELSTROM OF male students, Professor Hoppernickel addressed Herbie: “So, you have read most of Gadget’s notes—what do you think? Do alternate universes exist?”

“I’m aware of your views on the subject, Professor,” Herbie answered cautiously.

“You’re not my student anymore, Mr. Tanglefoot, and you never had to worry about hurting my feelings.”

“Well, now that Miss Hackwrench’s ‘Special Theory’ of Musical Strings has been expanded into a ‘General Theory’, it does appear that the existence of an incredible number of alternate universes is a central part of that theory, indeed, that the theory would fall apart if our universe were the only universe in existence.”

“So she *has* convinced you?”

“It all holds together remarkably well.”

“Yes, but you do not suspect how shaky her foundation is. I’ll admit that I originally agreed to sponsor Gadget’s paper for the base reason that it gave me a way to fight back against my colleagues, the majority of which believe String Theory is utter hogwash. But now that I can see the whole of it, and the photographs that inspired the theory in the first place . . . have you ever heard of John Nash? He won the Human Nobel Prize in

Economics. Had a complete mental breakdown in 1959 for schizophrenia. His brain was so tuned to pulling patterns out of the noise that when it ran out of things to make sense out of, he started pulling patterns out of rubbish. Communist conspiracies planted in the want ads of the *New York Times*, that sort of thing. Now take a look at the so-called ‘proof’ of Ms. Hackwrench’s paper—these photos contain nothing but static. She must have stared at them and stared at them until her mind snapped and started seeing patterns that weren’t there. So sad. The same thing happened to some of my graduate students—it’s the reason I switched to teaching at the Academy.”

“May I take a look?” Herbie asked.

“Sure,” the professor replied, handing them over. The photographs were chiefly remarkable for the immense number of colors employed. There were so many of them that they dazzled the mind. Otherwise, there was no pattern to be found in any of them—no black outlines, no solid fields of color.

“I can’t really see anything, either,” Herbie concluded. “This area in the middle of this one could be a figure, but if there is one, the picture is too noisy to be sure.”

“There, you see?” Professor Hoppernickel said nervously. “This sort of thing is an occupational hazard of being an astronomer or a physicist, but when you’re an astrophysicist, you get the worst of both worlds. Anti-gravity, perpetual motion, the secret fate of the universe—I get ‘papers’ on these subjects every year from assorted nuts wanting somebody to agree with them. Some of them get rather violent if you don’t. Although this one,” he referred to his copy of Gadget’s notes, “is so well organized I was almost ready to sponsor it.” He sighed, removing his glasses and pinching his nose. “Until I read the appendices. I don’t suppose I can convince you not to read Appendix A before we’ve *both* seen a demonstration of that device?”

Herbie looked away awkwardly.

Hoppernickel sighed. “No, I don’t suppose I can force that kind of promise out of you. You’re a born scientist, Mister Tanglefoot, just like me, and a born scientist can’t keep his snout, or in your case beak, out of the mysteries of the universe, no matter how painful. Just promise me this: try to remember how you felt about Miss Hackwrench *before* you read it.” Herbie offered to return the photographs. “No, keep them,” the professor replied, as he started walking back towards to stage. “Come along, Mister Tanglefoot, you have a speech to give.”

Herbie followed the professor in silence, putting the photographs beside his copy of Gadget’s notes.

5. THE RESCUE RANGER FAN CLUB

AS PROFESSOR HOPPERNICKEL AND HERBIE re-entered the stage, they found that Tammy had long-since concluded her speech and was now mingling with the crowd. As Herbie waited, the professor took the microphone for his next introduction.

“If I may have your attention once again, it’s time for another speech, by a young dove who graduated fifth in his class! Please give a warm welcome to Mr. Herbert Tanglefoot, Jr.”

There was a polite smattering of applause as Herbie made his way to the microphone. Once there, he adjusted his spectacles, pulled out his notes for the speech, and sniffed nervously before beginning. “I . . . I’ve been curious about how the world worked for as long as I can remember. The mathematical formulae discovered by the great scientists to describe the physical world have at times seemed more real to me than the confusing and easily-deceived evidence of my senses . . .”

Seeing Tammy on the floor, the professor attempted to make his way down the staircase to greet her, but was intercepted halfway down by Herbie’s father. The salesdove had just emerged from the curtains surrounding the stage. “Professor Humperdinck, just the man I was looking for!”

“Actually, that’s Hoppernickel, sir. Now if I could just go around . . .”

Herb ignored this attempt to evade him and instead grabbed Hoppernickel’s hand and shook it vigorously. “Herb Tanglefoot’s the name, and storage solutions is my game. Professor, have you ever considered the many uses that a *Foreverware* container could have in your home?” He bowed his head slightly as if in reverence as he mentioned the name of his employer.

Less than six inches away, Herbie sighed inwardly and raised his voice somewhat so that he could still be heard above the sales pitch.

“ . . . AND SO I CONCLUDE WITH this final piece of advice: the key to achievement is to find the one thing that comes easily to you, and focus all your efforts on being the best at that one thing that you can be.” Herbie had reached the end of his speech. Tammy appeared to be the only person who was still listening to him. “Thank you,” he said quietly, and then he crossed the stage to return to the wing. He was determined to read the rest of Gadget’s notes before the end of the party, so he started looking around for someplace to sit. The dressing room was out, as Gadget had still not emerged from there. He decided he would just have to drag a chair over to where he was right now.

As he stepped back out to the food-serving half of the stage, he noticed Dale and Foxglove hanging a red curtain over a clothesline that had been set up on the right side of the floor. A sign on an easel nearby proclaimed “The Great Dale-dini: Magic Munk Extraordinaire! (will work for chocolate)”

Ah, the magic show, Herbie thought wryly to himself. *Designed to keep the kids from going bonkers after eating all of the cookies Dad brought in his Foreverware containers.*

“Cookie?” asked an excited Beth, who had suddenly appeared at Herbie’s side.

Herbie jumped. “Don’t *do* that!”

Beth smiled up at him innocently. “Cookie, cookie, cookie.”

“Um . . . no, thanks,” he said, confused. “I’m saving my appetite for later.”

Beth frowned and put her hands on her hips. “No, silly. *I* want a cookie.” After thinking a bit, she realized her mistake. “I’d *like* a cookie. Please. Pretty please with sprinkles on top?”

Herbie sighed. “Sure, you can have one.” Taking Beth’s hand, he led Beth in between the tables. His father’s Foreverware containers were everywhere you turned, but most of them had already been emptied. Eventually he found one with some sugar cookies inside.

“Yay, cookies!”

“Oh, oh, can I have one too, Herbie?” At the sound of one of his favorite words, Dale had appeared at Herbie’s side. Laughing, he grabbed two for himself.

Beth’s mother Isabel, her plate covered with vegetables, also happened to be in the area, and she honed in on the sound of her daughter about to break one of her cardinal rules.

“No, no, Beth,” she warned, “what have I always told you?”

“‘No sweets before dinner’,” recited Beth. She reluctantly removed her hand from Herbie’s and offered it to her mother.

Isabel took it with a smile. “That’s right,” she told her daughter. “I don’t want you bouncing off the walls.”

“Not even one teensy-weensy cookie?” Of course, the cookies in the container were bigger than Beth’s head.

“No. And that goes for you too, Dale. Put them back.”

Dale pouted. “Aw, you’re not even my mom!”

“I don’t need you on a sugar high, either.”

A group of kids had already gathered in front of the makeshift curtain in anticipation of the show. “We want the Great Dale-dini!” they chanted. “We want the Great Dale-dini!”

Hearing this, Dale tried his puppy dog eyes on Isabel. “If Dale can’t get one, can Dale-dini?”

Isabel grinned. “If you get to your show in the next minute, yes.”

Dale returned one of cookies and took a bite out of the remaining one before getting a good look at it. He then saw that all of the cookies had Rescue Ranger heads iced on them.

“Um, why am I eating myself?”

Beth fell to the ground laughing.

“But I am!”

Monty approached the table at the sound of laughter and had a look for himself. “Aw, a smidgen of sugar in your likeness won’t hurt, I don’t think,” he said, claiming the cookie that Dale had returned.

FREE OF BETH, HERBIE LOOKED around for a chair. The only ones he could see were stacked against the wall at the opposite end of the hall. The young dove descended the stairs from the stage, passing Professor Hoppnickel, who was still unable to escape from Herb Sr.'s sales pitch.

Herb pulled his son aside as he tried to pass. "Now son, tell the professor here that the brochure does not lie when it claims that *Foreverware* will indeed protect anything sealed inside until the next ice age."

"I'm not going to say that!"

"But Foreverware is an honest company!"

"As honest as a professor looking for grant money," the professor commented dryly.

Herb nodded, misunderstanding him. "There you go! You might as well tell me that the stuff on TV is not true. I wonder," he whispered to himself, "when those poor castaways on *Gulliver's Island* will ever be rescued?"

"1978," Herbie replied.

Herb dismissed this answer. "Anyway! Let me give you a demonstration of the preservative powers of the patented burpomatic suction action, guar-an-teeed to put your food in a state of suspended . . ."

Herbie found himself forced to resort to extreme measures. "Oh say, is that *Gadget* I see coming this way?"

The salesman froze, looking around. It just so happened that *Gadget* was in fact emerging from the wings at just that moment, followed by a dozen of the boys who had not been deterred by the fate of "Hematoma".

Herb quickly shoved a small Foreverware container containing his business card into Hoppnickel's hands before dashing back to his hiding spot as fast as his short legs could carry him.

Gadget, upon reaching the stairs, stopped to look about her strangely. "I sense something . . ." she said to herself. "A presence I've not felt since . . ." With a toss of the head, she snapped out of her spell and made her way over to join the chaperoned Chip in waiting for Dale and Foxglove's magic show.

HERBIE WALKED PURPOSEFULLY ACROSS THE floor towards the stack of chairs. As he did so he passed Tammy, who had her hands on her hips trying to think of a way to get Chip alone so he could hear her speech.

"Miss President?"

Tammy turned to see two shy and skinny British pigeons, a sophomore boy and his younger sister, members of the Rescue Ranger Fan Club. They were informally known as the "A/V Geeks" due to their shared fascination with video cameras and CD players. Although two years apart in age, they were the same height. The feathers atop the sister's head were blond in color, while the brother's head tended towards a reddish hue. Tammy seemed to almost hear "Molly" sing her a little ditty about the two of them.

Tammy smiled and addressed the fans. "You can just call me Tammy, OK? I won't bite, I promise."

"OK . . . Tammy," the sister replied. "We, that is, Michael and I . . ."

The brother in question stepped forward. “What Jane here is trying to say is that we’ve got this smashing idea for something the whole club can do, and we wanted to find out what you thought before we left for the trip.”

“Well, what is it?” Tammy asked.

“*Rescue Rangers: The Movie*,” the two teens solemnly intoned.

Tammy was taken aback, although it seemed like “Molly” was expecting this very development. “A movie?” she asked. “Starring the Rescue Rangers?”

“Well, not starring them,” explained Jane. “We were thinking the group of us could get together to re-enact how the Rangers got together as a team.”

“The first Clutchcoin Ruby Case.”

“That’s right,” said Michael. “We’ve got the casting all figured out. I will play Dale, and Jane will play Gadget.”

Tammy smiled. “There were a lot of humans involved in that case. Who will play Detective Drake, for example?”

“Oh, we got that all figured out,” Michael replied. “We’ll keep the humans off-camera and use voice effects to make them sound big and booming. We were thinking of having our parents play those voices.”

“And then there’s the settings,” Tammy continued. “How will you portray Glacier Bay? Or the mountain of green gelatin?”

This stopped the two siblings cold. “We hadn’t gotten that far, actually,” said Michael. “I guess it isn’t that great of an idea, after all.”

Seeing them staring down at their toes at the death of their idea, Tammy reached out her hands and lifted their chins. “I wouldn’t say that,” she told them. “How about if you make it into a radio play instead of a movie? I’m sure we’d be able to pull that off.”

“Yeah, that would work great!” exclaimed Michael. “We’ll get right on it.”

“Now hold on, you two,” said Tammy. “I still need to see if this is all right with the Rescue Rangers. You can spend your free time on the trip working out the details, but don’t tell anybody else yet, just in case.”

“Alright, Tammy, we won’t!” Jane said. The two doves turned and walked away, talking excitedly to each other.

Tammy smiled at a job well done. “See,” she said quietly to her unseen watcher, “I told you they’d eventually find a less destructive way of using their talents.”

HER ATTENTION WAS THEN CAUGHT by the voice of Foxglove.

“What you are about to see is pretend,” Foxglove was saying. “A little game we are playing where we act like we have magical powers. Know that this is not real magic, which is a nasty thing that should not be practiced under any circumstances.”

Tammy turned around to see the curtain and easel that had been set up. A sign proclaimed that there was to be a magic show by “The Great Dale-dini Himself”, but Dale was nowhere to be seen. Foxglove, apparently acting as the absent magician’s assistant, was somehow fitted into a rather tight red dress that might have caught the attention of some of the sophomore males attending the party if they weren’t all at this moment trying to get Gadget’s attention.

Tammy looked once more at Sandra Herzog and her two helpers, who were still maintaining a jealous guard of Chip, turning away anyone else their age that tried to approach. Seeing Tammy's look, Sandra turned and mouthed the word "mine" at her.

"Oo!" Tammy cried in frustration.

"Still mad about the Yankees?" asked the same sports-obsessed dove from an hour before.

Suddenly struck by inspiration, Tammy reached out her arm and stopped Herbie, who was re-crossing the floor with a chair in his wings. "The Rescue Rangers are the only guests at this party who don't live in the spruce tree!" she exclaimed with excitement.

Herbie turned his head to look at her. "So?"

"So, everybody else will use the back door to the stairway to leave, while the Rangers will probably be using the front door!"

"And?"

"That will be the perfect chance!"

"For . . . ?"

Tammy sighed. "I'll explain later. I just need you to make sure the Rangers use that door. Can you do this for me? Please?"

Herbie sighed. "All right." He then changed course to plant his chair at the right side of the stage near the rear exit. Once settled, he pulled out the copy of Gadget's notes and began to read.

After saying goodbye to her grandfather, Tammy left the common room via the front door, leaned against the trunk of the tree, and looked up at the stars. She wondered how long she'd have to wait.

AS HE READ, HERBIE LISTENED to Foxglove conclude her pre-performance spiel.

"Remember kids," she concluded, "that this shouldn't be tried at home. And given that Dale's doing it . . . maybe not at all."

"I heard that!" Dale exclaimed, marching his way from the hall's permanent stage to the front of the magic show and trailing cookie crumbs as he went. He was wearing a standard-issue magician tuxedo and top hat, if the place doing the issuing was Las Vegas.

"Yay!" the kids shouted, "The Great Dale-dini!"

Dale quickly swallowed his rather dry cookie. "Well . . . (cough) . . . I'm glad you're all here. I wasn't expecting such a crowd." He pressed the play button on a portable tape recorder, and a tinny version of a dark fanfare was heard. "I'm . . . Dale-dini," he said, dead-pan, imitating his current favorite cartoon character.

"Yay!" the kids shouted.

Dale leaned in close to Foxglove. "We may do better than I thought," he whispered.

"Always nice to exceed expectations, sweetie," she said, kissing him on the nose.

Dale leaned back with a start. "Well! Ladies and gentleman, please have a seat, for the show is about to start!"

The kids launched into a vigorous game of musical chairs, despite the fact that there were no chairs, before ending up sitting cross-legged on the floor. Chip, Gadget and the other adults decided to remain standing.

"Alright," Dale said, rubbing his paws together, "so what trick would you like to see first?"

“Pull a rabbit out of your hat!” yelled a young dove at the back of the audience.

“Hey Rocky,” quoted Dale, “Watch me pull a rabbit out of my hat!”

“My name’s not Rocky, it’s Sammy!” the kid yelled back.

Foxglove gently tapped Dale on the shoulder. “Sweetie, I don’t think these kids are old enough to get that joke.”

“Fine!” Dale said. “Anyway, here is my hat!” He removed his top hat and placed it on the table. “Nothing up my sleeves!” he added, rolling them up.

Reaching deep into the hat, he pulled out a full-sized lion’s head, filling a significant portion of the hall.

All but one of the kids screamed; Sammy response was “That’s not a rabbit!”

Dale jumped up and down on the head a few times until it was sucked back into the hat. He got up off of the ground and wiped the sweat from his brow. “Sorry, guys,” he said, replacing the hat on his head. “I guess I’m a little rusty!”

His beak buried in Appendix A of Gadget’s paper, Herbie didn’t notice a thing.

THE SHOW WENT QUITE WELL after that, although the ending was a bit inexplicable. Chip was quite impressed by the part when The Great Dale-dini brought the entire audience back to the meeting hall. Which assumes that he had made them disappear, which Chip wouldn’t swear to.

“Again! Again!” cried the child audience. The adults just blinked uncomprehendingly.

The crowd of children rapidly dispersed as Dale and Foxglove started packing up their “magic stuff”. Chip and Gadget emerged from the crowd to complement Dale on the show. “That was absolutely amazing!” Chip exclaimed. “How did you get the saw to spontaneously combust like that?”

“I really wish I knew,” Dale said sheepishly.

“So do I!” Foxglove added indignantly.

“Well regardless,” Chip said, “just an amazing show, buddy!”

Dale grinned. “Thanks, but it’s much easier to do when you have a wonderful assistant.”

Just then, Zipper flew over and signaled to Chip, Dale, Gadget and Foxglove. “Monty’s in trouble,” he buzzed.

Standing nearby, Ken Herzog, the Rescue Rangers self-proclaimed “biggest fan”, looked around in annoyance. “Alright, who let a fly into this party?”

Chip sighed. “Please don’t tell me it involves, let’s see, um . . .”

“Cheese,” Dale completed the sentence. “Don’t tell us it involves cheese!”

Zipper shook his head. “No, this is serious.”

The four of them headed up to the stage, Foxglove stumbling for a moment on the hem of her dress.

MONTY WAS SITTING ON THE edge of the stage, stunned. Various guilty-looking parents were offering him cheese off of their plates. He accepted, just to be polite.

“What happened?” asked Chip.

“Well,” said one squirrel father, “we asked Mr. Jack here if there were any stories he could tell to entertain us. The stories with Professor Nimnul are *Will’s* favorites, so he asked for the story of your latest encounter with him.” The father named Will, a dove, glared at the one speaking.

“ . . . And I can’t remember a single thing!” Monty said.

This caused quite a commotion in the crowd, so Chip did his best to defuse it. “Dale, you didn’t pull any tricks with Monty’s brain did you?”

Dale looked inside his hat to see if a brain might be hiding there. “Wasn’t me!”

“Well,” said Will, “it’s not important. I’m sorry to cause such a fuss. You wouldn’t even know it was me if blabbermouth Frank here hadn’t offered that extra little tidbit of a name.” The two fathers glared at each other, which caused the two young sons standing beside them to do the same. Will’s son was Sammy, the same smart aleck from the magic show.

“Oh, but it’s a reasonable request,” said Chip good-naturedly. “Dale, you’re the second-best storyteller among us. Why don’t you tell these good people the story, while the rest of us help Monty get some fresh air.”

“Oh,” said Dale, daunted by the task before him, “um, I guess . . . Chip!”

“Yes?”

“Could you help me tell the story?”

Gadget indicated that she, Foxglove and Zipper could take care of Monty without further assistance, so Chip replied, “Sure! What do you need?”

Dale positioned Chip in front of a column on the stage that was a little out of the light. He pushed Chip’s shoulders slightly so that he was leaning against the column, then crossed Chip’s arms in front of him and lowered his hat so his eyes were covered from view.

“I’d give you a coin to flip if I had one . . .” Dale muttered. Turning back to the audience, he said, “Okay, Chip will be my cool sidekick, and correct me if I make any mistakes. Isn’t that right, Chip?”

Chip tried to get into character. “Right. Um, right-e-o?”

“Don’t push it. And Chip, pull up your pants a bit ‘k?”

“Why?”

“Dramatic effect! Anyway, our story begins a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away.”

Chip rolled his eyes. “More like back in February at Ranger HQ.”

“Fine, I’ll tell it your way.” With amazing chipmunk speed, he began again. “Well, one night there was thunder and lightning. I got up to see what was happening, ‘cause I like that sort of stuff.”

“A little slower, Dale.”

HERBIE HAD RUSHED THROUGH THE rest of Gadget’s notes. He studied the photographs Gadget had claimed as proof of her claims for several minutes, stopping finally to remove his glasses and rub the top of his beak wearily between two wing feathers. After staring at the packet of notes for a few moments, he tore off the back page and started working through some calculations on the back with a golfer’s pencil stub. In the corner of his eye he caught Foxglove, Gadget and Zipper shepherding Monty towards the outer exit.

He returned to his work for a few seconds, before realizing that the party was not yet due to end and Chip and Dale were not with them. Looking around, he saw most of the guests surrounding the two chipmunks. He glanced back down at the figures, but he wasn't particularly happy with what they were telling him, so he put them and the notes back in his chest pocket and quietly joined the crowd. He asked his mother, the most expert gossip he knew, what he had missed. She quickly filled him in.

NOT LONG AFTER HE HAD caught up, Herbie saw that Gadget, Monty and Zipper had returned to the party. Monty had a cold compress on his head.

"Gadget said the machine was a capacitor of sorts," continued Dale, "and that we couldn't really stop it unless we wanted to risk being fried animals. So we just watched as Nimnul yelled about going to some 'new world' or something. Then he set the machine off and part of it melted, but it was supposed to do that, so he ran right at the machine like *this*."

Dale made a quick run at Chip's pillar. Chip got out of the way just in time as Dale slammed into it and mimed wooziness. The kids laughed loudly.

"See!" Dale explained. "It didn't work!"

"Luckily for us," Chip said, "the police came up at that time to clean up everything like they always do. They took Nimnul away, although he seemed delirious from the fall. His failure made him so crazy that they put him into a mental asylum, where he's been ever since." He pointed at the child who was waving her arm in the air. "Yes, Beth?"

"Chip, what does 'deli-erie-oos' mean?"

"He seemed very out of it, very nuts."

"Isn't that a constant state of his?" said Frank.

"More nuts than usual," Chip replied. Several adults in the crowd chuckled.

"Anyway," added Dale, "having vanquished Nimnul once again, we headed home for a great night of fancy detective stuff."

"Namely Clue: Master Detective," Chip said. "I won."

Dale stepped forward in a heroic stance. "And the world was safe once again thanks to the . . ."

"Rescue Rangers!" the crowd cheered.

"Exactly," said Dale.

Chip saw another hand up, from a familiar teenage squirrel. "You have a question, Sandra?"

"That was a great story you just told, Chipper."

"The name's Chip. And that was Dale telling the story, not me."

"Whatever. Anyway, my question is, if I was in mortal danger, would you save me? Because you could. Save me, that is. Anytime." To complete the question, she fluttered her eyelashes at him.

"Are there any *other* questions?" Chip asked desperately. The hands and wings of half of the female sophomore class went up, several accompanied by squeals of "Pick me! Pick me! Don't pick *her*, pick me!" "No more questions then," Chip quickly concluded.

The crowd began dispersing, all except for Beth, Isabel and Herbie. Gadget turned to Dale. "Actually," she told him, "you forgot the part about finding the Dimensional

Viewer at Nimmul's lair, but that would probably act to disrupt the flow of the narrative, so it was better if it was left out. It actually happened, mind you, but you don't need to know that if the goal is to know how Nimmul was defeated. If on the other hand you wanted to know about the history of the D.V., which even I don't know in full . . . Hey, where did everybody go?"

Isabel checked the wall clock. "The party's just about over, anyway."

Chip snapped his fingers. "I can't believe I nearly forgot!" he exclaimed. He climbed up a chair to address the crowd. "Everybody, I have an announcement to make! Gadget, could you get Foxglove?"

6. NEW MEMBER

TEN MINUTES EARLIER, TAMMY WAS sitting cross-legged on the porch outside the meeting hall, stargazing. “Molly” seemed to have a strong fascination for the sky, particularly on clear days and nights. Tammy was busy pointing out the curve of the Milky Way, when she was surprised to hear the doors behind her open about a half-hour earlier than she had anticipated. She turned to see Monterey Jack walking out flanked by Gadget and Foxglove, with Zipper hovering above. From their expressions, Tammy instantly knew something was wrong. “Is there anything I can do to help?” she asked, getting up.

Gadget turned suddenly, surprised to find Tammy beside her. “I don’t know,” she said. “Monty appears to be having some trouble with his memory. Actually, I think we all are.”

“Memory trouble?” said Tammy, seeing a chance to help her heroes. “Does Professor Nimnul have some kind of mind ray that he’s using on all the animals in the park, hoping by sheer luck to deprive the Rescue Rangers of the knowledge of their very identities???”

Gadget rested her chin on one paw. “Hm . . . that would make a good story. Unfortunately, Nimnul’s been locked away in the mental institute for months.”

“Oh,” said Tammy, deflating. “Maybe it’s a concussion.”

“I don’t remember hitting my head,” Monty said. “But then, if I’m forgetting things, maybe I forgot that.”

“Hmm . . . does your head hurt? Does it feel hot to the touch?”

“Not any hotter than an armadillo’s back side!” he asserted. “. . . Or front side. Whichever’s hotter, I guess.” Foxy flinched, but she tended to do that whenever someone mentioned armadillos.

“Well, as my mom says, ‘Take care of the body first, and the mind will follow.’ I’ll get a cold compress from the apartment, just in case.”

“Thanks.”

Tammy dashed down the trunk of the tree to the next floor down, as only a squirrel (or a chipmunk) can. A few moments later, she returned with a small ice-filled bag, which she offered to Monty.

“I’m worried this memory problem could be affecting most, if not all, the Rangers,” Gadget speculated out loud.

“Even Dale?” asked Foxglove.

“I’m not sure anybody could tell if Dale started losing his memory,” Gadget replied seriously.

Monty took the bag of ice from Tammy and looked up at the three females now hovering around him.

“I think I’m feeling a little better,” he lied. “Honestly.” He got up and, linking arms with Gadget and Foxglove, prepared to return to the party. But first he stopped and looked back at Tammy.

Tammy shooed them forward. “Oh, I just need a breath of fresh air,” she assured them. “You go ahead, I’ll see you later.”

“Alright,” said Monty, reluctantly.

AT THE LAST MOMENT, FOXGLOVE excused herself and dashed back. “Congratulations on graduating, by the way,” she confided in a low voice.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t be too long. It is your party after all.”

On the way back to the door Foxglove tripped and fell to the ground. Tammy rushed to her side and helped her up. “Are you all right?” she asked.

“Oh, I’m fine. It’s just this dress.”

“Is there something wrong with it?”

“No,” Foxglove said with some trepidation. “It’s a very good dress, one of Dale’s better creations. I . . . I just don’t get along well with clothes. It’s something my parents always told me: physical confinement is the first step on the road to slavery. Well, not ‘told’, but that was the feeling I picked up from them whenever we encountered some of the clothes left behind by human tourists. I don’t believe that now, but it’s hard to get that out of my head.”

Tammy was confused by this last statement. “Your . . . parents. Your birth parents? Weren’t they feral?”

Foxglove nodded. “My whole family was feral. We lived in a national park in northwestern Connecticut.”

“Foxglove, you told me about your parents before.”

“I did?”

“Yes, when we first met.”

Foxglove rubbed her head with a wing in bewilderment. “I could have sworn . . .” she murmured.

“Anyway, what I didn’t know before is that you weren’t found by a Caretaker at birth and given to a foster family, like all the other feral-born I know.”

“We didn’t have a Caretaker. Chip’s looking into the reason. His current theory is that there was some kind of disaster decades before I was born that caused my family to flee the main colony to the other side of Bear Mountain, and the Caretaker for the colony thought we had all died.”

“Wow,” said Tammy. “What was it like to be a sentient raised by ferals?”

“They’re not really like the stories I hear told to the sentient children. They are not monsters, they are just trying to survive like you and me, but they lack a lot of the tools we have, and their life spans are so much less than ours. You wouldn’t believe how much they can communicate without using words. And the way they lead their lives is so in the moment. In some ways I miss how simple and direct everything was with them. No feral ever lied to me.” She said this last sentence with a strange, far-away look. “All the same, it was rather strange, growing up so slowly compared to my brothers, and thinking nobody in the world was like me.”

“But you were found eventually, right?” Tammy asked eagerly.

“Yes, that’s right. I was found by Winifred. She’s . . .”

“I know,” Tammy interrupted somberly.

“Did I tell you about her and forget that, too?” Foxglove asked, worried. “I’m getting as bad as the Rangers are!”

“No, you didn’t tell me about her,” Tammy assured her. “That was Gadget.”

“Oh! That makes me feel a little better.”

“Foxglove?” asked Gadget, who had stuck her head out of the door a few seconds earlier, “are you going to be much longer?”

“No,” replied Foxglove, who stopped a moment to check her dress again, “I guess I’m done.” “Don’t take too long with that breath of fresh air,” she told Tammy, before joining the party.

Tammy nodded. She waited until they were both inside, then took her promised big breath of night air, looked around to make sure she truly was alone, and sat down at the edge of the branch. Behind her she heard some kind of cheer from inside the meeting hall, but it was too muffled for her to make out much.

TAMMY CAST A SILENT LOOK of anticipation over her left shoulder in the direction of the door. The invisible something over her left shoulder was, if possible, even more excited than she was and was in an even more nostalgic mood than before, sending her a barrage of emotions that seemed to be tied to memories of Tammy’s years at the Academy. To calm down, Tammy turned her attention to the grounds of the park far below. It was late, and this corner of the park never was a gathering point for humans, so Tammy was surprised to discover a human sitting on the park bench between the spruce and oak trees.

The human was wearing a threadbare coat, more patches than fabric, over a rather angular body. Her nose was long, her eyes small, and the hair that escaped from a woolen hat was so thin and so red it looked like it was a part of the hat rather than a part of the human.

Now as a squirrel in a city park, Tammy had gotten plenty of opportunity to observe humans at park benches, and she knew that a sitting human must always be doing something: feeding animals, or filling out a crossword puzzle, or at least eating an apple. But this human was just sitting. There was a bag handmade from canvas beside her, bulging with who knows how many distractions, but she was just sitting there, waiting, like she was about to visit the doctor for a checkup, or the lawyer for a reading of the will.

Distracted as she was trying to figure out what the human was up to and still dealing with “Molly” in overdrive, Tammy was nevertheless not surprised when a chipmunk’s hand came gently down on her right shoulder; it was like they had been planning for this to happen all night.

Her eyes fluttering, she turned to greet her visitor. “Yes, Chip?” she asked dreamily . . .

. . . AND LOOKED UP INTO THE grinning face of Dale. “You planning on coming back in?” he asked. “Or does your mom need to take you in on a pallet?”

“Oh,” she said, disappointed. “Dale.” She suddenly felt incredibly alone—her invisible friend had left her before she had even seen who the chipmunk was.

“It wouldn’t be much use for her to go back now,” Chip said from over her other shoulder. “The party’s over.”

Tammy looked around, seeing Foxglove and the other Rangers exiting the building. *I still have a chance to pull this off*, she told herself. “I, uh, wasn’t keeping track of the time,” she said. Through the slowly closing doors, she caught glimpses of squirrels and doves crowding their way to the rear exit, to start on their long-promised field trip. “Did I miss much?”

Dale shrugged. “Chip and I told a story. There wasn’t anything else worth remembering.”

Foxglove gasped softly. Her face was red and some tears had run down her face, but they appeared to be tears of joy.

Tammy rose to her feet. “Did I miss something?”

“I don’t know, did you?” Dale laughed.

Chip reluctantly bonked Dale on the head. “That was for Foxy’s sake, not mine,” he hastily explained. He turned to Foxglove and gently led her forward to stand before the squirrel. “Tammy, I’d like you to meet the newest member of the Rescue Rangers: Foxglove.”

For a few seconds Tammy was speechless. Finally, she hesitantly hugged the bat and was able to choke out some words. “Con . . . congratulations, Foxy.”

“It *was* a shock,” Foxglove said as they parted.

“It shouldn’t have been *that* much of a surprise,” said Chip. “You knew as well as anybody that we were looking for a sixth member, and who else could we have picked?”

“Who else, indeed?” said Tammy in a hollow tone.

“I still think we should have gotten Fat Cat,” Dale joked again. Now it was Zipper’s turn to bonk Dale.

Chip cast a critical look in Tammy’s direction. “Are you alright, Tammy? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“It, it’s nothing,” Tammy said. “I must have been out for too long.”

Chip, not trusting this response, walked past her and looked out in the direction he had seen her looking when the Rangers had first left the party.

“Well, look who we have here!” He turned and addressed the group. “It’s Freddie the Witch, still on probation . . . well, I *think* she’s still on probation . . .” He wasn’t very happy to see his taunt end so unsatisfactorily.

Everybody crowded over to get a look.

“What could *she* be doing here?” Gadget asked.

“*That’s* Freddie?” Tammy asked. “I’ve read the case file, but of course it didn’t have any pictures, and I never thought I would actually see her . . .”

Chip turned on her. “And where did you get your hands on *that* case file?” Chip didn’t like word of the Rescue Ranger’s more esoteric cases to become common knowledge, as he thought that would hurt the group’s reputation as serious crime fighters.

“Well actually,” said Gadget, “I let her see it. I didn’t see what the harm could be.”

“You didn’t see the harm? She’s the president of our fan club!” Chip exclaimed, turning to Gadget.

“What kind of probation could it be if she’s allowed to visit a city park this late at night?” Tammy asked.

“A rather odd one, if you ask me,” said Monty. “Did you know that she’s serving her time working at the crazy house? The same place where Professor Nimnul is being kept.”

Now Monty became the object of Chip’s wrath. “Were you planning on sharing this vital tidbit of information anytime soon, or did we just get lucky?”

Monty looked down in shame. “I’m sure I would have remembered it. This head of mine . . .”

Chip sighed. “Just . . . don’t. So they’re working together; I knew Nimnul wouldn’t stay locked up voluntarily! That’s great, that’s just great!”

Foxglove had been spending the last few minutes looking between the others with increasing nervousness as the volume of their voices had progressively increased. She hoped that Winifred hadn’t noticed them bickering above her yet. “Do you mind if we leave now?” she asked. “Or at least I if do?”

Chip, catching her tone, took control of himself. “Right,” he said, calmly. “First thing is to get her out of there before the students arrive. Zipper, I need you to get a human police officer to come here. Vagrancy is still illegal at this hour.” Zipper saluted and flew off. “The rest of us need to get straight back to HQ and lock everything up for her inevitable return. Who knows what she and Nimnul are up to?”

Tammy shivered. “Can she use her magic against us?”

“I don’t think so,” said Foxglove. “That last spell of Winifred’s would have converted her body into a conductor of magical energy, but since we ruined it, I think it might have had the opposite effect. Although . . .” she added as an afterthought, “she can still understand animals. That was her very first spell—she said it was in the nature of a ‘dis-spell’, actually, if that makes any sense.”

Tammy moved to take a closer look at the woman being asked to leave by a patrolling police officer; a nearby street lamp winking out had attracted his attention. The woman looked rather sad to her.

“Hm,” Dale said, “without her magic, she doesn’t pose much, or *any*, threat then, does she?”

Chip shook his head violently in disagreement. “This is still Freddie we’re talking about, people! She’s a bad guy, and we’re the good guys. It’s as simple as black and white.”

“It wasn’t always that simple for me,” Foxglove said in a small voice.

Chip put an arm around the bat’s shoulders. “You’re an exceptional case, Foxy. From what you’ve told us, that human down there is like so many of the others we have encountered: only thinking of herself and not caring who she hurts in order to get what she wants.”

Tammy turned to face him, confused. “It can’t be that simple, not even for her. Maybe she’s here to help. Maybe she has a case for you.”

“No.” Chip turned his back on Tammy to address the Rangers. “We go back to HQ, we plan a schedule so one of us watches for her all night, and tomorrow we get her permanently out of the park before she hurts someone. Even without magic she’s still capable of causing a lot of trouble.”

“Just like that?” pleaded Tammy. “Isn’t there a vote or something?”

Chip looked silently into the faces of the other Rangers, and did not find any argument. “Not this time.”

“No argument from me,” said Gadget. “My memory seems to be playing up.”

“And what about me?” Tammy asked.

“And what *about* you?” Chip shouted Tammy down. “Fan club or not, you are not a Rescue Ranger! You’re barely an *adult*, and at times like this, I question even that. I can’t tell you what to do, but I would *advise* you, for your own safety, not to go anywhere near *that human*.” He turned back to the others. “Come on, Rangers. We’ve got a rough night ahead.”

Chip, Dale, Gadget, Monty and Foxglove, rejoined by Zipper, quickly made their way along the branch back to their home.

Tammy stood there, watching them, her hands balled into fists at her sides. She waited until they were out of sight, then turned at the sound below her of the Academy sophomores exiting the base of the spruce tree with their luggage.

“Good bye! Have a great time!” she cried out to the crowd, waving her arms wildly. She hoped none of them could see the tears streaming down her face.

7. APPENDIX A

THE PARTY WAS OVER.

From the base of the spruce tree, the families of the departing students emerged with their luggage. As organizers of the party, the Tanglefoot family was there as well, to make sure this last step went smoothly. Squirrel and dove parents scrambled to get everything arranged (they were not helped by the fact that the nearby street light was out), and the students dealt with many tearful goodbyes from the family members not coming along on the trip. Herbie, as a veteran of such a trip, was asked multiple questions from sophomores and their parents about flying on an airplane and how to deal with the “dreaded jetlag”.

Isabel Chestnutt stood next to her neatly organized pile of luggage, her daughter Beth’s hand grasped firmly in her own. She looked around the crowd for Tammy, who had disappeared from the party earlier, but had not been found in the family’s apartment. Her search ended with a cry from above.

“Good bye!” drifted down a voice. “Have a great time!” Looking up, the Chestnutts, Herbie, and a few others saw Tammy on a branch far overhead waving at them.

Isabel put her hands on her hips. “You take care of yourself, young lady, you hear me!” she cried.

Beth swiftly crawled up her mother to get on her shoulders. “Bye, Tammy!” she screamed, even louder than necessary. “I love you!”

“You, too, Beth!” replied Tammy after a pause.

Professor Hoppnickel looked up at a large clock mounted next to the bus stop located under the spruce tree. “Hurry! We only have a few minutes!”

It’s rather rare for animals to travel using human conveyances, but they have a few tricks to employ when they do. Those going on the trip climbed into a ventilated plastic box labeled “Careful - Live Animals” and addressed it a lab in Uttar Pradesh, India. The box appeared to be a standard animal carrier, with a fake lock on the outside, while inside it resembled the inside of a small-animal scale airplane, complete with comfortable and secure chairs and a mechanism for opening the box.

AS HERBIE AND THE OTHER animals left, a human bus pulled up to the stop and the driver got out to load the box for the first stage of its journey. Most of the remaining squirrels and doves re-entered the tree to begin the climb up the stairs to their apartments. The more adventurous squirrels climbed up the bark of the tree, while the stronger doves flew up into the moonless night, circling the tree in a corkscrew pattern. Among those preparing to take the latter course was the Tanglefoot family, despite complaints by Herb.

“So, son,” he said, putting a wing around his younger son. “Now that you’re back from school, what say you put your book learning to use building an elevator in this tree?”

Herbie looked up the trunk of the tall tree incredulously. “I don’t know . . .” he said. “I *guess* it’s doable. Maybe with Gadget’s help . . .”

Herb’s shoulders slumped. “Never mind,” he muttered.

Tank smirked. “You know, you *will* have to introduce yourself to her at some point.”

“Come along!” entreated Binkie, before taking to the sky.

Herbie winced as the dead streetlight he was looking at suddenly came back to life. He spotted a fly speeding away from the light, possibly Zipper, but he couldn’t be sure. The dove made sure his chest pocket was fastened shut before following his family into the air. As he caught up, he found that his mother had been commenting on the party in mid-air.

“. . . and besides,” she said, “what were the Rescue Rangers doing making a speech anyway? We didn’t ask to know who their newest member was.”

Herbie rolled his eyes. “Enough, Mum. Please, just give it a break.”

This of course had no effect on Binkie’s tirade. “And Tammy—wasn’t she supposed to be the guest of honor? I figured *she* would have been there for that speech, but she skipped out on her own party!”

Herbie was about to reply, when he suddenly remembered a moment two years ago, when a frustrated Tammy was about to drop out of the Academy because of slipping grades.

“I’m going to fight through this, Herbie,” she told him, “because if I don’t graduate I don’t see how I can ever be a deserving Rescue Ranger.”
“Rescue Ranger fan,” Herbie had corrected her.
“Yes . . . Rescue Ranger fan.”

Herbie had a sudden suspicion of what Tammy was probably up to with her plotting tonight. He hoped she wasn’t too disappointed.

AFTER WHAT SEEMED AN ETERNITY to Herbie with his mother’s prattling, the family finally reached their home in the tree canopy. Waiting for them on their front porch was Tammy. She had her Rescue Ranger scrapbook in her lap and was idly turning the pages.

Now a dove home in the spruce tree was much different from a squirrel home. The doves preferred living out in the open, letting the foliage take the place of the squirrel’s round walls. Only their living quarters and a little bit of storage space were enclosed in bubbles carved out of the larger branches. This made the Tanglefoot porch a stand-alone structure, two steps up, a few steps across, and another two steps back down again. The porch served four vital functions. It was a marker of where their property began on those rare occasions when anybody cared. Second, it was a place to put the barbecue. Third, it was a place to sit and gossip. And fourth . . .

Herb triumphantly crossed over the porch into the space “inside” it (differing in no way from the space “outside” it). “I’m home!” he proclaimed, hooking thumbs into the corners of his shirt and inflating his chest with pride. “Home, sweet home!”

“You know you always look like a pigeon when you do that,” observed Herbie, but only Tammy appeared to notice what he had said. Tank deliberately bumped him on the way to his room. Almost immediately, the sinister opening chords of a heavy metal song emerged from Tank’s portable radio, eventually followed by raspy lyrics: “*Say your prayers, little one. Don’t forget, my son, to include everyone.*”

Binkie was not going to ignore Tammy’s presence, however. “Well, good evening, Miss Chestnutt,” she said.

“Good evening,” Tammy said, standing up.

Herb turned around. “Well, are you going to stay out there all night?”

“Herb’s right,” agreed Binkie, putting her planned grilling of Tammy off until later. “You must come inside. You’ll catch your death of cold.”

Tammy looked in confusion back and forth between the two sides of the porch. “Well, I don’t mean to stay long.”

“You just want to talk with Herbie, hmm? You two sure talk a lot. Well, I’ll fix you both some lemonade. Come along and help me, Herbie.”

Herbie silently followed his mother into their home. There they carried out private conversations that Tammy couldn’t help but overhear, since there were no walls to block them.

“When are you going to ask her out?” was the first thing out of Binkie’s mouth when they reached the kitchen.

“Mother!” Switching tacks, Herbie asked, “Weren’t you just complaining about her behavior at the party?”

“She’s a young woman. She’s allowed to be contrary.”

In the “front room”, Herb turned the switch on a portable television set, and groaned loudly when nothing happened. He turned the TV around, removed the rechargeable battery from its back, then marched over to Tank’s room and opened the door.

“*Exit light! Enter night!*” proclaimed Tank’s stereo.

“Hey! Doesn’t anybody knock?”

Herb grumbled, closed the door, and knocked.

“Yes?”

Herb opened the door (“*Take my hand. We’re off to Never-Never Land!*”), reached out, and claimed the battery powering Tank’s radio.

“Hey!”

“The TV battery’s dead. Can’t expect me to miss my shows now, do you?”

“Really, Dad,” Herbie said as his father walked past, “that TV seems to have taken over all your entertainment. I can’t remember the last time I saw you reading anything.”

“I read the TV Guide!” Herb said, walking past his son without looking and immediately installing the fresh battery. “Did you read the article about the barbeque recipes of the stars? I’ve got to try out one or two of those.”

“I stand corrected,” Herb said dryly. Tank meanwhile took the dead battery over to a treadmill that Gadget had converted into a battery charger and got to work.

Binkie walked by with two glasses of lemonade on a tray. She walked onto the porch, deposited the glasses on a small table formed out of a chewed-off branch next to Tammy, and turned to return to the kitchen as Herbie sat down across from Tammy.

“Don’t mind us,” she told Tammy. “We’re going to bed anyway.”

“What was that?” asked Herb. “I couldn’t hear you because you were outside.”

Binkie leaned over so her head was now “inside”. “I said we’re going to bed. It’s quite late.”

“*Don’t anybody move!*” said the voice on the television. “*I’ve got you all surrounded, single-handed! This is a shakedown!*”

Herb pointed at the set and pouted. “You heard what Barney Flute said! We have to stay and watch the episode.”

Binkie walked in by the “door” of the porch, turned and walked to the TV, and switched it off.

“Aw,” said Herb, deflating.

Bink took his wing and led him like a child to their bedroom. “Bed, Tank,” she said to their elder son as they passed.

“Aw, but . . .”

“You can charge the battery tomorrow. Besides, don’t you have football practice tomorrow morning?”

“Wait, isn’t school out?” asked a befuddled Herb.

“Hush,” said Binkie.

“Yeah, practice!” said Tank, warming to the idea. He punched one balled-up wing into the other, giving Herbie a look that told him that he would be the victim of “tackle practice” at least once tomorrow, before returning to his room.

Herbie groaned. Tammy shook her head. “Isn’t it great to be back home again?” she asked with a grin.

A FEW MINUTES PASSED WHILE the two graduates silently drank their lemonades. Then Tammy reached across the table and took Herbie’s wings in her hands.

“Herbie, be honest with me—do you think I’m a good fan?”

Herbie’s brain froze. “Ah, well, that is . . . there’s all kinds of fans . . . you’re what I’d call an ‘active fan’.”

Tammy took back her hands. “And you’re very much in the ‘passive’ category. You’re the kind of fan I wish I could be, Herbie, you know that? You know everything about the Rangers, but you always remember to tell everyone about the things the Rangers want everybody to know about, and keep quiet about the rest. When they need help, you’re there, and when they need some space to do their work, you’re nowhere to be seen.

“I’ve been looking through the clippings,” she continued, gesturing at the scrapbook beside her, “and I spotted myself in seven different photographs, twice nearly stealing attention from the Rescue Rangers. You’re nowhere to be seen, exactly as a fan should be.”

“There’s nothing wrong with being enthusiastic, Tammy. I might spend the rest of my life as nothing more than a fan, but you stand a good chance to become a freelance detective someday. Do you remember the time we were looking for Professor Dottmeyer’s lost beetle?”

“Yeah, that was fun.”

“You were amazing, Tammy. I don’t think even Chip would have tracked Bubbie down as fast as you did. And don’t say it was luck. You’ve got an eye for detail, if you don’t let yourself get carried away with preconceptions, like on the class trip.”

“Well, that’s just it, isn’t it? I’m always letting myself get carried away. I tried to join the Rangers tonight, Herbie. The Rescue Rangers! What was I thinking? I’m nowhere near their class. Okay, maybe I found a beetle and some jewelry . . .”

“. . . and the Lost Tribe of the Huachi.”

“Will you quit bringing that up? The fact is, I’m not what a Ranger fan is supposed to be. I trip up the Rangers when they are working, invite myself to their picnics, and try to act like Gadget’s long-lost baby sister and play ‘what’s this do?’ with her inventions all summer. I don’t even know why she puts up with me the way she does.”

“I don’t think Gadget minds, Tammy. I think the two of you have something in common.”

Tammy shrugged. “I guess. The only reason I haven’t locked myself in my closet for the rest of the summer is because I found out about Foxglove being added before I had the chance to make an even bigger fool of myself than usual.”

“So they don’t know you were planning on joining?”

“No, and I hope they never find out.”

“So, what are you going to do now?” Herbie asked. “It’s too late to join the trip.”

“Well,” replied Tammy, “I guess I just have to continue to be the best fan I can be this summer, and try not to be so annoying.”

“As long as we’re on the subject of fandom, would you like to see that letter I got this morning?”

“Sure. Just to make it official: as president of the Rescue Ranger Fan Club, I hereby call this extraordinary meeting to order. Secretary Herbie, please present the only order of business.”

Herbie paused for a moment in his unfolding of the notepaper he had removed from his chest pocket to give Tammy a confused look, then adjusted his glasses and began reading:

To President Tamara Chestnutt and Secretary Herbert Tanglefoot, Jr.:

My name is Alison, and I would like to join your club.

I found out about the Rescue Rangers five years ago, when they saved my friend Ptolemy from a gruesome fate. At the time, nobody believed me.

You can just imagine my excitement, then, when this morning Ptolemy showed me the minutes of your first meeting, which he had obtained at the public library. I am writing this letter in response to the call for new members, regardless of species.

“It appears that our decision to send that out to every animal library in the state has come back to haunt us,” Herbie interjected.

“I don’t see why you should be upset about it,” replied Tammy.

“Wait until you hear the rest,” Herbie said, before continuing:

Is the offer still good? I noticed that the report was from three years ago. Is there still a Rescue Ranger Club, and if so, are you still taking new members? I live rather far away and I suspect a meeting in person would not go so well, so perhaps I could be more of a pen pal member?

There was no mention of membership dues in the minutes, but just to be safe, I have enclosed an acorn and some birdseed.

Tammy laughed. “I do believe that Alison is attempting to bribe the judges!”
 “I’m afraid the acorn didn’t survive the rigors of the avian postal service intact,”
 Herbie said seriously. “As for the seed, if the mailbird didn’t eat it, Tank did.”

If everything is agreeable, you can send me meeting minutes at my address below, and I’ll reply with my thoughts and anything regarding the Rangers I’ve found on my own. As an example, you will find my response to that first meeting on the second page of this letter. If you agree to this unusual request, I must insist that any correspondence be addressed directly to myself and using the acronym of your group on the envelope rather than the full name, as I would rather that my family did not know about this.

Regardless of your decision, I would like to thank the two of you for creating a fan club for a great group of heroes like the Rescue Rangers.

Sincerely,

*Alison Worthington, age 13
 Harmony Farm
 Lisbon, NY*

“Would you like me to continue on with the second page, Miss President, or is page one enough for you to render a verdict on this application?” Herbie asked facetiously.

“Can you summarize it?” Tammy asked.

“Well, we covered the ‘Risky Beesness’ case for about ten minutes in that first meeting, as you may recall, and that’s all that Miss Worthington’s notes are about. Speculation about the size of Queenie’s hive, the harmonics used in Irwina Allen’s invention, that sort of thing.”

Tammy nodded. “As I suspected. Yes, I think she would make a good member.”

“Are you sure?” Herbie asked. “You do know what she is, don’t you?”

“Of course I do,” replied Tammy, smiling, “although I think you’ve come to a different conclusion than I did. Let’s review the facts:

“We can see that the letter was run through a copier machine, probably to change its size. She states that a meeting in person would be a bad idea, and she doesn’t want her family to know that she’s dealing with us. And finally, she lives on Harmony Farm. What do you conclude from that?”

“I conclude that Alison Worthington is a human. A Speaker with a pet named Ptolemy who doesn’t know the Rules.”

“On the contrary, it’s equally obvious that she is a honeybee, probably a royal daughter of a queen bee, with Ptolemy a young drone. I believe I saw a human selling jars of Harmony Farm brand honey at a farmer’s market outside the Academy a few weeks ago. The case of Queenie notwithstanding, insects and small mammals have never

gotten along very well, hence her desire not to visit and simultaneously not to tell her family that she follows the doings of us furry/feathered creatures.”

“I’m not convinced.”

“We can always ask the Rangers if they ever had a bee-related case in upper New York State before doing anything.”

“Agreed.”

“Besides, even if she were a human, there are a few of them that can be trusted. The Rangers, for example, have two human FBI agents that they trust, named ‘Mulder’ and ‘Scully’.”

TRYING TO CHANGE THE SUBJECT, Herbie pulled his prize out of his chest pocket.

“Speaking of seeing the Rangers, Gadget will be putting on a quite interesting scientific demonstration tomorrow. I think you should come along and see it.”

“Yes, you told me about that earlier,” said Tammy. “So, what exactly is she demonstrating?”

“Making contact with alternate universes.” Herbie said this cautiously, watching Tammy intently to see how she’d react.

“Comic book territory?” asked Tammy incredulously.

Herbie shrugged slightly. “I can’t fault Gadget’s mathematics, but it contradicts the conventional wisdom. Physicists have known for some time now that on the subatomic level, everything is *pleuripotent*: anything that can happen, does happen, all at the same time. If you point a single photon of light so it can go through either of two slits with a fifty-percent probability, it will go through both at once, like it split in half. Only when that photon has to interact with the outside world is it forced, after the fact, to have gone through one or the other.”

Tammy nodded. “‘Quantum weirdness’, right?”

“Yes. Physicists have spent decades trying to make sense of this, but essentially, they only have two possible explanations. The ‘Many Worlds Hypothesis’ states that every one of the possible outcomes actually occurs, but in an alternate universe. There’s a universe where the photon goes right, and one where it goes left. This would mean that there are an infinite number of universes out there: one where Columbus never discovered America, one where the Tunguska Comet was really the vanguard of an alien armada, one where we never formed the Rescue Rangers Fan Club, even one where you have one more hair on your head than you do right now. Since every imaginable outcome must be represented, including universes operating on completely different sets of physical laws, Lewis Carroll’s Wonderland is probably floating out there in one of those universes. Most physicists reject this theory.

“Instead, they follow the ‘Copenhagen Interpretation’, which states that all of the various possible outcomes mash into each other at the moment of observation to become the outcome that we see. Since each event has only one outcome, there is no longer a need for multiple universes. The physicist Richard Feynman had a method for determining the outcome for this scenario, called ‘sum of histories’ . . .”

“‘Sum of histories’?” asked Tammy. “I think I had to do that in my Advanced Physics class. Is it the one where you plot out all the possible outcomes along with their probabilities on a sheet of graph paper, then add up the vectors?”

“Yeah, that’s the one.”

“Well, every time I did it, the probabilities added up to more than one hundred percent.”

“You made a mistake.”

“That’s what the teacher said. But maybe it added up to more than a hundred percent because there’s more than one universe.”

“Um, I don’t think it works that way. Probabilities can’t add up to more than a hundred percent.”

“Can you *prove* it?” taunted Tammy, leaning forward.

This flustered Herbie. “It’s simple math!”

“But can you *prove* it?”

“Look, I’ll check out my textbooks tonight, and I’ll get you your proof tomorrow. Deal?” He held out his wing.

She shook it. “Deal. So I take it that Gadget belongs to the ‘Many Worlds’ camp?”

“She does, but not merely by choice. You see, back in February, the Rangers tried to stop Professor Nimnul from invading another universe.” He told Gadget the story that Chip and Dale had reenacted at the party. “That device failed, but Gadget found that Nimnul’s device for spying on alternate universes actually worked. Gadget thinks that Nimnul did not make the viewer, but instead found it in a government warehouse.”

“What happened to Nimnul?” Tammy asked.

“When his machine failed, he totally lost it, and was thrown in the nut house.”

Tammy glared at him over the nut reference.

“Oh, sorry, insane asylum.”

“Apology accepted.”

“He’s been there ever since. Anyway, Gadget thinks that the DV (Dimensional Viewer) was originally built for spying—you set the device to pick up somebody’s brainwaves, and then the machine would show you everything they were looking at, no matter where in the world they were.

“At some point somebody figured out that you could adjust more than just which subject you were spying on. You could also tune in the brainwaves of the subject’s counterpart in any one of thousands of other universes.”

“Does Gadget explain how this works?”

“That’s where String Theory comes in. String Theory is an attempted ‘Theory of Everything’ that makes tiny vibrating strings the basic building block of the universe. The theory is really complicated, and so far impossible to prove.

“Gadget took the metaphor of the strings vibrating like musical instruments and made it literal, applying theories of harmonics to explain how different strings interact with each other. She claims that there is a fundamental ‘overtone’ produced by the combined vibrations of every string in the universe, and that alternate universes have slightly different overtones.

“The DV, in Gadget’s view, modulates the brain waves it picks up, changing the overtone. Once that is done, you are no longer looking at the thoughts of somebody in this universe, but the thoughts of that someone’s counterpart in another universe. At least, I think that is what she’s saying—Gadget’s logic was rather hard to follow.”

“You’re doing a lot better at following ‘Gadget-think’ than I ever could,” said Tammy. “So, Gadget gets her hands on this device, plugs it in . . .”

“You can’t run it on conventional electricity—it interferes with the signal. You have to use a tremendous amount of static electricity. In short, lightning storms. The Rangers must have been traveling to every thunderstorm for hundreds of miles around for Gadget to pick up the data she’s used in her paper.”

“So, what did she find?”

“She found lots of different universes, each of them with counterparts for the Rescue Rangers and Foxglove. She has a chart at the back listing the 36 universes most different from our own. She named this earth ‘Earth-1’, and the others are numbered from ‘Earth-3’ to ‘Earth-37’. She spent most of her study on ‘Earth-A’, the one Nimnul was studying.”

“Why does ‘Earth-A’ get a different kind of name than the rest?”

“That was Dale’s idea.” Herbie flipped through the paper until he found the passage he was looking for, which he read out loud. “My colleague Dale suggested the name for this universe, on the theory that if members of ‘Earth-1’ and ‘Earth-2’ ever met, they might get into a fight over which universe gets to be called ‘Earth-1’, so we agreed to call this world ‘Earth-A’. I did not inform him about the names given to the other universes, as I did not have 35 other alphabets/numbering schemes from which to extract the first member.”

“Sounds like ‘Dale-think’ to me. What’s ‘Earth-A’ like?”

“Weird. Lots more colors, several additional physical laws, and what Gadget calls ‘true three-dimensionality’. She made some pictures of Rescue Ranger counterparts in Universe-A.” He pulled out the loose photographs Gadget had given him and handed them to Tammy.

Like Professor Hoppnickel, she turned the pictures around several different ways, to reach a similar lack of results. “Nope, I can’t see a thing with these, although they do seem familiar somehow. Maybe you need special glasses or something.”

Herbie handed her the notes. “Gadget claimed to be able to understand them. Claimed they made a lot more sense in motion. She also thought that all of the animals on Earth-A were feral.”

“What, *all* of them?” Tammy asked incredulously.

“All of the counterparts the Rangers were able to observe were feral, and they never saw any signs of sentient animals. Not one Caretaker. Gadget was very sure on this point.”

“No Caretakers . . . I can’t imagine any civilization of sentients allowing ferals to fend entirely for themselves,” Tammy said reluctantly, turning back to the notes. “Gadget certainly is thorough,” she said after flipping through the pages and seeing the frequent tables and charts. She stopped near the end. “Here’s that chart you were talking about. ‘Appendix B: A Brief Survey of Nearby Universes’” she read aloud. “Wow! I bet Dale loved this one where everyone was half robot. Hm . . . there’s a footnote: ‘Labeled “Borg Earth” by my colleague Dale’. I should have known.”

“I wonder who watched that episode of *Star Trek* first?” asked Herbie. “Was it Gadget or Dale?”

“Gadget. I was visiting at the time. But Dale was the one who really got into it.”

“Makes sense. I wouldn’t put it past Gadget to make a working model of a warp-drive.”

Tammy opened her mouth for a moment to say something, then thought better and closed it—she had promised Gadget never to tell another living soul, after all. “Wait,” she said, changing the subject, “if this is Appendix B, what’s Appendix A?”

Herbie took back the paper, then looked around to see if any doves were still up at this hour. “Um,” he whispered conspiratorially, “I’m not sure you should see Appendix A.”

“Why not?” she whispered back.

After some hesitation, he showed her the section’s title.

“Appendix A” she read aloud, “Signs That Earth-A Is . . .” Her eyes bugged out. “She did *not* write that.” She grabbed the paper from Herbie and checked again. “Yes, she did.” In a barely audible voice she read, “Signs That Earth-A Is The Real World.” She put the paper down with an awed expression.

“That’s the Great Heresy, isn’t it?” asked Herbie, still keeping his voice down. “The belief that this world isn’t real, that we were all invented by some human in the ‘Real World’ for the sole purpose of entertaining human children.” He looked up uneasily into the sky, as if he expected to see a vast audience of young humans up there watching his every move.

Belief in the Great Heresy was almost as old as animal sentience, and it had always been an obstacle to its advancement. After all, if this universe only exists to entertain children, why bother to do anything serious with your life? Not to mention the possibility that boring your “Audience” might have fatal consequences. Even among its believers, the Great Heresy was always spoken of in whispers; for fear that the Creator might be insulted that his creations were “breaking the fourth wall.” It was only in the last couple hundred years that the majority of sentient animals had gotten past the problem of the Great Heresy, by pretending that nobody had ever thought up that unpleasant idea.

“You know,” said Tammy, “my great uncle was institutionalized for saying what you just said out loud, and that was only forty years ago.” She looked down at the notes in her hands. “There is no way she’s going to be able to publish this.”

“Well, she could always leave Appendix A out.”

“Wait, I want to see why she thinks the Writer lives on Earth-A,” she said, skimming through the section. Stopping suddenly, she stabbed emphatically at the page with a finger. “Did you see this? Did you see this? She says the Rescue Rangers have their own cartoon show on Earth-A. Foxglove’s counterpart is a pet bat owned by a human who once saw an episode of the Rescue Ranger’s own cartoon. That’s amazing!” She thought about this some more. “But a cartoon? Don’t the Rescue Rangers deserve live action? I wonder if I’m in any episodes?”

Herbie smirked. “I wouldn’t be surprised if you were in the series: you’d show up as a background character seven times . . .”

“ . . . and nearly steal the show twice. Funny, Herbie, funny. I wonder what kind of commercials the kids get when the Rangers are not doing anything interesting. I’d hate to think that all this time their lives were being sponsored by Hungry-Hungry Hippos. ‘Buy our game, kids, or the Rescue Rangers ceases to exist!’” Amazingly, Tammy managed to say that with a straight face, like it was something she had often pondered on sleepless nights. She looked down for a moment at the papers in her hands. “Do you mind if I borrow these tonight, for a little midnight reading? I don’t exactly relish having the apartment all to myself.”

Herbie nodded. "Go right ahead. Gadget said that she would have the power problem fixed tomorrow morning. Hopefully you'll be caught up on her theory when we visit the Rangers and try the viewer out ourselves."

Tammy smiled as she tucked the papers and photographs into her Rescue Ranger scrapbook. "You actually want to try it? Who's the 'active fan' now?"

"I have my reasons," Herbie said mysteriously.

Tammy raised an eyebrow, then frowned when Herbie refused to explain himself. "I've got my own reasons for visiting the Rangers tomorrow, as a matter of fact. I'll tell you about them if you will walk me back to my place."

Herbie bowed formally and presented his wing. "It would be my honor, Madame."

A FEW MINUTES LATER, TAMMY finished her tale of the Ranger's encounter with Winifred by pointing at the Ranger Tree. ". . . and they are keeping a watch for her return all night."

Herbie looked at the tree, where a single light was on in the window next to the entrance and a face with binoculars could be seen observing the ground below. Walking over to the edge of the branch outside the Chestnutt apartment, both Herbie and Tammy leaned over for a look themselves, but there were no signs of any humans on the paths.

When Herbie turned, Tammy was looking into his eyes. "Then there's the matter of the Rangers' mysterious memory loss," she said. "It appears to be quite serious."

"Yes, I observed that myself tonight. I'm sort of surprised something like this hasn't happened to them before."

Tammy was confused. "What do you mean?"

"Bacteriological warfare. Knowing Nimnul, I wouldn't put that sort of thing past him. After all the times he was defeated, surely he must have some sort of final ace up his sleeve, a Doomsday Scenario that would activate if he was ever put away for good. Well, the Rangers put Nimnul away for good in February, and now his delayed revenge is taking effect. If that's the case, losing their memories will just be the beginning."

Now Tammy was shocked. "Wh-where would you come up with something like that?"

"I dunno," Herbie replied, shaking his head. "Just . . . forget I said anything, OK? The Rangers are probably just tired or something."

Tammy wondered briefly exactly what kind of childhood Herbie's elder brother had put him through to put those kinds of thoughts in his head. "Well," she said, finally, "here we are at my front door. Good night, Herbie. I'll see you around eight?"

"Sounds good," Herbie agreed, blinking rapidly.

They stood there rather awkwardly for a moment.

"So, um, would now be a good time to tell me whatever it was you wanted to tell me?" Herbie asked.

Tammy sighed. "As good a time as any. You see, for the last three years . . ."

She was interrupted by the sound of a distant clock tolling midnight. At the third strike, night suddenly flashed into day for a tenth of a second.

8. EXIT LIGHT

“GET DOWN!”

Herbie pushed Tammy to the ground, shielding her with his body from what he was sure was a titanic explosion. He felt rather sheepish when several seconds passed without any sound to accompany the flash of light. “Sorry about that.”

“Don’t be,” she said, getting up, clutching the scrapbook to her chest. “That could have been some genuine life-saving under different circumstances.” She pushed past him to look at the oak tree. “I think that came from inside the Ranger Tree.”

“We better take a look.”

“Hold on,” she said, turning back to enter the Chestnutt apartment in a rush.

Herbie poked his head in. “Need any help?”

Tammy’s voice drifted back from her room. “Which do you think would be better in a life-or-death scenario: a loaded longbow, or a hockey stick?”

“Hockey stick,” Herbie replied without hesitation. “No need to reload.”

“Right,” she agreed, emerging from the front door wearing a lumpy backpack and holding the same hockey stick from her class photos aggressively in both hands.

“They let you keep that?”

“Well . . .”

He gingerly poked at the bottom of Tammy’s backpack. “*And* the pucks?”

Tammy’s grin was a sight to behold. Herbie sighed. “I don’t even want to know.”

Tammy looked up at the branch that linked the spruce and oak trees. “That’s a long way around. I wonder if . . .”

“Are you suggesting I carry you?” asked Herbie, skeptically.

“Not if it violates some law of physics or something,” she said sarcastically.

“Well, no, it wouldn’t, but . . .”

“Then you better catch me, ‘cause I’m about to find out if I’m part flying squirrel!” And with that she made a run off the end of the branch.

Herbie spread his wings and caught Tammy’s shoulders with his feet. He continued the trajectory to the Rangers’ tree in a glide, where he dropped her off on the entrance branch and landed about half a yard closer to the door.

“Thanks,” Tammy gasped. “I don’t know if you were looking down, but I saw Freddie down there. I don’t think she saw us, though.”

“I imagine even for a human, a squirrel being carried by a bird that’s not a predator would be a strange sight.”

“She was looking at the Ranger Tree, I’m sure of it. She looked rather shocked.” Tammy looked up and down at Rescue Ranger Headquarters. All of the lights were out. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

“You can lead the way. If Chip loses his temper, I’d rather him take it out on you than me.”

“Chicken,” she joked. She walked up to the door and knocked.

There was no reply.

“Chip!” she called out. “Dale! Is everything all right in there?”

Still no response.

She checked the doorknob. It was unlocked.

Tammy swallowed nervously. “Well, here goes . . .”

She turned the knob and carefully pulled the door open towards her, letting in some of the light from a lamp across the street.

Almost immediately, she heard the sound of multiple paws scampering towards the door, accompanied by a terrifying cacophony of squeals.

Throwing her weight against the door, she managed to close it just before hearing three or four loud “THUMP”s.

Herbie tried peering into the window to the right of the door, only to jump back when something bounced forcefully off of the glass.

“What was that?!” Tammy asked, although she had an awful suspicion she knew what . . . and who, that was.

“I-I don’t know. I think it was a feral chipmunk.”

Tammy shook her head forcefully, rejecting the evidence of her senses. “No, it was something else. Gadget accidentally opened the door to Heck. Yes,” she smiled grimly, “that’s much better.” She looked around. “We need to sneak inside and find out for sure what happened. Follow me.”

Wrapping her tail around the hockey stick, Tammy scampered on all fours down a floor from the living room window to reach a small round opening in the tree. Unlike the other window, this one had no glass, only a crossed pair of twigs tied together with twine.

Tammy deftly untied the twine and removed the two twigs. “Heh,” she remarked, “I’ve always dreamed of doing that.”

“So this is Chip’s bedroom?” Herbie asked cheekily from above.

Tammy sniffed in what appeared to Herbie to be an obvious imitation of his mother. “If you’re going to be that way about it, you go first.”

“Fine. I’ll need room to land, anyway.” Herbie took off and swooped in through the window, landing on the upper half of a bunk bed, which immediately collapsed. “Ouch,” he stated dryly from the floor, telling Tammy by the tone of his voice that he was all right. “I could have used more room to stop than I got, though.”

Tammy carefully lowered herself to the ground and took a look at the wreckage. “You didn’t do this, Herbie. This whole room was trashed.” Reaching under a mattress, Tammy pulled out the torn remains of Chip’s nightshirt. “Come on,” she said urgently, grabbing Herbie’s wing.

She pushed past the door, which had been torn off of its hinges, and turned right into the dimly-lit corridor.

“We are *not* heading up to the living room,” she said in a low voice. “I think we’d need a lot more than a hockey stick and a couple of pucks for that.”

“Did Gadget teach you enough to build some sort of stun weapon?” Herbie asked.

“We’re heading for the workshop. Materials to build things, and it overlooks the living room.”

Herbie nodded. “I don’t want to go near that mad chipmunk without something that can knock it out.”

“Stop calling it a mad chipmunk!” she screamed.

Herbie just looked at her retreating back. The corridor ahead of them branched to the left before continuing onward to terminate in another door ripped from its hinges.

Without a word, Tammy took the turn. Herbie hesitated. “Who would have gone and ripped the Rangers’ doors off their hinges?” he asked.

“That’s Monty’s room. He was probably sleepwalking,” Tammy replied over her shoulder.

“Okay, Monty, I can understand, but what about Chip and Dale’s room?”

“It’s just a little bit further,” Tammy said, ignoring his question.

The side corridor ended, with a standard door to the left and a sliding door to the right. Mounted into the end of the corridor was a pair of pulleys attached to a rope that ran from a hole in the ceiling to a hole in the floor. Tammy tried to slide the door to the right open, but it wouldn’t budge. She used the hockey stick to sweep the wall above the door until she found a gauge mounted above it, impossible to see in this light. She lightly slid the stick around on either side of the indicator until she was certain of its position. “Okay,” Tammy concluded, “the elevator’s above us, on the workshop floor I think.”

She grabbed hold of the rope and started pulling it upwards. As she did so, the sound of something could be heard gently lowering towards them from above.

After a few seconds, she felt something click into place, and a bell mounted next to the sliding door was struck once by a felt-covered hammer, making a faint sound.

After listening at the door for a moment to make sure nothing was inside, Tammy opened it and walked into the small circular chamber inside, taking position beside another rope and pair of pulleys that ran through one side of the compartment. Herbie stepped in beside her and slid the door closed, plunging the elevator into total darkness. After a moment, the car began to slowly rise, to the sound of the rope being pulled through the pulleys.

“Do you think . . .” Herbie speculated. “Oh, I hope not . . .”

“Look, Herbie, it’s bad enough that we are in pitch blackness right now. Please don’t make it worse.”

“How can you be sure we won’t end up in the living room?”

“I’m counting floors.”

A few minutes passed. The elevator briefly stopped with a moment, then continued upwards until meeting a second stopping point and a muffled “ding!”

Herbie heard Tammy walk over to the door. There was a long moment of silence. “I don’t hear anybody,” she whispered.

“Is that good or bad?”

A moment of silence. “That was a shrug, in case you couldn’t see it.”

“I didn’t.”

The door slid open a crack, letting a dim ray of light into the chamber. Tammy could be seen peering through it. “I don’t see anybody,” she concluded.

She quietly slid the door open the rest of the way. As she had predicted, they were in the middle of the workshop. The door on this level opened significantly wider than it did on the lower floor, wide enough to allow a vehicle in. The only light came from a distant lamppost visible through a window at the far side of the room.

The first thing Tammy did was to make sure that the only other door leading out of the workshop was locked. In fact, it had already been locked, from the inside.

Tammy turned around with a start and looked around her. Then she looked up. Foxglove was hanging from a rafter, looking very severely down at them.

“Foxglove! What happened here?”

The bat dropped silently to the floor and looked the dove squarely in the eye. Finally, she blinked. “Herbert, is it?”

“Yes.”

Foxglove put a wing up to her face. “Good, at least I remember that much.”

“Wait, is your memory failing, too?” Herbie asked.

“Yes.”

“But you were fine at the beginning of the party.” The bat nodded. “Then that means it *is* a disease, and it’s communicable,” Herbie concluded. “We’ll probably be next.”

“What happened?” Tammy asked, desperation creeping into her voice.

“Well,” Foxglove began, “Dale and I had first watch. He left to get changed, but never came back. After a few minutes, I searched for him and found him lost in the corridors.

“I led him back to the living room. His memory just kept getting worse and worse, until Dale, he . . . ” she sniffled, “. . . he introduced himself to me. Like he never knew me!

“There was this bright flash in my head, then I hit the master power switch when Dale attacked me, so I’d have the advantage . . . ”

“‘Attacked’?”

Foxglove continued without noticing the interruption: “. . . I tried to immobilize him, but the others came too fast . . . ”

Tammy was standing at the railing, looking down in horror at the scene below her. The tire slide had been ripped from its attachment to the ceiling, and the furniture was scattered in all directions. In particular, the television set had a head-shaped hole in it, and the chipmunk roaming about wearing the remains of Dale’s nightshirt had spots of red on the top of his head. The large shirtless mouse that was once Monty was ramming into random walls, and Zipper was walking on four widely spread legs in slow motion, his head craned back to look at her. But she wasn’t looking for any of these animals.

“Chipper!” Tammy finally gasped, as she caught a glimpse of the other chipmunk tearing at the couch with his teeth, the chipmunk she had glimpsed at the window, reduced now to a *thing* instead of a person.

Herbie walked over to the railing, but then quickly retreated upon glimpsing Gadget. “She . . . they’ve gone feral!”

“But that’s not possible!” Tammy exclaimed. “You’re either born feral, or sentient. You never go from one to the other—never!”

“It’s the final stage of the disease,” observed Herbie clinically. “Loss of memory, loss of personality, loss of sentience.”

“. . . I can feel my mind slipping . . . ” said Foxglove in a cold voice. “Promise me you’ll take me to Bear Mountain in northwestern Connecticut after I lose my mind, so my family can take care of me.”

“We will,” Tammy promised, “but you won’t lose your mind, because you’re not sick.”

“But she is,” stated Herbie. “The evidence points to it. She caught the disease,” he speculated, “whatever it is, from the Rangers. And they went to that party tonight, and

mingled with dozens of squirrels and doves, including us. It's the end of the world. Nimnul's ultimate revenge."

"No," Tammy said, shaking her head, "it's not a disease, it's not irreversible. We *saw* that flash from the spruce tree—it was not in Foxglove's head."

"You saw it too?" asked Foxglove.

"Yes," Tammy brightened, "and that means there must be another explanation."

"Did the flash happen before or after Dale crashed into the TV?" asked Herbie.

"Um . . . I'm not sure."

"In any case, no electrical short could have produced a flash that bright, or that brilliantly colored. Perhaps that was the disease striking our brains at the same time. Quick, Tammy, try to remember what you ate at the party. The newest memories appear to be the first to disappear."

Tammy shook her head violently. "It doesn't have to be that! Maybe it's magic—Freddie's returned!"

Foxglove shook her said uncertainly. "I don't know. This doesn't feel like any magic Winifred ever cast."

"I still believe it's natural," Herbie said, "and probably impossible to stop. Nimnul would have covered every angle. An air-borne pathogen, attacking the nervous system of all non-human life forms, in order to undo the day when the Professor realized that the 'vermin' he despised were as self-aware as he was."

"You're not helping!" Tammy snarled.

"We are looking at the end of animal civilization," Foxglove pronounced in a dead voice, "and it's all my fault, because I can't remember the phone number of what's-his-name. Gadget's got a device that lets humans understand us. There's only one human I can trust to help us out, and I can't remember his number."

"Even now," Herbie droned on, "a plane full of plague vectors is taking off, heading halfway around the world. When it arrives, animal sentience in India is dead. And here in America—dead."

"Like my Dale down there," Foxglove said, "everything that makes him Dale disappeared forever in the blink of an eye. And soon all animals will be as feral as he is."

"No," cried Tammy in a shrill tone, grabbing Foxglove by the shoulders and shaking her. "That's not true. I *won't let* it be true! There has to be another explanation, something reversible, there just has to be! *Give me another explanation!*"

"Stop shaking me!" cried Foxglove, in tears. "Who are you? What do you want from me?"

As Tammy stepped back in shock, Foxglove suddenly gave off a blinding burst of light.

Before they had recovered, a now-feral Foxglove swooped down and burst through the living room window to freedom, followed by the wild animals that had once been the Rescue Rangers.

9. ENTER NIGHT

“I’M BLIND!” TAMMY CRIED.

She’d had the bad luck to be looking right at Foxglove at the moment Foxy lit up like a couple dozen suns. “What happened?” she asked, desperately trying to rub vision back into her eyes with her fists.

Herbie, who happened to have Tammy between him and Foxglove at the time, was unaffected. He quickly guided Tammy to a chair. “Foxglove went feral and liberated the Rangers. You stay here and recover. I’ll try to catch them.”

In one fluid motion he ran and vaulted over the balcony of the workshop, attempting to glide down to the living room, but he misjudged his descent and crashed into the remains of the couch. “Ouch,” he said, rather less calmly than the last time. “You know, the Bat Guy makes this look a whole lot easier in the comic books.”

Herbie got up and hobbled over to the broken window. “Monty and Gadget have just realized how high up they are and are frozen on the branch,” he described to Tammy, “and Foxglove is gliding down to the ground. I can’t see Chip or Dale, either on the branch or descending the tree.”

“Try looking up.”

After a pause, Herbie informed her that the chipmunks were indeed climbing up, which as both of them knew was a dead end.

“What about Zipper? Has he escaped?”

“No, he’s still here,” said Herbie, trying to simultaneously keep track of the locations of all of the feral Rangers. “He’s trying to claw his way up the wall.”

“Claw? Are you sure he’s not walking up the wall?”

“No, I’m sure. He looks like he forgot how to do that.”

Tammy cried out in frustration. “Why is this taking so long?” she said, rubbing her eyes even harder. “It’s like looking through a sea of Citrus Delight!”

“I always preferred the ‘purple stuff’, myself.” Herbie said with a smirk.

Tammy held a paw up before her befuddled eyes, trying to see between her fingers. Suddenly she snapped her fingers in realization. “That’s it!” Taking off her backpack, she reached in and removed Gadget’s photographs from inside the scrapbook she had stuffed in there earlier. Shuffling through the photographs one by one she confidently declared, “Mouse, mouse, chipmunk, chipmunk, turtle, bat!” Her earlier fear and depression had seemingly evaporated with this discovery.

“You’ve lost me,” Herbie said.

“These pictures, I finally figured them out! Here, take a look!” Sweeping both arms in front of her to catch anything her faulty eyes were not telling her about yet, she made her way to the balustrade and held out the pile. “Catch!”

Herbie rushed over and caught the photographs before they reached the floor, then took them back to the window where he could continue to monitor the situation. “What am I supposed to do to see them?” he asked.

“You need to go blind,” Tammy said, laughing.

Herbie took off his Coo-Coo Cola bottle glasses. “Now what?”

“Well now you need to use your imagination. You see I have dreams that look exactly like those photographs. I’ve been having them for the last two or three years. Couldn’t make heads or tails of them at first, but eventually I figured it out. The trick is to mentally blur the colors together in your head, and then the borders just sort of draw themselves. Smashing your eyeballs into the back of the sockets helps, too.”

Herbie moved the stack of photographs forward and backward before his eyes before the image suddenly clicked. “Oh!” he exclaimed. Looking through the pile, he named off the animals he could now clearly see: “mouse, mouse, chipmunk, chipmunk, turtle and bat.”

Herbie blinked, then suddenly put his glasses back on and turned back to the window. To his relief, the situation outside had not changed. “Well I’m glad you were able to figure that out, but in case you’ve forgotten, we’ve got a crisis here, potentially the end of animal sentience as we know it!”

“But it’s not as bad of a crisis as we thought it was! Those photographs are from Earth-A, right?”

“Right.”

“And the Rangers’ counterparts on Earth-A are feral, right?”

“Yes, although . . .”

“Don’t you see? They match up! Mouse, mouse, chipmunk, chipmunk, turtle, bat! Are there captions on the back?”

Herbie turned over the photographs and read the captions written on them in pencil, “Earth-A Gadget, Earth-A Monterey Jack, Earth-A Chip, Earth-A Dale, Earth-A Zipper, and Earth-A Foxglove.” He reached down and picked up Zipper, who cast a terrified expression at the floor below and buried his head in Herbie’s shoulder. “Wait, turtle?” he asked, confused.

“The Rangers’ counterparts don’t have to be the same species in every universe, Herbie! Now tell me, is Zipper acting like a feral fly . . .”

“ . . . or a feral turtle!”

“Exactly!”

“Then that means . . .”

“That means the Rangers did *not* go feral. They swapped minds with their feral counterparts on Earth-A! The world is not doomed.”

“Except Gadget’s machine is only a viewer.”

“Maybe we need to take a look at it to be sure.”

HERBIE, HOLDING ZIPPER BETWEEN HIS wing and body, cast one last look at feral Gadget and Monty on the branch outside the tree, and then turned and walked around the wreckage of the living room, through an archway, around a corner, and then up a flight of stairs to a small sitting room with a large door. Tammy opened the door, allowing him into the workshop.

Herbie looked about in confusion. Gadget's inventions lined the walls and topped at least a dozen shelves that ran around the walls of the room. "Which one of these is the viewer?" he asked.

Tammy closed her eyes. "I was up here plenty of times last summer and over the Christmas holiday. Gadget has a very meticulous filing system for her inventions . . . " ". . . appearances notwithstanding."

Tammy opened her eyes, mentally comparing her previous memory of the room to its current appearance. "I think . . . maybe . . ." she pointed at a corner next to the banister. "Yes, I believe that gray box is it. Only one new invention? Gadget must have been really obsessed with this viewer."

"Wouldn't you be?"

Tammy nodded. "Could you take a look at it? I still don't trust my eyes yet." She was struggling to get everything returned to her backpack.

Herbie obliged, first putting Zipper down on the large circular platform in the center of the room. "Well superficially, it resembles a human oscilloscope from the 1940's, but it has been extensively modified. For one thing, there's no power cord, and no on/off switch. There's a metal tag on the back: 'OHD-0035 Dimensional Viewer (#2 of 2).' A couple of bare metal poles have been inserted into the unit. According to Gadget, touching these would activate the unit." He tried experimentally grabbing the handles. "As I expected, nothing happened. This unit requires an electrostatic power source."

"We saw two flashes of what could have been electrostatic discharge."

"Yes, but I think those were an effect of the mind-swaps, not the cause."

Tammy looked around the workshop, relieved that her vision was finally back to normal. "The first mind-swap obviously did not happen in here, or this place would have been trashed just like the bedrooms we saw. And we were present for the second mind-swap—do you remember any sounds or flashes from this corner of the room?"

"No."

"Well, then that makes it unlikely that this machine was involved in the second mind-swap, either."

"Maybe there's some other invention, located somewhere else?"

"We've seen most of Ranger H.Q.; let's check out the rest," said Tammy, picking up her backpack with one paw and Zipper with the other.

EXITING THE WORKSHOP INTO THE sitting room, Tammy opened a door into Foxglove's room, clearly identified by the ceiling perch in place of a bed and the heavy curtains on the windows. The room was untouched by the pandemonium that had affected the other rooms.

Herbie climbed a staircase from the sitting room to the top floor. After confirming that Gadget's bedroom was in the same state as Chip and Dale's and Monty's bedrooms, he looked in the hanger to see that the Ranger Wing had been roughly pushed aside. This was the path that the feral Gadget had made to the tire slide entrance. He then took the stairs down three flights to return to the floor he and Tammy had first entered an hour ago. He walked through the remains of Monty's rampage in the kitchen and dining room, peeked into Monty's bedroom, and met up with Tammy in the gym, which was unaffected.

“See anything?” Tammy asked.

“Nothing that could have been used for a mind-swap. Besides, if the Rangers were scattered throughout H.Q. at the time of the first swap, why wasn’t Foxglove affected until a half-hour later?”

“I was asking myself the same question. Not only was this swap performed by somebody outside the tree, but there’s something else, one missing piece before this puzzle is complete.”

10. TAKE MY HAND

STUMPED FOR THE MOMENT, TAMMY and Herbie returned to the living room to survey the damage.

“What’s that sound?” Tammy asked, hearing a reedy melody drifting in from the broken window. “Is that a pavane?”

Herbie rushed to the window. “Gadget and Monty! They’re gone!”

Tammy quickly joined him. They easily spotted the two mice scrambling down the tree towards the source of the mysterious tune. They were soon passed by a racing Chip and Dale. Even Zipper was struggling in Tammy’s arms.

Before them the sky was slowly brightening. It would be dawn in another hour. The music was coming from a picnic bench located next to the Ranger Tree. Sitting there was Freddie the witch, playing on a pipe, and on the table was Foxglove, swaying slowly to the rhythm. Freddie was holding her purse open, and gesturing for the bat to climb in.

“Chip was right,” Tammy said in a whisper. “She *is* up to no good.” Quickly passing Zipper to Herbie, she hopped out the window and raced down the bark of the tree. Herbie, still uncertain about his wings after his last tumble and encumbered with the fly-turtle, followed more slowly.

The feral Rangers were all crawling steadily for the purse when Tammy suddenly leapt down into their midst, screaming at the top of her lungs. The chipmunk that was once Chip was the first to panic, followed quickly by the rest. They scattered in all directions into the scrub that lined the jogging trails. Before the human had a chance to react, Tammy quickly hopped down to the ground and then raced back up the tree trunk to a branch which was too high for the former witch to reach.

Winifred dropped her silver pipe in shock and stared up at the squirrel. “What have you done?” she cried.

“You can’t have them!” shouted Tammy. “The Rangers are mine!” With that, she collapsed into a pile, just as Herbie landed beside her.

The dove crouched down and put a wing around her shoulder. “You had no other choice,” he said. Standing up, he scanned the sky until he saw the diminishing silhouette of a pink bat. “Now we’ll never know what happened,” he muttered.

“We may have lost the Rangers,” Tammy said, wearily getting back up, “but we can still find out the answers . . . from *her*.” She stabbed one finger in the direction of the former witch.

“What?” Winifred asked in a weak voice. As Foxglove had known, the human still retained the ability to understand animal speech.

“*You* are the missing piece,” Tammy said accusingly. “The one with all the connections. Isn’t that right, Winifred Cadwallader?”

“Don’t call me Freddie!” Winifred snarled out of habit, then abruptly realized that she had been addressed correctly for once. “I mean, wh . . . what am I accused of?” she asked, regaining her indignation.

“Isn’t it true that you work at the mental institution at the edge of town?”

“Yes.”

“And isn’t it true that one of the so-called patients of this institution is a scientist by the name of Norton Nimmul, a man that shares your hatred of the Rescue Rangers?”

“Wait—no, that’s not true! Well, the part about Nimmul registered as a patient, but the patient is not really Nim . . .”

Tammy didn’t allow her to finish. “I think the two of you planned this all along. You knew where the Rangers lived, but you’ve lost your magic, so the Rangers would only treat you as a medium-level threat, while Nimmul had developed the technology to eliminate the Rangers, but would never be allowed to get anywhere near the tree, so he pretended to have lost his memory while . . .”

Tammy looked at Herbie, who had been tapping her shoulder for the last minute. “Do you mind?” she asked through clenched teeth.

“I, uh, hate to interrupt a good rant, but I really think we should let Winifred finish her last sentence.”

Tammy thought for a moment. “Now that you mention it, what did you mean about the patient not being Nimmul?”

“The man in room 411A is not Norton Nimmul,” Winifred said. “He claims his name is Norris Nulton, and that he came from another world back in February, although not by choice.”

“Another swap!” Tammy and Herbie smiled as the final piece clicked into place. “Nimmul’s invention wasn’t a failure, and it wasn’t a teleporter at all!” exclaimed Herbie. “He must have grossly overestimated the power requirements.” Tammy shook her head to keep him from revealing too much.

“He kept telling me that only the Rescue Rangers could help him,” Winifred continued, not paying attention to what the squirrel and dove were discussing. “He . . . he knew an awful lot about the Rangers . . . and about me. Some things even I didn’t know. Got rather upset whenever I asked him about that. In fact, he appears to still be half-convinced that this whole world is a mad dream of his, one that he is unable to wake from.”

“He may be closer to the truth than you know,” Herbie said under his breath.

AS A RESULT OF THEIR conference, Tammy and Herbie had hesitantly come down from the branch to the park bench, although they still kept their distance from the human and remained on the side of the bench nearest the Ranger Tree.

Winifred re-opened the conversation: “Do you mind me asking what happened between you and the Rescue Rangers just then, with the shouting and the scattering? If I didn’t know any better, I’d say they were acting rather fer . . .”

Tammy quickly cut off that line of thought to resume her interrogation. “What were you planning on doing if you could convince the Rangers to help you?”

Winifred sighed as she realized she wasn't going to be getting any answers. "Norris thought that the inventor mouse . . . Gadget . . . would be able to invent something to put him back where he belonged."

"And you were just going to smuggle them in your purse?" Tammy asked incredulously. "How did you expect them to trust you if you were going to put them in an enclosed space that would be difficult for them to escape?"

"Have you got a better idea?" asked Winifred.

"As a matter of fact, I do. Herbie, go up to the workshop. In the north-northeast corner is what looks like a pink human pillbox purse. In reality, it is a miniature command center. Bring it down here, and Winifred will use it to take me to the asylum."

"When did the Rangers make that?" asked Herbie.

"They converted it from the Easter egg last September. It was to infiltrate the Guild of Calamitous Intent."

"Oh, I remember." He turned in preparation for his launch, then stopped himself, opened his chest pocket, and handed Zipper over to Tammy. "I think you're better off holding him," he said, before taking to the sky and making his way up the tree, corkscrew-fashion.

TAMMY TURNED BACK AROUND TO face Winifred, who was giving her a very odd expression. For a moment Tammy imagined what she must look like right now to the human, a tense squirrel cradling a fly in her arms. The image made her laugh out loud. "You must think I'm a villain from a *Dirk Suave* movie!"

Winifred cringed. "I don't watch many movies," she apologized.

"Look, I'm sorry if I can't explain everything that is going on right now."

"I understand," said Winifred in a quiet voice. "My reputation precedes me."

Tammy stopped to get a good look at Winifred Cadwallader. Up close, her face was lined with fine wrinkles, most of them frown lines but surprisingly there were some laugh lines as well. She could also see that the human's bright red hair was streaked with white, as if she had witnessed something that had scared her half to death. Her own capacity for evil, perhaps.

Tammy took a big breath as she made her decision. "I think we should start over," she said, closing the distance between them and extending her hand. "My name is Tammy. I work with the Rescue Rangers in . . . an associate capacity."

Winifred grinned as soon as she heard the name. She lightly shook the outstretched hand between thumb and forefinger. "'Associate capacity', huh? Is that a promotion from 'Chip's Biggest Fan'?"

Tammy's eyes went wide. "Where did you hear that?" she demanded.

"I told you that Norris knows a lot of things that he shouldn't. He also seems to enjoy the sound of his own voice."

"This is going to come out all wrong," Tammy said apologetically, "but why exactly are you here this morning? The Winifred I read about in Chip's case file would never come out here like this and expose herself to whatever the Rangers might decide to do against a one-time enemy. What changed?"

Winifred looked away. "I changed. When I was in prison I spent a lot of time in Solitary Confinement. My crime may not have been that bad in human terms, but I had

made some powerful enemies, and I was still arrogant enough to provoke them. In Solitary I had time to review my life, to affix blame for my problems where it belonged . . . with myself.

“I’m . . . I’m trying to do better. To atone for what I did and what I almost did. I’ll never have back what I threw away in pettiness and greed, but helping that poor man out makes me feel a little less empty inside. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Tammy patted her on the hand. “I understand. Tell me about Norris.”

Winifred’s face brightened as she thought of him. “He’s a sweet, sweet man. So trusting, so hopeful. The first thing he ever said to me was, ‘You’ve come to save me!’ Me, a hero! He thought I was Francine, his wife from that other world. Apparently, I look just like her.”

“Like Norris looks just like Professor Nimmul?”

“Yes, I thought of that. ‘Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,’ and all that.

Unfortunately for Norris, Francine is not like me at all, or rather, she’s exactly like I was before, made even more bitter by the fact that magic doesn’t work in her world. Reading between the lines of what Norris tells me, she despises him, and yet, he loves her more than life itself.” She looked up at the sky, tears in her eyes. “Despite the fact that my face will always remind him that his beloved Francine is lost to him, he’s still the only human who has ever cared about me.”

“You do realize if we succeed in helping this man, that you’ll never see him again. Not as you remember him.”

Winifred sniffed. “I know. In the grand balance of things, the happiness of Norris Nulton means far more than the meager hopes of a broken creature such as myself.”

“You’re a good person,” Tammy assured Winifred. She then sighed deeply in regret as the implication sank in: “And that means I lost the Rangers for nothing.” She backed up several inches so she could see Winifred in the eyes. “Let me tell you what happened to them . . .”

WITH A SLIGHT “DING!” A patch of bark at the base of the Ranger Tree slid aside to reveal the freight elevator. From it emerged a small human’s purse, pushed by Herbie. Due to the extensive contents of the purse, moving it was not easy.

“Need any help?”

Herbie looked around the side of the pink cylinder. “Sparky, is that you?”

“I dunno,” said the voice. “Is it?”

The two of them soon pushed the purse to the foot of the picnic table. Seeing them, Tammy hopped down, leaving the feral Zipper with Winifred. “Hello, Sparky!”

The rat strolled casually around the side of the purse, then froze and pointed. “Aaah!” cried Sparky. “Human!”

Tammy walked over to him, stopping herself before she put her arm around the electrified rodent. “It’s all right, Sparky,” she reassured him, her hands safely behind her back. “This one’s OK.”

“Are the Rangers awake?” Sparky asked. “I’ve got a delivery for them.”

Herbie gestured vaguely. “They’re . . . around. Ah, there’s a bit of a problem with them.”

Sparky pulled out a screwdriver. “I can fix it.”

Tammy rolled her eyes. “Sparky, the Rangers are not themselves this morning.”

“Then who are they?” Sparky asked, wide-eyed.

“We think their minds have been swapped with those of their counterparts from an alternate universe,” said Herbie.

“Have you tried applying 60 volts in a two-thirds phase-modulated pulse induction field to the inferior lateral gyrus of their left frontal lobes?” Sparky asked, speaking rapidly.

Herbie blinked, then blushed. “Alright, I’ll admit it: that went completely over my head. Still, I wouldn’t mind trying it if we get the chance.”

“Chance to do what?” asked Sparky, completely forgetting what he had just said.

Herbie sighed then looked up hopefully at the lab rat. “Gadget said she’d have the solution for her power supply problem by this morning. I’m assuming that you’re it?”

The mouse let a spark shoot between two outstretched fingers. “Well, I could power her viewer, but Gadget didn’t think it fair to use me like that, so I borrowed a rodent-scale Tesla coil from the university for her to use. I left it back at the tree. Of course, now that she’s in another dimension, I guess I should be taking it back . . .”

“Well,” asked Herbie, “could we use it first? We want to find out what happened to the Rangers.”

Tammy nodded in agreement, a grim expression on her face. “Alright, but since our counterparts are feral, I don’t see how they are going to be very useful, and trying to use any sensitive equipment with the Rangers in their current condition is just asking for trouble. Say, Winifred,” she added, brightening, “maybe you should try it!”

“Try what?” asked Winifred, leaning down.

“Aaah!” cried Sparky. “Human that can understand us!”

“She’s OK,” Tammy reassured Sparky.

“The Rangers have a device for spying on other worlds,” Herbie explained to Winifred.

“It’s designed to show what your counterpart is doing,” said Tammy. “In your case that would be Norris’ wife.”

“Winifred-A is Norris’ wife?” Herbie asked.

“Winifred-A’?”

“Well, we need some logical way of referring to counterparts when we don’t know their names. The swapped versions of the Rescue Rangers are: Chip-A, Dale-A, Gadget-A, Monty-A, Zipper-A and Foxglove-A.”

“Her name is Francine.”

“Well, as I said, the rule only applies when the true name is unknown, and I didn’t know that name until you just said it.”

“Will Francine know I’m spying on her?” Winifred asked.

Herbie nodded. “Gadget said that there was a limited form of empathic communication between somebody using the viewer and their counterpart. She theorized that if the counterpart had their own viewer and was using it at the same time, that this might trigger a full telepathic junction, a ‘meeting of the minds’ as it were.”

Winifred shook her head violently. “Bad idea, very bad idea. The last person you want to tip off in this situation is Francine Nulton.”

Tammy shrugged. “Well, that just leaves the three of us, and our counterparts. I don’t have very high hopes, though.”

Zipper-A peered down at them from the top of the table. At Tammy's urging, Winifred carefully picked up the fly and lowered him to the ground. Herbie watched as the fly grazed on the grasses growing through the cracks in the sidewalk. He suddenly clicked his beak, the avian equivalent of snapping your fingers. "Tammy?" he asked, looking Tammy in the eyes. "Now is the right time to tell me what you've been wanting to tell me since the graduation ceremony."

"Wait, *that?* Now?" Tammy stammered.

"Yes."

"Well . . . I, uh . . . Oh . . . drat." Tammy nervously rubbed the fur at the back of her neck with one hand. "I was hoping there'd be less witnesses around when I finally said this. Makes it seem less ridiculous that way." She looked around to see if there was anybody else around, then lowered her voice. "You see, there's . . . an invisible somebody . . . watching me. Sometimes." She then looked over her left shoulder, accusingly. "She hasn't been around, lately," she said to the empty space next to her, "like for the last four or five *hours*, when I could have *really* used her support." This being said, she faced the group again. "She's . . . well, she's me. Don't ask me how I know, since I never saw her or heard her or anything. I think . . . I think sometimes I might share her dreams. Do you believe me?"

"Yes," Herbie said, quietly. "Is she human?" he asked as calmly as he could.

"Yes," Tammy said without thinking, and then what she said sunk in. "I . . . never thought about it, but yes, yes she's human, and her favorite TV show is *Rescue Rangers*."

"The Rescue Rangers have their own TV show?" Sparky and Winifred asked simultaneously.

"I thought she was just referring to the stories I told her about the Rangers, but I think she was thinking of an actual show. That could mean she's my counterpart from Earth-A, and if she's human and has a viewer, and if she's anything like me (she's just got to be!) then that's it! I use the viewer to make contact, and tell her what's wrong, and she'll rescue the Rangers! And beat Nimnul, since he's obviously behind all this. And then force him to switch everyone back, including him! And everyone will live happily ever after."

"I love a happy ending," said Sparky.

The three of them started walking towards the Ranger Tree, until Tammy suddenly stopped and put a hand on Herbie's shoulder. "You can't come," she told him.

"Why not?"

"Because you need to go with Winifred to the asylum. We need to find out anything that Norris knows that could help us."

"Aw, but I wanted to see it!"

"You'll have plenty of time to see later."

Herbie sighed. He looked up at the human with uncertainty. "Are you sure we can trust her?"

"Absolutely."

"All right." He walked up to the pillbox purse, opened a secret compartment in the side, and stepped inside. "YOU CAN PICK ME UP!" a voice boomed from inside.

"Oops, sorry, had to set the volume. You can pick me up."

Winifred picked up the pink object with some reluctance. “Pink is *not* my color,” she said to no one in particular. Brushing some mud from the bottom, she tucked it under one arm and hefted the patchwork bag with the other. “Good luck,” she told Tammy.

“You, too.”

TAMMY AND SPARKY MOVED SPARKY’S miniature Tesla coil into the elevator and began the arduous process of pulling themselves up to the workshop level. Eventually, they emerged from the elevator and pulled out their power source.

Sparky looked around. “Which one of these inventions is the viewer?”

Tammy pointed. Sparky set up the Tesla coil. “I shouldn’t have to connect anything,” Sparky explained. “The static electric field will work just fine at this distance.”

Tammy moved a chair into position, sat down, and looked at the dials of the instrument. She compared a set of notes taped to the device with the settings. “It’s already pointed at Earth-A.” With a deep breath, she held her hands just above one of the two metal handles, mentally preparing herself.

THE PINK PURSE CAME TO rest for a moment on the roof of a beat-up beige Plymouth Suburban Wagon as Winifred started fishing for her keys. A little door opened up on top and a dove’s head emerged to get a last look at the Ranger Tree and the spruce tree, their branches intertwined. “Just think,” he said incredulously, “she’s about to see the Real World!

“I wonder what it’s like?”

PART TWO: Francine

*Empty is the sky before the sun wakes up.
Empty is the eyes of animals in cages.
Empty, faces of women mourning
When everything's been taken from them.
Me, don't ask me about empty.*

*Empty is a string of dirty days
Held together by some rain.
And the cold winds drumming at the trees again.
Empty is the color of the fears
Long about September when the days
Go marching in a line toward November.
Empty is the hour before sleep kills you every night
And pushes you to safety away from every kind of light.
Empty is me. Empty is me.*

—“Empty Is”, Frank Sinatra

11. WE'RE OFF TO NEVER-NEVER LAND

T-118 days, 5 hours, 26 minutes and 45 seconds (February 14, 7:33 PM EST).

IT WAS SAINT VALENTINE'S DAY. The world chose to ignore this fact.

It was a cold and miserable night. It had rained, and then a plummeting drop in temperatures at sunset had caused the water to freeze. The trees had become locked in a permanent appearance of weeping, and the city streets with their black ice had been converted into death traps. On the lonely forest road, darkness and silence reigned beneath the stony cloudbanks.

There was both life, and death, dwelling in the woods on either side of the road. The life consisted of birds, mammals, assorted invertebrates, fungi, mildew and above all the frozen trees. The life was sleeping, but not dreaming, waiting, but not knowing what it was waiting for. The death consisted of those who had waited their entire brief lives without ever learning their purpose. Most of this death took the form of crumbling stone statues, things that had once been human before the War. No one now living remembered the origins of those misshapen lumps of rock, not even their few survivors and descendants, who even then futilely sought the secret of their fate. The wood nursed its secrets, and was jealous of those who might expose them.

DOWN THE LONELY FOREST ROAD rolled a small Army jeep, its pale yellow headlights rapidly swallowed by the darkness all around. It edged forward as if aware of the forest's malevolence towards it. In the driver's seat sat a short little fat man in a tight, badly fitting army uniform. His face was clean-shaven, so clean in fact that he looked incapable of sprouting facial hair.

Lou didn't like driving through the woods, especially at night. Bud would tell him he was a scaredy-cat, if he were here, but he never was there when it got really scary. Lou told himself what Bud had always told him, that there was no such thing as spooks, that they were simply the inventions of scaredy-cats with overactive imaginations. Of course, he wasn't imagining the *eyes*, so many *eyes* that were watching him from the woods. He started driving a lot faster then, black ice or no black ice.

After only a few near-death experiences, he reached his destination, a point on the road no different than any other point, other than the fact that it was exactly halfway between the city and the sanitarium. There, a small cabin, called "the shack" by anybody who had ever set eyes upon it, had been constructed according to specifications and a checkpoint set up to screen passing motorists, a patent absurdity as the only traffic the road ever saw was when a new pair of guards was sent out every twelve hours to relieve the checkpoint. Once on duty, the pair was never to be separated, which made Lou's

little trip to the city even more dangerous. But Bud wanted a few things, and he could be very persuasive.

Lou parked the jeep in the designated parking spot next to the cabin, got out, and walked halfway to the cabin door, then stopped and walked back to turn off the headlights of the jeep. He got halfway to the door again before turning to retrieve the bag of supplies. Finally he walked through the door.

"It's about time!" exclaimed Bud as Lou entered and closed the door behind him. Bud was a tall thin man with a long thin mustache. His army uniform was impeccably fitted and pressed. He was sitting in a wooden chair leaned back against the wall, his arm snaked out to one side to adjust the frequency of a contraband radio. He suddenly stood, strode the two paces of the narrow room that separated him from his partner, and pulled an open bag of Heinrich's Chocolate-Anchovy Strudel out of the bag he was holding. "Hey!" he exclaimed, "you ate nearly half the bag!"

"I can't help it," Lou explained. "I eat when I'm nervous."

"You didn't get caught, did you?" Bud asked in an accusing tone.

"No, but those woods . . ."

"How many times do I have to tell you? There's nothing wrong with those woods. It's all in your head—you're like Little Miss Muffet: a spider would give you a heart attack." He poked his head in the paper bag. "Now, did you at least get a newspaper?"

"You mean this?" Lou said with a wink, pulling the item from his back pocket.

"Give me that!" Bud exclaimed, yanking the paper from his hands. With an eager Lou following, he walked over to a small desk and started separating out the sections of the paper. News, Sports, Business, Ads and Personal Ads were all cast aside as the Entertainment section was opened and eagerly perused by the pair. They soon found what they were looking for: the box office breakdowns of movies playing in theaters that weekend.

Bud handed the paper to Lou as he retrieved a notepad from his breast pocket. "Alright," he said, "what's the number one movie?"

"It's . . . aw, not the boat movie again! When will people stop watching the boat movie! The ending is so depressing!"

Bud chuckled. "That it is. What's number two?"

"The depressing detective movie."

"Number three?"

"The depressing political thriller."

"Number four?"

"The *really* depressing historical romance."

"And number five?"

"The chase movie. I liked that one."

Bud checked his notes. "Yeah, but I still predicted four of the five. Pay up."

"But," Lou blustered, digging out \$50 and handing it over, "that's not fair!"

Bud leaned over Lou as he pocketed the sum. "Are you accusing *me* of being unfair?"

"No!" protested Lou. "Not you! This paper's got to be wrong. Those can't be the top-grossing movies."

"And why not?" Bud asked, as he picked up the News section. The headline proclaimed "Detroit Standoff Enters Third Week", and the photograph beneath it showed a smoke-enveloped city surrounded by what appeared to be a ring of giants.

"They're all so depressing!"

"Exactly," Bud said, his head buried in the paper. "Don't know how the chase movie got in there. Must have been the blues music."

"Where are the rest of the happy movies? Where's the Jack Nicholson movie?"

"He was completely out of character, smiling like that."

"The big vs. little movie?"

"Dodgy accents."

"The one they made from that book? *Great Vibes*?"

"What? Oh, I know which one you mean. That one blew the romance subplot completely out of proportion to the doom and gloom subplot."

"But that was the best part!"

"Lou, when will you wake up? People want their movies to match their lives."

"Hopelessly depressing?"

"Exactly," agreed Bud. "Well," he reconsidered, "not exactly. But happy endings haven't worked since the '30's. The only reason Hollywood keeps using them is for the kiddies." He looked up to see Lou's hurt expression, then rolled his eyes and sighed.

"Ah, don't look at me like that, Lou. I'm sorry. Now does that make you feel better?"

"It'd help if I got your half of the Cracker Jacks."

Bud, his head back in the newspaper, waved his hand absently. "Fine."

"Goodie!" Bud pulled the box of candy out of the paper bag and started in on the comics. He was up to "Family Circus" when Bud plunked his paper down in front of him.

"Take a look at that!"

"'Commander Cellini To Be Released'," read Lou. "Waitaminute, wait a minute! Is this the same Commander Cellini who last year got locked in the loony bin we're guarding because he said Earth was in danger?"

"The same," Bud agreed, nodding.

"The same Commander Cellini who was your 'close personal friend'?"

"The same."

"The same Commander Cellini who promised us a transfer right before his Ultra Probe launched?"

"The very same."

"Hooray!" Lou sang. "*We don't have to live in the shack! We don't have to live in the shack!*" Then a thought came to him. "Hey, Bud?"

"Yeah?"

"Why'd the Army take so long to let him go? Everybody knew he was right months ago."

"Because the Army never admits when it's wrong, kid. This article—it's buried in the back of the paper, on a Friday. They let him go because Cellini's friend Captain Koenig has friends in high places, but that doesn't mean anybody has to know about it, see?"

"Yeah, I guess." He sat there for a bit before resuming the refrain of "*we don't have to live in the shack!*" He looked around to see Bud at the window of the cabin, looking out at a car honking at him from the checkpoint. The rain had started up again.

"It's your turn, Lou. Go out there and see what that lady wants."

"Oh, no!" Lou protested. "It's *your* turn. Besides, I'm not finished with the comics yet."

"I'll pay you five bucks to do it."

"Twenty."

"Ten?"

"Deal." Lou said, putting down the paper. He put on a rain slicker that was hanging on a peg near the door, walked back to Bud, grabbed the clipboard that was hanging on the wall next to him, and held out his hand.

Bud checked his wallet, which was mostly full of money he had won from Lou. "I haven't got a ten," he explained. "Give me two tens for a five."

Without thinking, Lou handed over two ten-dollar bills, and got a five in return. "And here's what I owe you," Bud said unctuously, returning one of the tens while pushing Lou out the door.

Lou stood outside the door for a minute, reviewing the transaction in his head. "Hey!" he exclaimed. He turned to go back in the cabin, but found the door locked. "Hey, Bud!" he yelled, rattling the handle.

"Go take care of that woman!" Bud yelled through the window. To emphasize this point, the car horn honked again.

"Alright," Lou reluctantly agreed. "But we're not finished!"

PUTTING ON HIS BEST AUTHORITATIVE air, Lou sauntered up and knocked on the driver's side window of the car, a beige 1960 Plymouth Suburban Wagon in very used condition. "I need to see some identification, ma'am," he announced.

The driver rolled down the window to reveal a middle-aged person (you had to look a bit to be sure it was a woman), wearing wrinkled powder blue coveralls. Her hair was red, long and stringy. Her pearl-rimmed glasses only served to emphasize her age.

The two instantly recognized each other. "You!" they proclaimed in unison.

"Hiya, Frankie!" Lou greeted her as he regained his composure.

"Never call me Frankie!" she snapped in response.

"Uh, sorry, Francine."

She raised a red eyebrow at him.

"Mrs. Nulton?"

"That's better. I should have known it was you the moment I smelled your breath." She glanced over to take in Bud through the cabin window. "Aren't you two supposed to be guarding the Vostaach Space Center?"

"Ah . . ." Lou stalled, rubbing the back of his neck. "There was the little matter of the first Ultra Probe blowing up on Launchpad Seven. Nobody was in there, but . . ."

"That was you two?" Mrs. Nulton asked, raising her eyebrows. "I should have known."

Lou looked nervously at his clipboard, then waved it for her to see. "The Army's keeping a tight lid on the Mitty Sanitarium. We have to keep track of everybody who

comes or goes.” He pulled out a pen and started writing. “Francine Nulton,” he said and wrote. Checking his watch, he added, “7:46 P.M.” He looked at the clipboard. “It says here I need to write down why you’re going there.”

“You’re getting nosy,” the woman noted.

“Hey, if it was up to me you could go *waltzing* down the road, no questions asked!” Lou attempted to illustrate this, and nearly tripped over his own feet. “So it’s not me being nosy, it’s the Army. Now what should I write down?”

Mrs. Nulton rolled her eyes. “Write down that I’ve come to pick up my husband.”

“ . . . pick up her husband,” he repeated, writing that down. “Okay, then I can raise the barrier,” he read off of the clipboard.

Mrs. Nulton looked at Lou. Lou smiled back at her. Mrs. Nulton waited.

“Oh, I’m supposed to raise the barrier!” Lou said. He raced over and operated the mechanism.

Mrs. Nulton put the car into drive and started driving through the gate.

“I’ll see you later!” Lou said as her car turned a corner. “With your husband!” he added.

LOU WALKED BACK INTO THE cabin, lost in thought and dripping rainwater onto the floor. “Hey, Bud?” he asked.

Bud was leaning against the wall again, still studying the article he had found.

“Yeah, Lou?”

“That lady was Francine Nulton.”

“I noticed.”

“She said she was going to pick up her husband from the loony bin. I didn’t know he was in the loony bin.”

“You weren’t paying attention,” Bud informed him, referring to the article. “He cracked up right after the invasion started. The Army snuck the news of his release right at the end of the Cellini story: ‘Also being released from the Mitty Sanitarium tonight will be Norris Nulton, failed inventor.’ ‘Failed inventor’,” he repeated. “Now *there’s* the understatement of the year.”

12. DISAPPOINTMENT

T-118 days, 4 hours, 48 minutes and 16 seconds (February 14, 8:11 PM EST).

A FEW MINUTES LATER, A woman wearing a yellow raincoat over powder blue overalls swiftly made her way from her parked car into the main entrance of the Walter Mitty Army Mental Sanitarium, as the rain fell in buckets around her. After hanging up her coat to dry and signing in with a young Army clerk, she quickly made her way back to the office of Dr. Pritchard-Mitford, the head psychologist, her waterlogged shoes making a high-pitched *pocketa-pocketa-pocketa* sound on the linoleum floor.

“Good evening, Mrs. Nulton,” Dr. Pritchard-Mitford greeted her. “Please have a seat. I was expecting you a little earlier; you were informed of your husband’s release well before lunch.”

Francine Nulton bristled from her seat. “That would have required me to miss work, Doctor,” she said, and dared him with her stare to question her priorities. She glanced down at the desk to see a set of release forms and a pen waiting for her. Seeing that he had not answered her she continued. “I understand that he has recovered?”

“Well . . .” the psychologist hemmed, sitting down behind his desk, “Mr. Nulton is still a rather nervous individual, and prone to a variety of neuroses . . .”

“My husband has *always* been like that,” Francine stated, rolling her eyes. “What I need to know before I sign these and take him home is, have the panic attacks stopped? Does he still blame himself for the invasion? Is he a danger to himself?”

“. . . or others?” Pritchard-Mitford added.

“Norris Nulton a danger to *anyone* other than himself?” Francine asked ruefully. “Now that *would* be a dramatic change.”

The doctor cleared his throat in disapproval. “Yes, yes, he’s over all of that. We gave him a radio that could only pick up the news channel, and he’s finally come to accept that there wasn’t anything anybody could have done to prevent the invasion, including himself.” He produced a long manila envelope out of a drawer of the desk and placed it on top of the forms in front of Francine. “If you have any doubts you are free to review his file.”

Francine looked down coldly at the file. “Allowing me to review my husband’s private medical file is a bit irregular, is it not? Especially since according to you, he’s a sane man and my power of attorney over him should no longer apply.”

The doctor looked at her imploringly.

Francine glowered. “The Army doesn’t want to pay for him anymore, and his presence here will inevitably remind a reporter some day that it was the government’s money that paid for my husband’s failure,” she accused.

The head psychologist wilted. “Yes,” he admitted in a low voice.

Francine proceeded to sign the release papers. “That’s all I wanted,” she told him sweetly as she was doing this, “a little truth will always make things easier. Now where can I retrieve him?”

A LITTLE BALDING MAN SAT on a hard wooden bench in the middle of an endless antiseptic hallway. The bench was so high and the man’s legs so short that his plain brown shoes did not touch the ground, and he was idly kicking them back and forth. Above the shoes were brown slacks, and above that a brown sports jacket over a yellowing buttoned shirt and a fat brown bowtie. A miniscule brown porkpie hat in the center of his mostly-bald head completed the ensemble. The hair he did have, a handlebar mustache and a fringe around the back of his head, was red and fluffy in appearance. A large pair of spectacles sat on his bulbous red nose. He was looking down and twiddling his thumbs. Next to him on the bench were a brown suitcase and a book with a brown cover. The book was a well-worn biography of Thomas Edison.

“Norris.” The voice came from the end of the hallway. It was a harsh voice, and always carried the subtext that the person addressed was in trouble, yet to Norris it was the sound of violins and oboes, his muse and his salvation. “Coming, Francine,” he replied, eagerly, as he picked up the suitcase and book and waddled down the hall in the direction of the voice.

“What were you doing down there?” Francine asked her husband when he had caught up with her and removed his hat. “You were supposed to wait for me at the entrance.”

“Ah . . . the attendant said to wait in B wing and . . . wait. Was it B or D?”

Francine sighed. “Come on. I’m not fond of driving in the rain as it is, and now it’s dark as well.” She started leading the way to the exit, with Norris following her.

“It’s good to see you again, Dear,” Norris told her back. “I’ve missed you terribly.” Francine cast a warning glance over her shoulder at him, and he did not say another word until they were in the car, with Francine in the driver’s seat.

After turning over the engine a few times, the old car sputtered to life and the radio turned on. It was an after-market unit, practically brand new. Many of the men who had built the car had died of old age before the men who had built the radio had even been born. The first words out of the radio were, “. . . and here is the news out of Detroit.”

Norris groaned. “Do we have to listen to the news station?” he pleaded. “I’ve been desperate for music the entire time I was in there.” He reached for the dial.

Francine looked from the radio to Norris’ hand in panic. “No, you fool, don’t touch it!”

But it was too late. As soon as Norris’ fingers touched the knob, the unit gave off a loud spark and a puff of black smoke and died. Norris pulled back his hand quickly, casting a fearful look at his wife like he expected her to strike him.

Instead she sighed and turned the ignition off. “That was my fault, Norris. I had a new radio put in while you were away, and I forgot to switch it back on the way here. If we’re lucky, all that was damaged was the radio itself. You just sit here while I disconnect it.” She pulled her raincoat back on and pulled a lever to release the hood of the car. Norris sat in the driver’s seat, trying to be as small as possible and desperately trying not to cough from the smoke.

THE TRIP HOME WAS MOSTLY devoid of interest. In between the dozens of long-abandoned buildings were the usual roadside ads to trade in your gasoline-powered car for one of the cheaper nuclear-powered models. One of the ads had been torn off in the wind, revealing an older public-service ad showing a photograph of a man wearing a purple costume with two M's on the chest, domino mask, broad-brimmed Panama hat and cape, posing heroically. A wind machine had obviously been employed during the photo shoot for dramatic effect. The hand of young girl could be glimpsed holding one corner of the cape in frame. "There's No Need to Fear, Good Citizen," the ad proclaimed, "The Masked Marvel is Here!" Francine chuckled when she saw it. Her reaction was a bit stronger to another ad, located at a traffic stop. This ad showed a lush carpet being vacuumed by a gleaming chrome machine, wielded by a happy couple that looked like they belonged to a bygone era much happier than the present day. The couple was identified as Dinah and Harold Largess. Dinah's eyes sparkled as she admired her shapely Parisian dress, while Harold gave the viewer a crafty smile, his pencil mustache underlining a powerful beak of a nose. At the top of the ad were the words "Orlac's Machines: Solving all of life's little problems." Francine stared enraged at the ad, attempting to crush the steering wheel of the car into dust with her grip, until Norris informed her for the third time that the light had changed. Then she shook it off and continued driving.

It was about nine o'clock when the Plymouth pulled into a cul-de-sac in a somewhat suburban corner of Hartford, Connecticut. Unusually for neighborhoods in this area, a full half of the homes were occupied. The car drove past a young man and a teenage girl, both of them looking up into a tree, to pull into the garage of the house at the back of the court. While Francine got to work giving the car's wiring another examination and preparing to swap out the burned-out radio for the factory original unit sitting on a bench, Norris wordlessly brought his luggage as well as an empty cooler belonging to Francine into the house.

"I'll make you supper," he called out from the kitchen.

"Mac and cheese again," she muttered to herself before replying to him. "Very well."

"HERBERT," ALICE WENTWORTH SAID, "WE need to talk." The girl was about thirteen years old, her long black hair neatly done up in dozens of braids, and wearing a purple dress.

"I think she was just startled by the exhaust," said Herbert d'Foote, looking up in the tree and not paying attention to the girl. "I suspect the Nultons may have the only internal combustion car left in Hartford." The young man looked to be about eighteen years of age, a bit on the short side, with short blond hair and every accoutrement associated with a stereotypical nerd, starting with the Coo-Coo Cola bottle spectacles. He was wearing black jeans and an open tan jacket that revealed a black tee-shirt, on which was silk-screened an image of a anthropomorphic mouse in a purple jumpsuit catching a falling star in her hands. It was his favorite piece of fan-art for the *Rescue Rangers* television show, the work that inspired him to become the fan artist known as "Honker".

"Herbert," repeated the girl more firmly, "I'm leaving the fandom."

This caught his attention. “Leaving? But Alice, this was only your first time on the forum!”

“My first and my last. Did you read what they said about me?”

“Look, the *Rescue Ranger* fandom is the nicest, most well-behaved fandom I’ve ever encountered. This was just a fluke. You posted in the afternoon, when only the young hotheads are on. And you touched on a controversial subject.”

“I politely expressed my opinion of who belonged together in my welcome post, and I got the Spanish Inquisition! I want you to take this back.” She opened up the backpack she was wearing and removed a blue tee-shirt, onto which had been silk-screened an anthropomorphic chipmunk in a Hawaiian shirt lying at the feet of the same mouse from Herbert’s shirt. The mouse seemed so absorbed in a technical explanation that she didn’t even notice the chipmunk. The fan-art was signed “Honker”.

Herbert accepted it with a heavy heart. She then reached in to remove a stack of four videotapes held together by rubber bands. “No,” he said. “Keep those. Regardless of what you think of us, the show is more important. Don’t let what happened today poison what you think of that. Leave the fandom if you must, but please, remain a fan.”

Alice continued to hold out the tapes.

“At least watch them again before giving them back. Can you at least do that for me?”

Alice closed her eyes and lowered her arm. “Not today,” she pleaded. “I couldn’t possibly . . .”

“Take as long as you need. We’re still friends, aren’t we?”

Alice nodded, then turned and walked back to her house, which was located on the opposite side of Herbert’s house from the Nultons’ house.

AFTER A FEW MINUTES OF work, Francine put away her tools and cleaned her hands very thoroughly with a rag, a satisfied grin on her face for a job well done. Then, remembering the two people she saw on the way in, she stepped out of the garage door.

The young man was still there, standing in the front yard of the next house over. He looked to have something stuffed inside his zipped-up tan jacket. In one hand he was holding one end of a long leash; his nervous attention was focused on the other end, which was up a tree.

Francine grinned wickedly, and strolled over to stand beside the teenage boy, her hands clasped behind her back. “Good evening, Herbert, Jr.,” she greeted him, a catlike grin on her face.

Herbert, Jr. jumped, causing a blue shirt to drop to the ground. “Uh, good evening Mrs. Nulton,” he replied, trying to hide the leash behind his back.

“Pet problems?” she asked.

“What? No, no. This is a dog leash.”

“I’ve noticed,” Francine replied smoothly, “and Pudgy doesn’t climb trees that well. Have you gotten another pet?”

“No, no,” Herbert repeated. “I, uh, I was playing with the leash and it got stuck.”

“Perhaps I can help you pull it free, then?” she offered.

“No! Ah, no thanks, Mrs. Nulton. I . . . I wouldn’t want to damage it.”

“As you wish, Herbert,” she answered. “You dropped this . . .” She picked up the shirt and got a good look at it, then scowled. “Where did you get this?”

“I . . . uh, found it at a flea market. It must have been a tie-in product.”

“You know as well as I do that nothing this good was ever associated with that show, and the studio would never sign off on a design like this. You drew this, didn’t you?”

Herbert said nothing.

“Herbert, you’re better than this! Why are you wasting your time doodling for a dead cartoon?” She held up the shirt. “It’s obvious you have real talent—use it on something with merit! It could be commercial or pure art, just *do* something with your abilities. And I saw Alice here earlier—were you trying to suck her into your little cult as well?”

“Look, Alice can be a fan if she wants to. Why do you have to be so critical of us all the time?”

“Can’t you see what you’re doing? It’s a show, it’s *just a show*. I should know—I used to clean Rockwell Studios, and I had plenty of opportunity to observe the man who created your idols. Take my word for it: all E. Thaddeus Rockwell wanted was to inundate children with advertisements and rip them—and their parents—off with cheap merchandise. He didn’t want to make the world a better place or provide positive role models. *Rescue Rangers* was a TV show, a cartoon for children, which had no higher purpose than to keep the little brats quiet for a half hour so their parents could get some relief. That is all, no more! Undeserving of art, undeserving of fiction, undeserving of discussion! And most certainly undeserving of *that!*” The “that” in question was the end of Herbert’s leash. She turned to walk back to her house, looking over her shoulder to add, “it’s a good thing there isn’t an animal at the end of that leash, Herbert. Like for example a certain endangered bat that by law belongs in a zoo. Because if there was, I’d be obligated to do something about it.” She looked back to see him shake his head back and forth, his head white as a sheet. “A very good thing, indeed,” she repeated, chuckling to herself, as she returned to the garage and from there into the house.

THE MACARONI AND CHEESE WAS awful. You wouldn’t think it was possible to screw that up, but Norris had a bit of a knack in that department. Afterwards Norris sat in a chair in the living room and read his book while Francis vacuumed. She was using an Orlac machine, but this one was made of yellowed plastic and had not required a major repair for decades, while the one in the billboard ad (which Francine had still not forgotten) had been all looks, had weak suction, and could not be expected to last one month after its 90-day warranty had expired.

After the vacuuming came the dusting and polishing. The room, and indeed the whole house, was not really in need of dusting, as it had just been dusted the day before, the windows were never opened, the air conditioning and heating filters were regularly replaced, and the doors were all well sealed. Nevertheless, Francine dusted, and the act made her feel as if she were fighting back the forces of chaos in the universe, keeping the house her own small bastion of order in a world long-since gone mad and quickly crumbling into dust.

At the left end of the wall were the photographs dedicated to Francine’s life before she met Norris, all of them in black in white. The first, labeled “Orlac’s Machines, Bristol, CT, 1970,” depicted Roger Orlac, his family and his employees, standing in front

of a factory. Roger's eyes were on the trophy wife at his side, a good twenty years younger than him, and his arms gestured outwards to his employees and the world beyond that he dreamed of dominating. The two daughters standing in front of him were completely ignored, for Roger Orlac's plans had no room for children. The girls, aged 10 and 8, reached back with their arms to cling desperately at his legs, as if this gesture was enough to keep him from going away again. At Roger Orlac's other side stood an elderly man with the company's balance sheets tucked absent-mindedly under one arm. Beside him stood his grandson, a serious boy of 12 trying to catch the attention of the elder girl.

The second photograph, "Orlac Funeral, Athens, Greece, 1977," showed the two sisters wearing black and standing before the caskets of their parents and their accountant. The elder sister was grief-stricken, while the younger appeared to be flirting with the photographer. The guests behind the two sisters seemed to be milling about in a state of shock, none more so than a young man standing behind the older sister—this was the boy from the earlier picture.

The third photograph was labeled "Dinah's Wedding, Bear Mountain, CT, 1982." The center of the original panorama photograph had apparently been Dinah and her husband, but they and most of the wedding guests had been cropped off of the photo that was mounted. What was left was the older sister, a shy and confused woman in her early twenties, looking with longing and relief into the eyes of the confident young man from before. She looked like she was scared of life and relieved to have somebody beside her to stand up to its terrors, while he looked very tired, but very much in love. Francine got past this one rather quickly, not wanting to dwell on the memories it summoned. The young man did not show up in any other photographs on the wall, and the next decade of Francine's life was not represented, either.

Another section of the wall was dedicated to Norris, also in black and white. There were photographs of him receiving academic awards, both as a young boy and as a college student. Neither of these photos included his parents. Instead, there were photographs of Norris presenting strange devices he had built for the camera, with Norris acting as the parent and the device acting as the child. Next, some covers from science fiction magazines from the early 1970's had been framed and mounted beside the other photographs. Each depicted a scene where the center of attention was a strange invention, and all of them were signed "NN". There was a photograph of Norris in his twenties, with a full set of long hair, sitting behind a table at a science fiction convention and signing one of those covers. The centerpiece of this section was a framed fold-out spread from *Analog* magazine dated March, 1973, that depicted Norris' vision of a permanent base on the Moon. Below it was a newspaper clipping dated September 2nd, 1984, showing a cleaned-up and somewhat older Norris shaking a man's hand beside a scale model of the same base, the headline reading "Moonbase Alpha Begins Construction." There appears to have been a shift in career around this point, for this was followed by numerous framed plans of inventions done in a cartoon style. Each drawing was stamped "Property of Rockwell Studio." One labeled "Ratcatcher" showed a plane in the shape of a duck's bill and another labeled "Rangermobile" showed a skateboard with a car battery powering a hairdryer for propulsion.

The final short section of wall, the only part in color, included photographs of Francine and Norris. The first of these was an interesting contrast with the "Dinah's Wedding" photograph, taken surreptitiously at the Rockwell animation studio late one

night when the two of them were supposed to be working: Norris the concept artist was the one who was both confused and in love, while Francine the cleaning woman was grumpy and at the same time satisfied that she had found someone so completely dependent on her. After that there were a few dating photos, followed by the wedding photo (a full spread to highlight the fact that the event had been snubbed by Dinah and Harold Largess), followed by photos showing life in the years that followed. Norris was always enraptured in those photographs, and Francine at best looked like she had something better to do. They were both middle-aged, both recognizably the same people who had walked in that door a few hours earlier. Unlike her parents, Francine had few servants. The most prominent of them was a woman in her mid-thirties with blond hair and a permanently vacant expression in her eyes; in half of the photos she found her reflection in a nearby mirror more fascinating than the camera.

This was the entire set of photographs that Francine had sent herself to dust; there practically wasn't any wall visible between them. When she reached the Moonbase magazine spread she paused, looking at one corner of the diagram that depicted the device that had failed to detect the invasion. She considered removing the magazine spread and the photograph below it after her husband had gone to bed, but eventually decided that their absence would probably have a worse effect on him than their presence, and so continued.

THE DUSTING THAT NIGHT WAS never completed, because Francine was interrupted by a knock at the door. She answered it to see her next-door neighbors, the d'Footes: Herbert, Sr. and his wife Elizabeth. Herbert, Sr. was a wide, jovial man in a loud Hawaiian shirt and shorts, even in miserable weather like this, while Elizabeth wore her blue dress and a string of too-obvious pearls, her blond hair up in a beehive. Francine was not fond of either of them, the husband because he was loud and always happy, and Elizabeth because she reminded her of her sister. For once, Elizabeth looked worried.

"Hiya, neighbor!" proclaimed Herbert, Sr. happily before his expression changed to mirror his wife's. "Sorry it couldn't be under happier circumstances, though."

"Have you heard?" asked Elizabeth.

"Heard what?" asked Francine.

"The Danaans are coming!" Herbert, Sr. informed her. "Hartford is being evacuated! We're the last families left in the court."

Francine calmly leaned out to look around. The only car left in the cul-de-sac was a brown and white station wagon in front of the house next door, decades newer than the Nulton's car. The station wagon contained two passengers in the back seats, Herbert, Jr. and a mountain of a young man in his early twenties. At that moment, the older man punched the younger Herbert in the arm. Herbert mouthed the words "quit it" and tried to rub the feeling back into the assaulted arm. Francine noticed that although there was a large dog roaming freely back and forth in the car, there was also a cat-sized animal carrier in Herbert's lap. Francine's eyes returned to meet those of Elizabeth. "It appears you are right," she observed.

"I've got family in Canada. You can come with us if you have no place else to go," Elizabeth offered.

Francine managed to suppress a look of horror at the thought of spending weeks with Elizabeth's relatives. Instead she thought for a moment. "No," she finally replied, "I think we'll be alright. You better go now, before the traffic backs up too much."

"Are you sure?" Elizabeth asked anxiously.

"Quite sure," Francine replied.

"Well, if you insist," said Herbert, Sr. "Good luck!"

"Thank you," Francine replied. Then she closed the door. A few seconds later, she heard the station wagon driving away.

"What was that about?" Norris looked up from his book when Francine returned.

Francine's response was to turn on the ancient Zenith color television in the corner of the living room (the TV was old enough that "COLOR" was printed on the cabinet with very large type, each letter in a different color). It took a few minutes for the tubes to warm up, but there was no need to change channels to discover the explanation Francine was looking for.

The image depicted a stream of enormous flying machines cloaked in vapor making their way in a wide double column. As they passed, the ground between them was rendered utterly devoid of all life, down to the microscopic level. A large logo in the corner identified the image as "LIVE" and the voice of a reporter eagerly described details that a baby could see with the sound turned down. What eventually could be discerned was that the column was headed east out of Detroit, and that their target appeared to be New England.

Norris jumped up in alarm. "They're coming for me!" he shrieked, pointing at the television. "They know I tried to stop them and they're coming for their revenge!"

Francine turned off the television with an annoyed flick of the wrist. "Don't be ridiculous," she retorted. "It's obvious that they are coming to Connecticut to topple the insurance industry. You have nothing to do with the matter."

"You really think so?" he asked, relieved.

"Of course," she replied. "That doesn't mean we don't need to evacuate, though."

"Yes, of course!" he realized. "Where will we go?"

"I think the family mansion at Bear Mountain is likely to be overlooked," Francine said. "At least for a day or two. I'll inform Miss Weir to pick us up. We have a much better chance of getting out of here alive in a helicopter than in the car."

"I'll start packing," Norris offered.

"Yes, you do that," she said, walking over to a telephone in the kitchen and starting to dial. "The Danaans won't reach Hartford until tomorrow morning. I'll instruct Miss Weir to delay her arrival by four hours—that should be enough time for a nap."

"How could you sleep at a time like this?"

Francine gave Norris another warning stare, and he obediently shut up.

13. ARRIVAL

T-117 days, 21 hours, 45 minutes and 47 seconds (February 15, 3:14 AM EST).

AFTERWARD, FRANCINE WASN'T SURE WHICH sound she heard first, the explosion to her left or the thunder to her right.

"The Danaans are early," she said calmly.

She sat upright in bed, replaced her sleep blindfold with her glasses, and turned the nightstand light on. Bright searchlights illuminated the world outside the bedroom window. Instinctively, she flipped the lights back off to avoid attracting attention. What she did notice in that brief moment of light: it was 3:14 am, and the bed next to hers was empty.

Cautiously, she got up and retrieved an ancient Army surplus flashlight from the nightstand and turned it on.

"Norris?"

No response.

She got up. As she was expecting the helicopter any minute now, she had gone to bed mostly dressed, and it was a simple matter to put on the rest of her things.

"Norris, where are you?"

Still nothing.

Searching the room, she finally found her husband unconscious on the other side of the bed. He had rolled off the bed when the attack began and apparently bumped his head when he hit the floor. Francine propped up the flashlight so she could see what she was doing and tried to awaken her husband.

"Now is not a good time for taking a nap, Norris. Norris?"

He returned to consciousness with a labored moan.

Francine put her hand over his mouth. "A little quieter, please. The Danaans are in our back yard. I don't know what's keeping Miss Weir." She helped him to sit up with his back to the bed, but all that came out of his mouth was gibberish.

Francine rolled her eyes, thinking he was playing for attention. "How many fingers am I holding up?" she asked.

The man jerked his head around strangely. "Uhhh . . . I, I, I can't, I can't, I can't see."

"Your timing is as impeccable as always, Norris," she drawled. "Stay here."

"Nnooooo."

"What?"

"Nnorrris."

"That's you. Norris Nulton."

"Noo." His brow furrowed. "Nnorrrton."

Francine froze. "Norton. Professor Norton Nimmul?"

The man flopped his head up and down.

“You’ve *got* to be kidding me. Look, we’ll deal with your delusions later. Now stay where you are.” She crawled over to the window and cautiously looked out. “They appear to be going east.” She crawled over to the nightstand, took down an antiquated telephone, and dialed a number. “Pick up, Laurel, pick up . . .”

A minute later, she hung up. After another glance out the window, she made up her mind and returned to the man’s side. “Okay, it looks like we’re on our own,” she told him. “I’ll try to get you to a hospital if it’s safe. If not we can hole up at the estate until they leave.” She helped him to stand up, picked up a suitcase with her free hand, and then began walking him towards the door.

“Wherrre?” asked Nimmul.

“To the car, Norris,” responded Francine. “I’ll drive.”

Partway across the living room, a whistling sound was heard rapidly approaching.

“Get down!” cried Francine, pulling Nimmul to the ground. A moment later the building shook from the force of an explosion. She gave “Norris” a rueful look. “It looks like you were right after all—they *are* in Hartford to kill you.” She helped him up to his feet and then, more quickly than before, escorted him out the front door.

Francine and Nimmul exited the house into an abandoned neighborhood, the beige Plymouth the only car in the cul-de-sac. She led him into the passenger seat and then shut the door and retrieved the rest of the luggage to put in the trunk.

While she was gone, Nimmul swung his arms about wildly for a few seconds, then stopped and tried to focus on the hand he was holding before his face.

It took a couple of trips, but eventually Francine got the car loaded. She stopped to look back at the house. She and Norris had spent the last eight years of their lives there, and now she fully expected never to see it in one piece again.

“It was always such . . . a clean house,” she eulogized before climbing into the driver’s seat and driving out of the cul-de-sac.

THE ROADS OF HARTFORD WERE deserted, even more than usual. Smoke rose into the air, probably from burnt-out buildings, but Francine was relieved to note that none of the destruction was directly visible from the road. All lights were out, the clouds above illuminated by roving searchlights.

After nearly a half-hour of eerily-silent driving, she switched on the radio to soothe her nerves, only to be met with static.

“They took out WOLD!” she exclaimed. She adjusted the tuner of the factory original radio until she found a signal.

“ . . . until you reach Long Island,” a pre-recorded voice from the radio informed her. “Be sure to bring completed copies of Federal Relocation Forms 15-187 and 347-61, or you will not be admitted into the shelters. This is an emergency broadcast message. All evacuees from the upper New York, Massachusetts and Connecticut areas are instructed to head south to the safety of New York and New Jersey. New York residents shall take highway 87 . . .”

Francine frowned, taking the onramp to Highway 91 North, and continued tuning as they made their way alone, the southbound lane clogged with fleeing motorists.

Nimmul craned his neck around to take in his surroundings.

“It worked,” he concluded. “This isn’t my original world. What happened here?”

In the distance the alien spaceships could just be made out against the eastern sky, beams of silver light obliterating everything in their path.

“Who’s attacking?” he asked.

Francine raised a stringy orange eyebrow at this question. “The Danaans, obviously. Unless that’s *another* alien race attacking us.” She tuned the radio some more, until she found a news station that was still manned and operational.

The news was not good. As usual, all efforts to stop the alien advance had utterly failed against the Danaan’s superior technology.

“It is suspected that Emperor Freewheel is among the casualties,” reported the news announcer.

“Good riddance!” replied Francine.

“You already have an emperor?” Nimmul asked in some alarm.

“We *had* an emperor, until Freewheel’s robots failed to keep the Danaans penned up in Detroit. The man had invented a giant remote-controlled robot and started mass-producing them, but never figured out how to control enough of them at once to stop the Danaans, and the controls were so complicated he wasn’t able to teach anybody else how to use them. Don’t worry, though, the crown and scepter will not remain unclaimed—as soon as another scientist comes up with a plan to save the world, you can be sure the title will be presented once again.”

“All of your emperors are scientists?” Nimmul eagerly asked.

“They have been for the last fifty years. Who better to put in charge of the world than a scientist?” asked Francine.

“Who, indeed,” agreed Nimmul. “Now what about that man I saw on the billboard on the way out of town, the one in the mask and cape? I thought I made very sure there were no superheroes in this world before I selected it.”

“The Masked Marvel? He was less hero than egotistical blowhard. And you don’t have to worry about him—he’s retired.”

“Super powers or no, I don’t want to have to worry about heroes getting in my way.”

“Then don’t. The Masked Marvel was a product of the late 80’s, a very unusual period in recent history. Man was venturing into the Solar System, nuclear power was solving the power crisis, and the Cold War between the U.K. and the U.S.S.R. was winding down. Irrational feelings of optimism were widespread, so when New Haven’s local billionaire hired an android named ‘Roboman’ as his personal bodyguard, everybody looked at their comic books and got inspired to put on tights for justice.

“Hartford’s version was the Masked Marvel, a man who seemed at least as interested in his publicity as in fighting crime. Just as with the other cities, the presence of a masked hero inspired other borderline-crazy people to dress up and become masked villains. Their theatrical battles destroyed downtown again and again and drove down the property values. Eventually, people stopped paying attention and the heroes all sort of gave up.” Francine glanced over at her passenger. “Are you feeling any better, Norris? I’d rather not fight my way into the hospital unless I absolutely have to.”

“My vision has cleared up,” replied Nimmul. “I think I’m alright now. But don’t call me Norris—it makes me think you’re not taking me seriously.”

“I never take you seriously, Norris,” replied Francine flippantly. “You’re the one in love with me, remember?”

“I’m not Norris. I’m Professor Norton Nimmul! Why can’t you accept that?”

“Because fantasy and I have never gotten along very well,” Francine remarked. Seeing the look on his face, her expression soured. “Right!” she announced, and then rapidly pulled over to the side of the road. “Okay, genius,” she warned. “If you’re Professor Norton Nimmul, how come you look just like my husband?”

“Your husband,” Nimmul informed Francine with hauteur, “has the honor of being my stunningly-handsome counterpart in this universe. The interdimensional portal I invented brought me here, and . . . there wasn’t another me next to me when you found me, was there?”

Francine took a moment to parse this. “No.”

Nimmul buried his head in his hands. “Which means it didn’t transfer any matter at all.” He looked up, a frustrated expression on his face. “If I’d known it would only swap minds, I could have just plugged a Tesla coil into a wall socket and those rodents would be none the wiser!”

“The Rescue Rangers?” Francine asked.

“How do you know about them?” Nimmul asked, grabbing her lapels.

Francine slapped his hands away. She decided to humor his delusion for now. “In this universe, *The Rescue Rangers* is a cartoon show, and you’re the main villain. You can guess who the heroes are.”

Nimmul was beside himself with rage. “I can’t believe it—*they* got their own TV show and I didn’t?”

“Well in this universe, you’re not exactly star material.”

“This Norris Nulton . . . what was he like?” Nimmul asked. “The whole time I was spying on him, he was in an asylum.”

“Well, that should tell you everything, shouldn’t it?” Francine replied. “Like yourself, his dream was to invent, only his inventions all failed. He came to believe he was cursed before his plans for Moonbase Alpha were accepted.”

“This world has a moon base? I’ve always wanted one of those.”

“You wouldn’t want it now,” replied Francine. “The Danaan’s mothership is up there. They were able to invade because Norris’ alien detector failed.”

“Alien detector? Does alien invasion happen on a regular basis on this Earth?”

“It doesn’t on your Earth? We’ve gotten 50-50 odds with alien invasions this century—two duds, and two genuine Wars of the Worlds.” She hooked a thumb in the direction of the distant spaceships. “*These* guys have so far proven unbeatable.”

“Well, they’ve finally met their match in me,” proclaimed Nimmul. “Now, woman, if you could drive me to the scene of the devastation, perhaps I can find what I need to begin my rise to power.”

She gave him a warning stare but he refused to flinch. She considered the situation: her Norris had gone so far around the bend that he thought he was Norton Nimmul. Her spineless mess of a husband had become a raving lunatic husband who actually fought back against her insults, and she found herself preferring the replacement to the original. “Alright Professor,” she chuckled, “you’ve convinced me.”

“We’re going?”

“No, you’ve convinced me that you’re not my Norris. Not even he would say anything *that* crazy, although come to think of it, those war machines would probably crumble to dust if Norris had ever touched one of them. We should reach Gogol, my

mansion, in a couple of hours. If my father (may he roast) knew anything, it was how to build to last. Nothing can touch us once we reach it. What you do after that is your concern, not mine. After all, the Danaans are not exactly leaving anytime soon.”

“How are you so sure of that?”

“The goal of every alien invasion has always been the same: the extinction of all animal life on Earth. You can understand why I might want to head away from them under the circumstances.”

Nimnul folded his arms and pouted. “If I knew more about this world, I’d ask to be dropped off right now.”

Francine ignored him, pulled back onto the freeway, and turned the radio back on.

“THIS JUST IN,” THE VOICE of the radio announced. “The remains of a helicopter have been found in Colt Park, apparently shot down by the Danaans about an hour ago. The female pilot was unconscious and was taken to Hartford Hospital, but the insignia identify it as being in the private ownership of the Orlac family.

“The Orlacs, founders of the world’s biggest vacuum cleaner company, are renowned as much for their privacy as their wealth. Owner Dinah Orlac married investor Harold Largess in 1982. They moved to Moonbase Alpha last year to help set up the station’s hospital. Older sister Francine Orlac married . . .”

Francine abruptly turned the radio off. “Laurel,” she deduced. She took the next freeway exit, then pulled into an abandoned gas station and pulled out a map. “We’ve got to go back.”

“Go back?” asked Nimnul incredulously. “You won’t turn back so I can save this world, but you’ll risk your life for a pilot . . . your employee, I presume?”

“Look!” yelled Francine, getting in Nimnul’s face. “You apparently know nothing about me. I hold employee loyalty in high regard. It’s a lot more dependable than love, I can tell you that! She stood by me during a pretty rough patch, when I was much less of a people person than I am now. If she was willing to risk her life to save us, it’s the least we can do to go to that hospital.”

Nimnul said nothing. Francine stared at him for a little longer, then got back to the map and plotted out a route that would not involve any of the clogged southbound freeways. After a few minutes she started the car and headed west, on a route that was mostly away from the still-visible alien ships. Nimnul spent the drive with his neck craned back, studying the ships for obvious weaknesses.

EVENTUALLY, THE TWO OF THEM reached Hartford Hospital. As might be expected, it was rather crowded. Francine checked in with the attendant then turned around to bump into a woman who was eagerly checking her reflection in a window, as if she were afraid she’d see someone other than herself. This woman turned out to be the servant from Francine and Norris’ pictures. She was wearing a red jumpsuit with an “Orlac’s Machines” patch over the breast pocket and her head was bandaged.

“I’m sorry about the helicopter, boss,” she said. “I just can’t get the hang of flying in clouds. That Danaan ship was completely hidden—I didn’t see it until it was too late.”

“Think nothing of it, Miss Weir!” Francine replied, relieved. “I’m happy you’re in one piece.”

“Probably not as much as I am,” the pilot replied with a half smile.

Nimnul popped his head into the conversation, bearing a copy of the newspaper under his arm. To Miss Weir he asked, “Could you point out on a photo exactly what part of the spacecraft you hit?”

Miss Weir shrugged. “I think you’d probably be more interested in seeing it for yourself. The ship didn’t self-destruct like all the others. It’s still in Colt Park, if you’d like to take a look.”

“I’ll wager your crash knocked out the self-destruct system. You’re right, Miss Weir, I do want to take a look.”

Francine looked out the window. “Well, I need to take pictures anyway for the insurance adjusters; they’d never believe me otherwise. And the Army’s between the park and the Danaans right now, so we should be relatively safe.”

“The doctors say I can go, as long as I take it easy for the next week,” Miss Weir said. “It’ll probably take a few days for you to get a new helicopter for me to fly anyway, boss.”

“That’s alright,” Francine replied. “You can leave the driving to me.”

AFTER SIGNING A VERITABLE MOUNTAIN of paperwork, the three piled back into the Plymouth and made their way over to the city park, where Miss Weir led the way on foot through the gravel paths. Chipmunks peeked at them from the treetops. Nimnul glared at them.

“Don’t worry,” Francine assured Nimnul. “Our rodents are as dumb as they look, unlike yours.”

Francine pulled Miss Weir aside to fill her in on recent developments. Nimnul was sure he saw Francine use the “he’s crazy” gesture at one point.

Miss Weir then pulled ahead of the group. “Just a little further, Professor, Mrs. Nulton.” Unlike Francine, the pilot appeared to have instantly believed Nimnul’s story.

Francine produced a Polaroid 420 camera from her purse and pulled out its “snoot”, then looked suspiciously at Nimnul.

“Don’t get too close,” she warned. “There’s no telling what you’d do with technology so recent.”

“Recent?” Nimnul asked incredulously. “That camera looks twenty years old to me.”

Francine cautiously stretched out her arm and touched Nimnul with the camera. She seemed surprised that it didn’t burst into flame.

“Let’s just say that Norris and anything invented in his lifetime didn’t get along together very well,” she explained.

“What kind of inventor could this Norris be if technology blew up when he touched it? No wonder he was a failure!”

“On the contrary,” said Miss Weir half to herself. “Perhaps technology reacted to so badly to Norris *because* he thought he was a failure?”

“That’s magical thinking,” Francine remarked, smiling. “We’re not living in a world of witches and talking animals, after all.”

“Thank goodness for that!” exclaimed Nimnul.

Francine turned her head to keep the others from seeing the hurt expression on her face.

Topping a rise, they saw the remains of a spaceship embedded in the next hill. Police tapes attached to plastic orange poles surrounded the craft, and a lone police officer was standing guard.

“Hey there!” the officer yelled at them the moment he spotted them. “This is a restricted area.”

“Leave this to me,” Francine told the others, instantly self-assured again. She walked up to the officer and began haranguing him, pointing to the mostly-intact helicopter also inside the police line and the camera in her hands. Some money may or may not have changed hands, I’m not at liberty to say. Afterwards, she waved Miss Weir and Nimnul to her side. “You’ve got ten minutes before his shift ends,” she informed them.

Nimnul said, “I want to get as much of a look at the ship as I can. Miss . . . Weir, was it? I’ll probably need your help.”

“Let me guess, you’ll need a bit of extra muscle?” she quipped.

“Well, I’m not exactly built for heavy lifting,” replied Nimnul.

The mad genius took a quick walk around the spaceship then returned to what was obviously a door with a keypad. He quickly started pulling it apart. A minute later, with a spark from the open keypad, the door slid open. “Who needs a lockpick?” he smirked.

“Nice work, Professor!” the pilot exclaimed.

“‘Professor’!” he exclaimed over his shoulder. “Now how come *you* believed me from the first when your boss didn’t?”

She tapped the side of her head. “‘Cause I was a fan of your TV show even before it aired. In fact, I may be your very first fan. *She* may have worked on the show, but she didn’t like your character because she thought the producer made him up to make fun of her husband. Besides, stranger things have happened—believe me, I know.” She then looked up at the spaceship, holding back. “I hope none of those aliens survived the crash,” she said.

Francine joined her, holding Polaroids of the helicopter. “The fact that you’re looking at a whole spacecraft and not a field of debris is pretty good proof that they must all be dead. I think this is the first Danaan spacecraft ever to fall into human hands.”

Francine and her pilot walked into the spaceship to join Nimnul. The inside consisted of a single room, the burnished metal walls otherwise unadorned. A shelf of strange computer equipment circled five feet above the ground; the several flat screens on the wall behind them were all blank, and one was broken and leaking some kind of viscous clear liquid. Two chairs sprouted from the floor to support the dead pilots. Each one was seven feet tall and impossibly spindly, almost all legs and arms attached to a tiny torso. Their two eyes were on stalks above each oval head and their skin (what showed outside their militaristic jumpsuits) was bright red in color, with a texture resembling that of a basketball. The two aliens were slumped over their computers.

“What a smell!” exclaimed Francine. “What is it?”

“You mean besides the smell of burnt alien?” asked Nimnul. He was examining the broken screen and hadn’t bothered to turn to face them. “What I detect is electrical. The collision with the helicopter must have triggered a catastrophic short in the wiring, killing everyone inside instantly. It looks to be a freak accident, or perhaps the crew was grossly

incompetent—I wouldn't rely on something like this happening on a regular basis. Anything else I should know that doesn't work against these ships?"

"Explosives, flamethrowers, you know, the usual," listed Francine. "I think somebody even tried throwing acid on one once as it was ravaging a city—the results were definitely not pretty."

"So there's something that blocks anything from hitting the ship, like a force field?" speculated Nimnul.

"And I ended up hitting the ship because it either wasn't on, or the system was faulty?" Miss Weir asked.

"Right. I'd guess they didn't have it turned on, given you hit them when they were in the clouds. Why waste power on defenses when you're hidden?"

Francine shrugged. "Force fields. That's science fiction territory. The experts all say there's no such thing." She made a circuit of the small room, craning her neck to get a look at the computer equipment. "I imagine all the scientists will want to figure out how that death beam thing works," she remarked.

"Oh, that's easy," said Nimnul as he pulled himself out of a crawlspace. "It looks pretty standard to me."

"Really?" asked Francine. "You've got light rays that can kill people on your world? That's something else the scientists on this world said was impossible before the first Danaan attack."

"It's just a high-powered laser. In my universe, the technology has been around since the 1960s."

"Laser?" Francine asked.

Miss Weir waved her hand in the air. "Ooo, I think I can get that one! Light Amplification . . . that was the easy part . . . by Simultaneous Emission of Radiation?"

"Stimulated, actually," said an impressed Nimnul. "Where did you find her?" he asked Francine.

"The temp agency sent her to me fifteen years ago," she replied proudly. "And despite surviving a head-on auto collision before we even met, she has never missed a day of work!"

"It took you five years to hire me full time!" Miss Weir complained.

"Well to be honest I wanted to see if your memory ever came back."

Nimnul sighed. "Forget I asked. Getting back on topic, it appears that the Danaans don't think you have lasers. I'll build one, and then we'll see how well they stand up to it."

"Could you build one powerful enough to cut one of these ships in half?" asked Miss Weir.

"The power requirements would limit portability, but I could do it."

Francine stroked her chin thoughtfully. "Hmm . . ." she mused, "maybe I can profit from this madness after all." Raising her voice to address Nimnul, she said, "sounds interesting. What do you need?"

"Let's see, a glass cylinder I could add electrodes to, a semi-silvered mirror, a regular mirror, and a gas to fill the tube. Carbon dioxide or argon would suffice. Oh, and I'd need lenses for focusing the beam."

Francine thought a bit. "Argon might be tricky. I think I know where we can get the rest. Miss Weir?"

“Yes, boss?”

Francine pulled out a pen and a business card for “Orlac’s Machines” and wrote something on the back. “Take my car and Professor Nimmul here and get him whatever he needs, then meet me at this address. It’s an abandoned industrial laundry—plenty of room to build your prototype.” She handed Miss Weir the business card as well as her credit card.

“And what will you be doing?” asked the pilot.

“I’m going to call my contacts, and start filling out the paperwork. If we can make this demonstration impressive enough, we may find ourselves working for the next Emperor of Earth.” She rejoined the police officer and after some more quasi-legal deals were made, he let her borrow the radio in his car.

14. THE DEMONSTRATION

T-96 days, 12 hours, 52 minutes and 48 seconds (March 8, 12:07 PM EST).

ON A LOW RIDGE TEN miles east of Hartford, CT, three people waited nervously. They would have one chance to demonstrate why they were Earth's only hope against alien conquest.

It was early March, and although it was noon, a cold haze still clung to the lowlands under the ever-present clouds. This had the advantage of obscuring much of the devastation caused by the Danaans, who had moved north only a week earlier. Emerging from the muck from two opposite directions, two black limousines approached. The job of the dignitaries inside was to determine the next emperor of Earth.

"Miss Weir, would you please check the mirror-control system while I double-check the CO₂ laser?" asked Nimmul, clearly nervous.

"You're really paranoid about something going wrong, aren't you, Professor?" replied Miss Weir as she tested out a joystick. The joystick was connected to a set of motors, which in turn manipulated a mirror. When nobody was looking, she used the mirror to help her check her makeup, primping her hair a little so it was just right.

"Wouldn't you be?"

Francine walked up and straightened Nimmul's tie, to his annoyance. "I think we'll be alright as long as you don't bring up the whole 'other universe' thing," she told him. "They really don't need to be reminded of that. One more thing to keep in mind: the emperor might be elected by a committee of a hundred scientists and world leaders, but they always rubber-stamp the recommendations of just two bodies: The Company and the World Space Commission."

"The purpose of the World Space Commission seems pretty obvious, but what does 'The Company' do?"

"The Company is the informal name given to the world's foremost anti-criminal organization—the group is so secretive that their true name is unknown."

"Sounds like something out of a Dirk Suave movie."

"Their primary antagonist since the end of the Cold War was T.H.E.M.—Thieves, Headhunters, Extortionists and Mercenaries, but that organization was recently shut down, leaving The Company without much to do, and a shrinking budget as the World Space Commission claimed more and more of their funding."

"So the two groups don't get along very well, then?"

"Why else do you think they are coming in two separate cars?"

THE FIRST OF THE TWO limousines climbed smoothly up the monotonous mountain road, so smoothly in fact that it seemed as if it were standing still and the road was moving

backwards in a loop like some old cartoon. The shock absorbers were the only part of the limousine that worked correctly. In fact, the catch on one of the passenger doors was so weak that it would give at the slightest shock. A rental car would have been a safer substitute, but the lack of an official logo on the door would have made it obvious that The Company could not afford the services of a full-time mechanic.

“The Commissioner is up to something with this nomination, I just know it!” So said the Assistant Director in a thick Russian accent. The Assistant Director was an imposing man with dark red hair wearing a pressed black suit. The suit was the semi-official uniform of the semi-official organization known as The Company. The man’s code name within that organization was “The Bear”.

“The Commissioner is *always* up to something,” replied the woman seated next to the Assistant Director. She was string-bean tall with a cloud of brown hair hovering over her narrow head and a pair of oversize round glasses perched on a small sharp nose. She was the only person in the car not wearing black, instead wearing the standard white lab coat expected of semi-mad scientists. She was known as “The Thinker”. A pair of headphones were on her head, the sound turned down so nobody else could hear what she was listening to. Everybody assumed it was Bach or some other ancient composer, but in fact she was listening to Titanium Gander’s new album *Ham On Kablam*.

On the opposite seat, a middle-aged man in a black suit was trying to look back through the smoked glass and the haze at the city they had passed through. His relationship with The Company was rather irregular, and the code name given to him, “The Hero”, was not meant as a compliment. “You know, other than the fact that it’s abandoned, the place hasn’t changed much in the past five years,” he said.

“That’s sort of an important point to pass over, Dad,” declared the young woman at his side. She was wearing a black suit similar in many details to her father’s, but with a long skirt instead of pants. Her flaming red hair was easily the brightest thing in the car. She was not actually affiliated with The Company, so she didn’t get to have a code name.

“Now remember what I told you, Carolyn,” the father addressed her.

“And that would be . . . ?” she asked, batting her eyelashes at him.

“The usual: don’t make me look bad, and don’t blow anything up. In fact,” he mused, “you’ve actually been doing that.”

“Maybe I’m just due for a major eruption, if you catch my drift.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” he replied.

The Thinker reviewed the file on Norton Nimnul. “I can’t verify any of these credentials,” she sighed. “And this whole section about ‘alternate universes’—ridiculous!”

The Hero grinned. “You’ve worked with dodgier scientists before, Doctor Irwin. And I don’t think the inventor of the ‘Norma Ray’ should scoff at any scientists’ wild claims.”

Doctor Irwin frowned. “The Norma Ray would have worked! I just never found a subject who could follow instructions. When I say ‘don’t think’ during the procedure, I mean it!”

“You could have tried hypnotizing them,” Carolyn suggested.

“Impossible!” The Bear exclaimed, “section 14, paragraph 14 of Company regulations clearly state that ‘agents must be in a conscious and un-mesmerized state during working hours’.”

“Aww!” Doctor Irwin pouted. “You never let me have any fun.”

“Speaking of Doctor Irwin’s inventions, Agent Maughlarde, have you managed to recover her KEPN helmet yet?”

Agent Maughlarde and Carolyn looked uncomfortably at each other at this question. “Still looking,” the agent hemmed, looking at his nails.

The Assistant Director crossed his arms. “I don’t even know why you and your daughter are on this mission, considering you have still not recovered it!”

“You mean you’re still stuck in Florida?” the scientist asked.

“Yeah, Connecticut was our home turf prior to Florida,” said Carolyn, defensively. “But The Philosopher, your boss, specifically asked for our opinion on this matter. He’s always turned to my dad whenever he thought you couldn’t handle the situation.”

Annoyed, The Bear turned and knocked on the black glass partition that separated him from the front of the car. “Driver!” he bellowed, “how much longer?”

The partition opened, revealing Lou in a fancy chauffeur’s outfit. “Hold your horses!” he cried. “I’m taking a shortcut! It’s just around this corner.”

“You’re going to let him take a shortcut?” Carolyn laughed. “You’d never let me do that!”

“Carolyn . . .” Agent Maughlarde began.

Just then, the car rounded a tight corner and ran out of road. The passengers grabbed on to anything they could as the limo plunged down the incline.

“ . . . I agree completely!” he finished.

FRANCINE POINTED UP THE SIDE of the small mountain next to them. “Isn’t that one of the cars now?”

“Looks like it,” replied Miss Weir.

“They better not damage the equipment.”

“**B**RAKES, BRAKES, BRAKES!” CRIED LOU, as he depressed the foot pedal in question.

The car screeched right past the equipment in question, stopping only when it hit the guardrail at the edge of the hill. The impact caused the Assistant Director to strike the door with the faulty catch, spilling out and over the edge.

Without thinking, Carolyn sprang forward and grabbed the hand of the Assistant Director before it was too late, pulling him back into the car. She looked accusingly at her father, as if it was his job in every dangerous situation to save the day. Agent Maughlarde looked away in embarrassment.

The Assistant Director looked over his shoulder at the fall he was almost forced to take. “I . . . I owe you my life, Miss Maughlarde.”

“Oh, think nothing of it. You would have done the same if our positions were reversed.”

“Nevertheless, your act has imposed a debt of gratitude upon myself. You may rest assured that I will re-pay it in kind someday.”

Carolyn sighed. *Men and their chivalry.* “Cash will be fine.”

THE SECOND CAR, TRAVELING SIGNIFICANTLY faster than the speed limit, bumped along the country road. Thanks to an excellent set of shock absorbers, the passengers were largely unaware of this, but to the outside observer, the car looked like a model car careening through a miniature set.

“The Assistant Director is up to something with this nomination, I just know it!”

This accusation was made by a tall man in a very official-looking uniform that identified him as Commissioner Simmonds of the World Space Commission. Simmonds and three others, who he regarded as his entourage regardless of what they thought, were the passengers of the second limousine. The driver of this limousine, Bud, was sick to death of hearing Simmonds talk and so was driving far too fast to get to his destination.

“Well certainly, Commissioner Simmonds, it’s a plot, that’s what it is, a plot!”

This statement was made by a small-looking man named Gorski, but he only looked small because he was cowering before the might of his boss. By title he was Commander of Moonbase Alpha, but considering he had fled to Earth the moment the Danaans had landed, that title didn’t mean very much right now, and Simmonds was his only ticket to getting back his once prestigious and perk-filled position.

Another man facing Simmonds sighed to himself in mild disgust. “Can we get to the matter at hand?” he asked.

In appearance, he was a man well into middle age; his wild gray hair receded far from his forehead. Norris Nulton would have known him as the man shaking his hand in the “Moonbase Alpha” photograph from 1984. He was working some calculations on a pad of paper. “David, do you have those figures yet on the power requirements?”

The man addressed was working rapidly at a thick calculator-like device called a “Handy Navi” that was plugged into the car’s power port. Despite the fast work with his left hand tapping a stylus on the device, his right hand reached into an inside pocket and pulled out a printout. After handing it over he pulled out a stick of string cheese with the same hand and began nibbling on it nervously. “Preliminary reports say that the new weapons system will need a couple of hundred kilowatts of power to be useful, Professor Bergman,” he said in a gentle voice, his accent a mix of Jamaican and British.

Professor Bergman looked over the printout and nodded. “Yes, that was what my calculations were pointing at as well.”

“So this meeting is already a waste of time!” declared Simmonds, pounding his fist into the armrest.

“I wouldn’t say that,” replied Bergman. “I still want to see what this man has to offer.”

“You’re wasting our time, and you know it, Professor Bergman. Commander Gorski and I have already made our choice.”

“You have?”

“Yes. We think that *you* should be the next emperor of Earth.” Simmonds accented the statement by stabbing Bergman in the chest with a finger.

“*Me?*” the Professor protested. “I haven’t the skills . . .”

“You have my full confidence, Professor,” Simmonds declared. “I’ve seen your work on Moonbase Alpha up close. Surely you know that only on the Moon will this invasion be finally defeated, and who knows the Moon better than yourself?”

David spoke up. "I would not advise that, Commissioner. We should still hear out Nimmul before dismissing him."

"Pfaugh!" (Yes, there are still people in the world who say "pfaugh!"—Simmonds was one of them.) "This Nimmul character is an obvious lunatic. Professor Bergman, on the other hand, is a trusted member of the scientific community, somebody I'd trust to save the human race. You've worked with him for what, fifteen years now, David? Surely you agree that the Professor is the man for the job?"

David hemmed. "Professor Bergman is a master of the defensive sciences. I have no doubt that he could invent a quite good shield to defend us from attack, and that he'd have it ready by September of next year. However, this crisis requires a maverick, someone good at the offensive sciences. And he must be quick. The fate of humanity depends on it." This last bit was said almost too low to catch.

"Very well. We'll watch this little 'demonstration', and we'll see what we'll see." Simmonds gave a significant sideways glance at Gorski, who nodded imperceptibly.

As if he had planned it that way, the limousine stopped at just that moment. Simmonds gestured to Bergman. "After you," he said.

Frowning, Bergman and David exited the limo, followed by Simmonds. Gorski knocked on the driver's partition. "Just need to ask about something I saw on the way," he explained, pulling the door shut.

"WELL," SAID FRANCINE, APPROACHING THE three new arrivals, "everyone's finally here!"

"Close enough," Bergman smirked.

"If you would sit down over here, the presentation can begin."

Carolyn rushed to get a seat up front; the others found theirs at a more leisurely pace. Most of the guests tried to avoid looking at each other, so they spent their time reading the brochure Nimmul had left on each chair.

Nimmul returned to the stage, set up his flat display screen and opened the file containing his notes. Then he looked out over his small audience and froze.

Out of the seven people before him, he recognized four. Nimmul's greatest apprehension was reserved for two men in black suits seated next to each other. The larger one appeared to be criminal genius Aldrin Klordane, the only man Nimmul truly feared. The next seat over appeared to be occupied by Donald Drake, the retired police detective and the only man to ever outsmart Klordane. And yet here they were sitting semi-amiably beside one another.

The reason, Nimmul quickly realized, was because these two were not actually Klordane and Drake. Klordane would never dress in anything so plain as what he was wearing. Moreover, his face actually had a healthy shade of pink to it instead of the "gravestone gray" he had acquired as a result of his accidental drowning at the hands of Detective Drake. The difference in the other man was less marked, but the presence of the young woman at his side trying to draw him into conversation certainly seemed different. *After all, as Nimmul told himself, if Norris Nulton is so different from myself, why shouldn't these people also differ from their counterparts from my world?*

Besides "Klordane" and "Drake", Nimmul also recognized the woman in the lab coat, who was currently swatting at a bee that had become fascinated by her headphones, as

someone he used to bump into at his neighborhood supermarket, and the aging male scientist as his world's leading astronomer. Collecting his thoughts, he looked down at his notes and began his presentation.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, this new technological development could not only result in the defeat of the alien invaders, but would also benefit industry tremendously, especially in precision areas."

David raised his hand. "Question: what's the resolution on that device?"

"1024 by 576 pixels, 48 bits per pixel."

David, impressed, wrote that down. "Okay, continue."

Nimnul turned back to the screen. "Laser technology is based on not only an initial stimulation of the material, but maintaining that stimulation via the light emitted. The devices produce beams of monochromatic, coherent light."

The two scientists looked bored. The Assistant Director and the Commissioner were staring daggers into each other. Agent Maughlarde was paging through Nimnul's handout. Only Carolyn seemed to be paying rapt attention, although it seemed that the words meant less to her than the person giving the presentation.

Undeterred, Nimnul continued. "Up here I have two lasers to demonstrate with. The small box contains a low-powered Helium-Neon laser to assist with aiming the much larger, high-powered carbon dioxide laser. As the beams are simply light, a mirror can be used to redirect them. Miss Weir will now demonstrate that with just the visible laser."

Laurel used the joystick on the desk to direct a spot of red light around the thick panel twenty yards distant.

Agent Maughlarde glanced up over the edge of his brochure.

"As you can see," explained Nimnul, "a beam of light, but one that doesn't spread out over a distance anywhere near as much as a normal light source. Now for the part that could help defeat the aliens and improve industry. Miss Weir, cut a hole in that steel!"

"Yes, Taurus Bulba." She shook her head. "I mean, yes, Professor Nimnul."

Miss Weir pulled the trigger on the joystick and guided the beam around again, the invisible beam from the CO₂ laser precisely cutting through the steel as it was guided by the mirror. When Miss Weir reached the start again a minute later, a roughly circular piece of steel an inch thick clattered to the concrete floor.

Bergman picked up a pair of binoculars and examined the hole. "Yes, that looks about right." He then stood up. "Professor Nimnul, I wonder if your device has a bit further range than that—say the other side of the mountain over there?"

"This is only a prototype model, and I did have limited resources and time to build it, but it could indeed cut metal at a greater distance than this demonstration. Of course, more power would be needed to compensate for atmospheric scattering of the beam."

Bergman shrugged. "Well, I was curious as to the far range of the device. Could you at least brown the grass from this distance?"

"Yes. Even with the beam spread out a bit by a lens, the infrared beam from the CO₂ laser would be powerful enough to dry and ignite the grass."

"Alright, well, if that's all you have . . . the computer display was a nice touch, though." Bergman got up, and began walking back towards the limousine.

Commissioner Simmonds quickly stood up. "Not so fast, Professor Bergman. Surely Professor Nimnul has something else." Pr. Bergman gave the Commissioner a curious look for this statement, but Simmonds continued on unperturbed. "For example, you've

demonstrated the cutting capacity of your laser, but what about its heating properties. Can it melt lead?"

"The metal that was cut through was vaporized. Lower power or a more diffuse beam would easily melt lead."

"Yes, that is the sort of thing I was thinking of. In many cases, these alien ships cannot be defeated by a simple punch through the center—you need to melt the entire outer shell to incapacitate it. Is there any way we can see a demonstration of a wide-area melting effect?"

"Give me a few minutes and I can rig up a simple demonstration with some solder. The shields around the alien ships wouldn't stop a beam of light, anyway."

"Go ahead, Professor. We have all day."

Doctor Irwin meanwhile was making a notation on a clipboard. "Only had one demonstration prepared. Tsk."

"The one I thought you'd be the most interested in, Madame," snapped Nimnul without looking up from where he was adding a lens to the assembly.

Doctor Irwin looked at Professor Bergman and smiled wickedly. "Shall you tell him or shall I?" she asked.

Professor Bergman frowned at her warningly. "Wait for it . . ."

While Nimnul finished installing the lens, Miss Weir set up a roll of solder and a Coo-Coo Cola can on a small table at the edge of the hill.

"Ready, Professor?" she asked.

"Fire away, Miss Weir."

SUDDENLY THE POWER TO THE equipment winked out.

15. THE JUDGMENT

T-96 days, 12 hours, 18 minutes and 13 seconds (March 8, 12:41 PM EST).

“WHAT WAS THAT?” NIMNUL DEMANDED.

As if to answer the question, Commander Gorski turned the corner of the powerhouse and sat down in his seat, tucking a wire cutter into his pocket.

Nimnul sighed and shook his head.

Professor Bergman leaned over towards the Commissioner. “Really, Simmonds? You would stoop so low?”

Simmonds smiled. “Just seeing how he responds to the unexpected, Professor.”

Nimnul unplugged his equipment from the powerhouse cables and transferred them to a small handheld box, then pulled a starter cord on it. The box hummed quietly to life and Nimnul’s computer started booting again.

The man known as The Bear sputtered. “What . . . what is that?”

“A backup generator. My own personal design,” replied Nimnul.

“I’ve developed something similar for use on Moonbase Alpha,” said Bergman. “But mine would never be powerful enough for a laser. Not at that size, anyway.”

“This directly harnesses the energy from radioactive materials at 95 % efficiency.”

“Ninety-five?” asked the Assistant Director. “How, may I ask, are you converting heat radiation so efficiently?”

“The generator relies on manipulation of the weak nuclear force to harness the energy of the unstable isotopes used as fuel . . . that and a men’s size 10 tube sock, but I’d rather not get into the technical details just now.”

Professor Bergman eyed the small box ruefully. “I’d love to see the equation behind that process sometime. But in the meantime, continue on with your demonstration.”

Nimnul nodded. “Right. Miss Weir, fire.”

Miss Weir turned the diffused beam on the can and solder and pulled the trigger on the joystick. After a few seconds, the solder melted, taking the plastic spool with it, and the can of drink popped, producing a cloud of steam.

The Assistant Director nodded. “Impressive.”

Carolyn waved her arm in the air excitedly.

Nimnul blinked. “Err, yes?”

“Now Mr. Nimnul, what gave you the idea for such impressive technology?”

Nimnul hooked his thumbs into imaginary suspenders. “The laser is merely a re-engineering of technology from my original universe. The display is a spot of reverse-engineering of the displays in the alien ships. The generator is admittedly my own idea. It’s really just taking electro-nucleo-static technology to its logical conclusion.”

At the words “my original universe”, Francine planted her head in her hands. “That’s it, we’re toast,” she declared to no one in particular. To her surprise, none of the adults

seemed to be shocked by this revelation, but then Nimmul had been self-congratulatory in the pamphlet everyone had received, and that included the tidbit of his extra-dimensional origins.

The major exception to the general lack of reaction was Carlolyn, whose eyes sparkled at the same phrase that had dismayed Francine. “Keen gear!” she exclaimed. “How exactly did you get here?”

“To make a long story short,” Nimmul explained, “what I thought was going to be an interdimensional teleporter merely swapped brainwaves between myself and my counterpart in this universe.”

“Oh sure, I can see how that that would work!” Carolyn responded, as her father gave her a glance clearly demonstrating his desire for her to stop that thread of questions right there.

“Nice to know someone understands what I’m talking about,” replied Nimmul with a nod at the young woman as she walked over to where her father was standing.

AGENT MAUGHLARDE HAD WANDERED OVER to the railing that the Assistant Director nearly broke through. Seeing that it was still intact, if a bit bent out of shape, he leaned out over it to get a good look at the city. Alone of the group, he was still unimpressed with Nimmul. “You know . . .” he declared to Carolyn, who had just joined him. “I think I can see our old house from here!”

“Weren’t you even paying attention?” she asked in exasperation.

“Hm?” her father asked absently. “Yeah, lasers, little power-doochiekeys, that stuff?” Carolyn rolled her eyes at him.

Francine, seeing that Nimmul was busy explaining the operation of his power unit to Professor Bergman, decided to join the Maughlarde family. “It’s nice to see you again, Drew, Carolyn,” she said quietly. “Nice suits.”

Carolyn took this to be a veiled accusation. “In all the years you babysat me as a kid, did you ever seen me wear a dress?”

“Not of your own free will, no. I believe your exact words on the subject were, ‘me, Frilly and Pink have agreed to disagree,’ and I see your opinion on the subject has not changed. So, Drew, I see your step-daughter talked her way into another delicate situation where she wasn’t invited.”

“She can be very persuasive,” Drew replied. “So, are you still enjoying suburbia?”

Francine shrugged. “It has its good days.”

“Did I miss much?”

“After leaving Harford? It’s been pretty quiet. So quiet in fact that the Masked Marvel retired. Right after you left, in fact.”

“Did he now?”

“Yeah, I heard that, too,” Carolyn said, staring accusingly at her father. “Rather a shame about that.”

Drew looked curiously at his adopted daughter for a few seconds, then glanced over his shoulder at Nimmul. “You mind telling us what’s *really* going on?” he asked.

Francine frowned. “It’s . . . complicated.”

Carolyn laughed. “Well I’d figure that multi-universe travel would be complicated! Care to give any detail on that?”

Francine shook her head. In the last few weeks she had witnessed more scientific miracles than Norris' hero Edison had created in a lifetime. The theory that this was merely a deluded version of her husband was no longer possible. "I never was one for science. But . . . he's definitely no longer my husband."

"That's for certain. Has he cared to tell you anything about it? Or are we going to have to pry it from him?"

"Not much to tell. He decided he wanted to be emperor of Earth and failing on his own world, he picked this one."

"And he's *the* Professor Norton Nimmul?" asked Drew Maughlarde. "From the TV show?"

"Yes," answered Francine.

"Wow," said Maughlarde. "You know, Bergman and Irwin are considered the two smartest people in the world, but I don't think either one of them have realized the implications of *him* being here."

Francine grinned. "I think it's beginning to sink in."

Maughlarde frowned. "You don't get it either, do you?"

Francine stopped laughing. "Get what?"

Carolyn sighed. "He's Professor Norton Nimmul. He doesn't follow the physical rules of the universe, he breaks them like twigs!"

"
 . . . AND ALL WITH VERY LITTLE waste."

"Very interesting," remarked Professor Bergman. "As you might know, the world has had a bit of a problem with handling the tons of nuclear waste generated every year. The original area allocated for it on the Moon reached capacity four years ago, seven years ahead of schedule. It was lucky we were able to get a second waste area on the far side of the Moon set up as soon as we did."

"And Moonbase Alpha?" Nimmul asked.

"Moonbase Alpha primarily exists to monitor the nuclear waste, to be perfectly frank," said Commissioner Simmonds. "The occasional surveys of the solar system and deep space that we launch from there are as much for publicity as for science. By the way, I'd like to take this moment to apologize to you about a little bit of misdirection regarding this demonstration."

"What misdirection?" asked Nimmul, perplexed.

"You see," explained Bergman, "The principle of the laser is already known to us. We picked it up when one of their ships crashed on the Moon eight months ago. Careful study revealed that the alien's 'death ray' was indeed a powerful weapon, but the power requirements were prohibitive. The aliens themselves use bio-energy to power them, draining the life of their terrestrial victims like some sort of vampire. No other power source was capable of charging and firing the weapon fast enough to get through their defenses."

Commissioner Simmonds, standing nearby, chimed in. "Every candidate for emperor we've had in the current crisis came up with the laser. The ones who got the job were those who had something more."

"And that power cube of yours is exactly that 'something more' we need to end this war, once and for all," added the Assistant Director, grabbing a hold of Nimmul's hand

and shaking it firmly. "I believe we missed our introductions earlier, what with the runaway car and all! The name's Klaudaine, Assistant Director Aldus Klaudaine. If there's any way I can be of assistance, do not hesitate to ask! For example, you said you intend to take over the nation's infrastructure. That will require a K-31A form. If you don't accompany that with a pink #14 slip, the request will have to go through an additional seven levels of oversight. Most people don't know that."

Nimnul nodded slowly. "I've noticed this world is really fond of paperwork, so thanks for the advice, Mr. Klaudaine," he said, being careful to get the name right.

"HEY, BUDDY! BUD! LOOK WHAT I found! Can I keep it, huh, Bud, can I?"

Lou came out of the powerhouse leading a metal bulldog by a thick rope.

Bud came running over. "You put that back, Lou! I'm sorry folks, Lou didn't mean to mess with your experiment."

"Careful with that!" cried Nimnul. "I haven't gotten all the bugs out of his programming yet!"

"What is that thing?" asked Doctor Irwin.

Nimnul pulled out a remote control and started fiddling with it. "A robot guard dog and a companion of sorts. Unfortunately, there are some glitches in the programming I still have to fix."

"That's an awfully simple-looking remote."

"Do you mean compared to the ones used by Emperor Freewheel? Well, my remotes only provide guidance. The dog thinks for itself."

"Indeed?" Irwin started walking around the robot. "Its motion is quite lifelike," she observed. "It appears to be observing its surroundings." The dog bowled Lou over and started licking him with a metal tongue. "And it even shows signs of personality. I've never seen artificial intelligence so advanced! And it's self-contained! How big is the processor, Professor?"

"The same sort as in this desktop computer."

Irwin shook her head incredulously. "Well surely it's a different sort of processor—the dog's computer must be capable of holistic learning and lateral thinking, while the desktop needs to optimize for linear processing."

She knelt down and ran her hand along the back of the mechanical dog. It responded by panting and wagging its tin tail. "If I wasn't seeing it with my own eyes I wouldn't believe it!" she exclaimed. "This shouldn't be physically possible!"

". . . like twigs!" Carolyn repeated to Francine, as she and her father went to join the others by the mechanical dog.

Francine blanched.

PROFESSOR BERGMAN ONCE AGAIN APPROACHED Nimnul. "Alright, I think we're nearly done here. I'd like your advice though, on some unfinished business from our last emperor."

"What might that be?" he asked.

Bergman pulled out a case file marked "TOP SECRET" and gave it to Nimnul. "Fifteen years ago, David here was involved in a project to improve human

communications, a project run out of Kensington College by a former colleague of mine, Professor Hodgeson.

“The experiment was split into two parts. Adult volunteers like David here were implanted with circuitry that allowed them to directly connect with computers. Unfortunately there was a fault with the interface and . . .”

Bergman flipped a few pages in the case file to reveal a couple of photographs. They were not pretty. “David was the only survivor. Indeed, for awhile there, we were certain he was dead.”

Nimnul frowned. “I must admit, I haven’t done anything related to biology for some time. Given the poor success rate of the project, I’d hazard a guess that entirely the wrong approach was being taken.”

Bergman nodded, and then flipped a few more pages. “The other part of the experiment, involving children, was even less successful. The children all tested positively for a minor form of parapsychological powers: the form of telepathy known as intuition, or enough telekinesis to get a child in trouble, that sort of thing. Professor Hodgeson invented a device, called the Kensington Identity Development System, or KIDS, that he hoped would allow the minds of the children to join into a gestalt consciousness. Now here are the schematics of the device that Hodgeson used. I was wondering if you can see any way to avoid a repeat of the unfortunate consequences of the last time the device was used.” Another page was flipped, revealing another ugly photograph.

“Golly!” Nimnul blurted, “That’s horrible! Those poor kids!” He immediately put his hands over his mouth in shock.

Bergman smiled. “Very good. I was afraid we were about to crown an emperor without a heart.”

Simmonds smiled as well. “So it’s a unanimous vote, then?”

“I . . . I would never stoop so low as to experiment on children,” Nimnul stated in a low voice.

Agent Maughlarde, playing with the iron mutt, looked up. “Yes, I don’t really see any other choice.”

Simmonds looked around for a dissenting vote. Not finding one, he stepped forward and shook Nimnul’s hand. “Very well. Professor Nimnul, you are hereby appointed emperor, your office to last until the end of the current crisis. What name should we address you as?”

Nimnul stood as tall as someone of his stature could. “You shall address me as Norton II, Emperor of Earth and Protector of the Moon.”

Francine laughed out loud.

“I’m distantly related to Norton I,” Nimnul explained, sheepishly.

“I know!” guffawed Francine. “So was Norris!”

Simmonds shook his head in bewilderment. “Well, if our business is done here, we shall go. The forces of Earth . . .”

“ . . . as well as the Moon . . .” added Gorski.

“Are now at your disposal,” finished Simmonds.

“Oh, and if you’d ever deign to share the plans for that remote control, I just had a brilliant idea of how to use it on Moonbase Alpha!” exclaimed Gorski.

THE MEN AND WOMEN TURNED around and headed back to the cars to leave.

“A moment, if you will, ladies and gentlemen,” said Francine, regaining her composure. “One final order of business. You know and I know that both of your organizations will attempt to plant spies within the new emperor’s organization, and I know that if I expose them, you’ll just plant some more.” Klaudaine and Simmonds looked at their feet. “So therefore I am accepting one member from each group into Imperial employment. Whether or not these plants actually get anything useful to do will depend on their loyalty to the emperor and their good behavior. Any volunteers?”

David looked to Professor Bergman. “May I?” he asked.

Bergman nodded.

Assistant Director Klaudaine looked around. “Perhaps Doctor Elena Irwin would be the best candidate . . .”

“And abandon the work on my robo-bee saboteurs? Forget it!” she declared, climbing back into the car.

“A pity. I would have liked to have worked with her,” mused Nimmul. “As a matter of fact, what I really need is a political adviser.” (“And someone to fill out all those forms for me”, he muttered). “Would you be available, Assistant Director?”

“Me?” Klaudaine thought for a bit. “Well, I do have about two years of vacation time built up. It sounds like an interesting challenge—I’ll do it! I’ll have to temporarily resign my position, to avoid the appearance of a conflict of interest, but I’m sure that the Gander will understand. There is also the small matter of my cat . . .” He pulled out his wallet and began thumbing through multiple photographs of a rotund purplish feline with a perpetually disappointed expression on its face, as if it disapproved of its master’s choice to have a law-abiding career.

“No pets.”

“Oh. Oh, well, I guess in that case I’ll need to make a few arrangements with my regular sitter. It shouldn’t be too hard for him—Greenstreet is very good at taking care of himself. Is there a phone around here by any chance?”

Francine directed him towards the telephone inside the powerhouse.

“Hello, Percy . . .”

Carolyn ran forward to curtsy and then vigorously shake Nimmul’s hand. “An honor to meet you, your Excellency!” she said, before running to join her father.

With the four departing dignitaries in place, the two cars drove off.

Nimmul turned his head to meet eyes with David, who was still standing a few feet away. “I don’t believe I caught your name?”

“David, David Kano,” he said, approaching. “I’m an expert on computers and the conditions on the Moon. I thought you might find my services to your liking.” He handed over a business card, explaining, “You can look up my references on this node of the Wired.”

Nimmul stared at the card for a bit. “‘September 14th Society’?” he read.

“A society of just two, I’m afraid.”

“Is it your birthday?”

“No, but it is a day I very much wish to see.”

Nimmul thought a bit, then shook the man’s hand. “Very well. Talk to my assistant over there, she should be able to brief you on anything you need to know.”

FRANCINE WALKED UP TO NIMNUL, looked around to make sure nobody could overhear them, then said one word: “Golly?”

Nimnul grunted in annoyance. “There was a certain episode . . . involving the telephone system and a teleportation device of my own invention . . .”

Francine nodded. “‘A Fly in the Ointment.’ We never got to air that episode.”

Nimnul’s eyes went wide. “You were going to?”

“Sure, if Agent Maughlarde hadn’t shut the studio down. Let me tell you now, if you want The Company off your back, pay your taxes on time!”

“I can’t believe you were going to air that, on a children’s cartoon show. You people are sick!” Nimnul exclaimed.

“I liked that episode, myself.”

“That was the worst day of my life!”

“I can imagine.”

“No,” declared Nimnul. “You *cannot* imagine. Being a half-hour program, I assume you don’t know about the worst part.”

Francine grinned impishly. “Surprise me.”

“Telephone lines are notoriously noisy.” Nimnul said this statement like he expected it would reveal everything, but Francine was stumped.

“So?”

“*So*, your episode may have ended nice and tidy with everything back to normal, but the fact of the matter is, those rodents and I were never completely separated.”

This got Francine’s attention. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, there are parts of my brilliant mind that are no longer my own! That there are thoughts and utterances that are not me, but them! And, especially . . . *HER*. The *mouse*, the one who builds tinker toys out of *garbage*.” Nimnul rapped his knuckles on his head for emphasis. “She’s *up here*, where she most certainly doesn’t belong!

“At night, in my dreams, I’ll be rehearsing my plans of world domination, when *she* has to stick her little snout in, and express her opinion. I’m sick of it! I hoped, when I built the transporter, that the trip would repair the damage, that I would finally be 100 % *me* again. But no, it appears I’ll be stuck with those lousy vermin, forever!”

Francine was touched. “Wow. I . . . I’m so sorry. Maybe after this whole ‘rule the world’ thing has been accomplished, I can help you to cure . . .”

“You think I haven’t tried!” Nimnul turned away. “Begone, woman!” he cried over his shoulder. “The world is mine in name, but now I have to take it!”

Francine turned and walked towards the powerhouse. As she passed the mechanical dog, which was playfully tearing a corner of the building apart, she remembered the worlds of her former neighbor and shuddered.

DAVID KANO WALKED UP TO the beautiful blond woman who was busy putting the equipment away. “Lorina?” he asked.

“I had a dream about a month ago,” she told him, without turning around. “There was this gray wasteland, littered with gigantic blocks and covered with several feet of heavy blue dust, endlessly swirling in the wind but never rising very high. There were no

clouds, and the sun was clearly visible in a dark red sky. I was there, in some sort of spacesuit, because I could hear myself breathing. I entered the only surviving building, a tilted crumbling spire that was snapped off above the third floor. It was a miserable apartment complex once, I think, only built for giants instead of men. In a living room on a floor with no roof was some kind of shrine with a ripped banner that read ‘The Man Who Could Have . . .’. ‘The Man’ in question was Norton Nimnul, and there was a big portrait of him dressed in rags but posing as Napoleon on one of the less-damaged walls. I swept the dust from several glass cases to reveal his inventions: a metal dog much like the one we saw today, the model for a cheap U.F.O., a simple Jell-O mold . . . I felt sure that I had been there before.”

“You had been there before,” David answered, gently. “It was in San Diego. Your father built that museum, and you spent most of your childhood there. You made that banner, Lorina, and you were the driving force behind our mission.” He moved some hair aside on her head to reveal a faint white line. “It was your impulsive trip that showed me the dangerous effect the trip has on memories, so I could take the necessary precautions to preserve my own memory.”

The woman shook her head, covering the scar. “I don’t remember any of that. All I have is the dreams. And the questions you still refuse to answer. That’s why calling me ‘Lorina Liddell’ is a waste of time. There’s nothing left in me of her. ‘Laurel Weir’ is now not just the name I have stolen, as ‘David Kano’ is yours, it’s who I am. You know what else I saw in that museum?”

Without waiting for an answer, Laurel turned, quickly grabbing David’s left wrist and pulling up the woolen sleeve to reveal a thick metallic wristband. The device was covered with controls and lights. On a small screen was a photograph of David’s face.

“I knew it!” she proclaimed. “We *are* the same! What do you really look like when you take this off?”

David put his hand over Laurel’s mouth. “You must *never* speak of such things where they can be overheard!”

“Why? Is somebody after us?”

David looked around. “Perhaps. More importantly, we must not let any of them know the truth about us. We are completely powerless in our true forms, and the stakes are far too high to fail.”

“But you told me the mission was to make Nimnul emperor, and now he’s emperor. What more do you want?”

“September 14th, Laurel. I want September 14th.”

16. CORONATION

T-41 days, 15 hours, 25 minutes and 1 second (May 2, 8:35 AM EDT).

THE ORLAC FAMILY ESTATE OF Gogol was located near Bear Mountain in northwestern Connecticut. Francine usually used the helicopter to approach it, but the black limousine was using the long country road on this early May morning. The car had earlier passed immense farm lands separated from each other by narrow strips of native forest, the former cared for by teams of automated machines, but now the terrain consisted only of scattered bushes, all in a rather unhealthy state. Ahead on a hill was the three-story mansion. The only sound to be heard was the quiet hum of the car's nuclear engine and the crunch of tires on gravel. There was not a bird, chipmunk, or any other sign of animal life to be seen. The sky was overcast. It had always been overcast, and it would always be overcast.

"We have a little more time," said the car's passenger. "Neither Nimmul nor Francine have told me about the history of this place."

"You're in luck—I've heard every story ever told about Gogol. In the beginning, this was all one big forest, the 'Dark Entry Forest', because it was so thick no light ever reached the ground.

"The Mohicans say that one day the spirit of the dead was passing through the area and wanted to rest, so he raised up the Coltsfoot Triplets range to rest his head, and Bald Mountain and Woodbury Mountain to put his feet on. These three mountains shut out the sun for most of the day, making Dark Entry Forest even darker.

"The English moved into the area in the 1600's, leading to plagues for the Mohicans and witch hunts for the English. The last witchcraft trials held in New England were for Winifred Benham and her daughter. The judge could not prove that the two women were or were not witches, so he issued a verdict of 'not proven'. The Benhams after the trial moved up here to settle where two ley-lines crossed, and Gogol sits on the site of their cabin. Francine is a direct descendant of those two.

"After the deaths of the Benhams, the three Dudley brothers built Dudleytown in 1740 on the very land we're driving through now. It is said that the brothers were descended from the Dudley lords of England, who were cursed by King Henry VIII for their plots against him. Dudleytown soon became known as a place where people did horrible things, and in every case the criminals would tell anyone that would listen that they were driven by visions of demons and weird animals emanating from a hole in the earth that some said was a portal to the Underworld." The car was entering the driveway, so the driver was forced to omit all the juicy details of the curse in action. "Then the trees all died, and the animals for ten miles around abandoned the place, and Mister Orlac won Dudleytown in a drunken poker game and rather than admit he'd made a mistake, he

razed the town and built his third mansion here so nobody would have to look at his notsons, and oh look, we're here, so that's the end of the tour."

The limo pulled up to the door. Out of the driver's door stepped Lou, wearing the most elaborate lab coat ever devised. It was made of cloth of gold and covered with seven different kinds of precious stones. Written on the back in a trail of small glittering diamonds, the name "NIMNUL" was written like the man was a prizefighter.

The driver ran over to the passenger compartment and opened the door, allowing a large man in a plain blue suit to exit. The man, former Assistant Director of The Company Aldus Klaudaine, tapped the side of his head significantly.

Lou sighed. "Do I have to?"

"I didn't pick the costume, Comrade Lou. Nimnul did."

"Alright." Lou went back in the car and came out with an enormous crown on his head, nearly half Lou's own height.

Klaudaine crossed his arms and looked Lou up and down. "You look good."

"I feel ridiculous."

"Well of course you feel ridiculous. All tsars should feel ridiculous. Keeps more heads attached to necks."

While they were talking, a large black van had pulled up behind the limousine, and from it had emerged a camera crew. The driver of the van, Bud, walked over to Lou and Klaudaine and started laughing.

"That's got to be the silliest outfit I have ever seen! You gotta let me take a picture before this is all over."

Klaudaine wasn't laughing. In a voice loud enough to be heard by the camera crew, he declared, "That is *not* the tone you should be using when addressing the Emperor of Earth and the Protector of the Moon. I demand that you apologize to Emperor-Elect Norton this instant!"

Bud was taken aback. "Err . . . right, *Emperor-Elect Norton*. Will you accept my most humble apology?" He even went down on one knee.

Lou giggled. "Heh, what if I don't *want* to accept it?" he declared for the crowd.

Klaudaine "accidentally" jabbed him in the ribs. "Watch it, *Emperor-Elect*," he hissed. "You may look close enough to the real thing for today, but you most certainly don't *sound* like him."

"Oh, all right," Lou replied in a low voice. Reaching back into the car he produced a two-foot long scepter/mace. "I forgive you. Arise, Sir Loin of Beef!" and he bonked Bud on the head. "Arise, Earl of Cloves!" Another bonk. "Arise . . ."

Klaudaine grabbed the scepter. "You will be quitting the 'Looney Tooning', *yes?*" he whispered sharply. In a public voice, he said, "shall we visit your wife, Emperor-Elect?"

"I get a wife, too?" said Lou. "Woo-hoo!"

"Allow me," said Bud, as he took the scepter from Klaudaine's hand and tried to "accidentally" bonk Lou. Only with the crown on, bonking Lou had no effect.

The Emperor-Elect stuck out his tongue.

Bud shrugged. "Remember, Lou, the wife in question is Frankie."

Lou shivered.

"Is anybody going to open this door?" demanded one of the cameramen.

Klaudaine rushed forward. "It appears that I must add 'designated knocker' to my job description," he joked.

AS THE CAMERA CREW WAS setting up, Klaudaine found time to make a phone call. “Miss Maughlarde, I hear you are taking the World History class, are you not?” he said. After pausing for an answer, he continued. “I have also been informed that this is not one of your best subjects, and if you fail, you will not be able to graduate. I will have you know that I am an expert at world history, and I would be honored to help you as your ‘study buddy’. I will stay up late nights with the books and the notes, and make the tea. I can also provide you with the answers for the tests that you . . . oh, well, I suppose that is a little out of line, yes, but still you must admit that this help would be very near to ‘life-saving’, thereby fulfilling my debt to you and . . . Oh. I see. Very well. Good day to you.”

Klaudaine looked up to see Francine, who was looking disapprovingly at the carpet the camera crew had crossed. No mud or other stains were visible, but in her mind’s eye, Francine saw clearly the dirt and contagion that the crew had brought into her home. She appeared to be visibly restraining herself from grabbing a scrub-brush and disinfectant and going to work on the invisible footprints. “Oh, Your Excellency!” he exclaimed.

With an effort, Francine broke out of her spell and noticed Klaudaine with the telephone in his hands. “Not for a couple of hours yet,” she said, in reference to the title. “I’m still Mrs. Nulton.”

He noticed her looking at the phone. “I hope you don’t think that I would, to use the American expression, ‘stick you with the bill’. I always repay my debts. And might I observe, that is a most beautiful dress you are wearing. It really compliments your appearance.”

“Thank you very much,” she replied, taking the phone out of his hands and spraying it with a sanitizing spray positioned for that very purpose. “It was the most expensive dress I could find. I usually do not care for my appearance, but today a good portion of the world will be spending several hours looking at me, and I thought I should make an effort to be worth looking at.”

“Indeed. This is a most impressive mansion you have here. Do *you* mind telling me a little about its history? I asked Lou, but . . .”

“Say no more! Lou probably told you all the lies the city folk tell. Hobbomock has stories told about him north of here and south of here, but the Mohicans never claimed he raised the three mountains. Winifred Benham moved to Massachusetts after her trial, not here. Dudleytown failed not because of ‘the curse’, but because the lack of sunlight and poor farming practices depleted the soil, and it was in a dumb position for trade. The trees didn’t disappear; they were all cut down to fuel the ironworks up on Mount Riga. That’s why there are so few animals around.

“As for Gogol itself, it was built by my father in 1958 as a place to get away from it all. My mother named it after Nikolai Gogol, the Ukrainian author. My sister and I spent more of our time here than in any of the other family homes. We inherited it in 1977, and I became sole owner in 1982. It hasn’t been used much in the last decade, as I found a home in the city to be much more convenient. Besides, I’ve never been much into the whole ‘master-servant’ thing. Any other questions?”

“Francine Benham was your ancestor, then?”

“Yes, she was, on my mother’s side. Anything else?”

“No, that clears things up nicely.”

“Good, because I have a question for you.” Francine took a moment to look around at how her living room was being transformed. She was pleased to see that nothing had been broken and the men handling her belongings were wearing gloves. “I have to say, you’ve got a nice operation going, Aldus. I thought *I* was the only one paranoid enough to pull off a charade like *this*.”

“Remind me to tell you of the epic five-year battle of paperwork between myself and Agent Maughlarde for the position of Number Two in The Company. A battle that I have won, you will note,” Klaudaine replied, coldly. “*That* was a lesson in the true nature of power.”

“You think I have not been taught that lesson as well? Or do you think I gave up control of Orlac Machines for the sake of my health?”

“Very well. And what was your question?”

“What are you and Nimmul really up to? Earth Forces have all been equipped with lasers by now, but the Danaans keep kicking our tails!”

“That was ironic, just now. Nimmul came from a world of intelligent animals, and then you use the phrase ‘kicking our . . .’”

“Are you going to give me a straight answer, or not? Do you and Nimmul trust me?”

“Do you actually want me to answer that question, Francine?”

Francine said nothing.

“I thought not. Suffice it to say that Nimmul and I know what we are doing.”

“Really? Sending all of those prisoners up to the Moon, that doesn’t look very competent.”

“You’re not giving Nimmul enough credit. That man is a genius with a computer. He’s already figured out the Wired.”

“The Wired?”

“‘A series of tubes’, as I believe it is called,” Klaudaine joked. Drawing no response, he gestured vaguely with his hand. “This month’s name for the world computer network. Anyway, Nimmul’s developed a laser for the lunar troops that mounts on their backs and does all the aiming and firing for itself. It doesn’t matter who wears it!”

“And so you send up people you’d prefer not come back.” Francine shook her head in wonder. “*I* would stoop so low, but I never suspected that a Company man would allow such a thing on his watch. I thought you were the good guys.”

“The equipment’s ready, Mr. Klaudaine,” Bud said, walking up to them.

“I am not ‘the good guy’, Madame. I am ‘the guy who gets things done’.”

“**T**HIS IS SUPERVISOR JOHN G. Houker at Vostaach Space Center calling Mr. Klaudaine. Bear, do you copy?” The man on the screen was short, if possible even shorter than Nimmul or Lou. A head resembling a loaf of white bread dwarfed a tiny pair of spectacles, accented by bushy gray eyebrows and a halo of gray hair.

Klaudaine sat down at his appointed post and picked up the microphone on the desk before him. “Aldus Klaudaine at Gogol Mansion here, over.”

Supervisor Houker peered dimly through the spectacles. “Ah yes, Klaudaine. I was wondering if you could be a dear and put the Emperor-Elect on? Captain Cellini is ready for his final orders.”

“Of course,” Klaudaine replied, moving over in the seat to make room for Lou, who was doing his best to sit down without losing his gigantic crown. He closed his eyes for a second and silently hoped he wouldn’t forget his lines.

“Eh . . . Emperor-Elect Norton II is here,” Lou announced in a very shaky impersonation of Norton Nimnul. He remembered he was supposed to be condescending, so at the last moment he tacked on the word “mortal”.

The man addressed on the other end of the video link in Russia stood erect in his orange jumpsuit. He had the look of an alpine skier and the wandering eyes of an inveterate explorer. He was also trying valiantly to keep a straight face. Behind him could be seen crews busy loading a large space transport. One of them was quite obviously Norton Nimnul. Seeing this, Klaudaine silently squeezed the bridge of his nose between his fingers to try to make the headache go away.

“My instructions?” the captain gently prompted.

“Ah, yes. You are to take Commander Gorski back to Moonbase Alpha, where he will resume his duties. I will be coming up as soon as the coronation ends and I become ruler of Earth. Mwa. Ha. Ha, ha, ha.” Lou beamed at getting all that out in a recognizable form.

Houker stepped back into frame. “In addition, Emperor-Elect, it would be our honor to send you Russia’s message of thanks for your imminent liberation of their great nation.”

This statement seemed to take both Klaudaine and Lou by surprise. Klaudaine recovered first, jumping up and turning on a fax machine located on the table. “Of course, sir. You may transmit that thanksgiving message from Mother Russia at any time.”

The machine responded by spitting out page after page.

“I believe that concludes our business today,” said Houter, reaching forward for a switch off-camera. The image turned off.

Klaudaine looked up at the camera crew. “That will be all, gentlemen. I would suggest you return to the van while we finish up in here. Agent Keigh, could you drive? I need Bud to man the fax machine for me.”

“Sure thing,” the man addressed replied, as his men filed out.

“‘Thanksgiving message’?” asked Bud.

“Last-minute instructions from the Emperor Elect. In code.” Turning to the fax machine, he picked up a pile dozens of pages long that looked like a standard self-congratulatory message of thanks. Flipping through the pages, he said, “This can’t be more than five or six pages here, decoded. There’s a unit in the limo. Are you coming with us, Empress-Elect Francine?” He offered his arm.

“It would be my honor, Aldus,” she replied, taking it. “By the way, why is Gorski on that flight?”

“Let me put it this way: you are the enemy. You have that rocket in your sights. Then you learn that Commander Anton Gorski, a man who requires an instruction manual to put on his boots, is on that rocket and he’s going back to the Moon to run it as well as he did before. Would *you* shoot?”

Francine shook her head, laughing.

IT WAS A LONG DRIVE to Philadelphia, site of the coronation. Klaudaine spent the whole time on his car phone making various arrangements, while Bud “operated the decoder mechanism”. This consisted of feeding pages one at a time into a slot on the side of the device and waiting for a little bell to ring before feeding in the next, as well as dealing with the used pages that tended to get spat out randomly and violently. Lou, despite being Emperor-Elect, was still stuck driving, as he wasn’t trusted to be able to “operate the decoder mechanism” successfully.

Once all of the pages had been scanned, the black rectangular box thought for ten minutes, and then started kicking out more pages, which Bud did his best to catch and keep separate from the input pages. Francine took each one out of his hands as soon as they were caught and glanced at it, and then returned it to Bud. The first three pages each consisted of a list of names, addresses, and “reasons”, with the header “Induct into Lunar Army ASAP”. When the machine was finished, Bud put it aside, opened a compartment in the side of the car, and removed the Handy Navi. He started entering the names and addresses, but quickly got frustrated.

“None of these people exist!” he exclaimed.

“Let me see that.” Francine took back the first page and started looking at it more closely. “Oh,” she said at last, “I see. Nimmul made this list from memory, using people from his universe. They have different names over here. For example, ‘Huey Newark’ must be ‘Howard Jersey’, Norris’ college roommate in his freshman year. I bet all of these addresses are wrong as well.” She got out a pen, then picked up one of the used sheets of paper and turned it over. “I’ll see if I can figure out who these people really are, and then you can use your computer to look them up.”

Bud handed over the pages and straightened his back. “Fine by me!” he exclaimed.

AS FRANCINE WORKED ON THE names, she started paying attention to what was in the “reason” column. Among the entries were “mocked me in gym class”, “gave me a B in Chemistry” and “tied my shoelaces together”. Obviously, this was an enemies list, all of them condemned to do duty on the Moon alongside the convicts for what their counterparts did to Nimmul in another universe. Strangely, at least a third of the names had the same baffling reason: “called me ‘Waldo’”. She made a mental note of that name for now.

The last two pages changed format from the earlier ones. Now there were many columns instead of just three, and none of them was “reason”. One of the new columns was “alias”, and another was “age”. Francine read the first line and became very still. “Alice Wentworth”, the line read. “Alias Queenie. Age 13.”

Francine skimmed the rest of the list, but found nobody she knew listed. She was somewhat impressed to see that some of the aliases, like “ConMouse” and “QQ”, lacked contact information—that meant that they had hidden their information so well that Nimmul couldn’t track them. From the aliases used, it appeared that this was the user list for the online forum dedicated to the *Rescue Rangers* cartoon. She also noticed that neither Herbert, Jr., nor his alias of “Honker” were on the sheet. Francine looked over the list and deliberated. She reasoned that making this second list disappear would accomplish nothing in the long run: Nimmul would eventually follow up and re-send the

list, and Francine might not be lucky enough to intercept it a second time. She therefore started copying out the list onto the end of the first list, leaving out anyone younger than 18. The rest were legal adults, she coldly told herself, and therefore liable for the consequences of their poor judgment. For the “reason” column, she wrote, “Watches cartoons too much”.

By this time, Klaudaine had finished his calls. “Well?” he asked her.

“Nimnul wants more recruits. Here’s the corrected list,” she said, handing over her hand-written list as she pushed the decoded pages into an opening on the side of the car labeled, “for destruction of incriminating documents.”

THE CORONATION CEREMONY WAS VERY long, and very boring. Francine, however, reveled in it, for she was the center of attention, something she had long been craving. Yet for some reason it felt strangely unsatisfying. There were many interviews with the press, most of them entirely devoid of any intellectually significant content, and then the limousine finally turned around and drove back to Gogol. Francine went back to her room and collapsed on her bed, sound asleep.

17. THE FINAL BATTLE

T-36 days, 0 hours, 45 minutes and 6 seconds (May 7, 11:14 PM EDT).

FIVE DAYS PASSED. FRANCINE SPENT the days in social activities, actively snubbing the many people who had hurt her through the years. She told herself the humiliation was acceptable; after all, she wasn't sending any of them to the Moon. Her sister Dinah and scheming brother-in-law Harold took this moment to finally break the decades of pretending that Francine had died before marrying "some bankrupt artist". The fact that they now tried to pretend that it was *she* who had never contacted *them* led the Empress to seriously consider forging Nimmul's signature on an order to condemn their precious lunar hospital.

Very little of her nights was spent sleeping. Instead she compulsively vacuumed the hallways of Gogol as she tried to imagine what was happening on the Moon at that moment. Francine had trained for spaceflight with the others, so she was keenly aware of the dangers.

One night, Klaudaine poked his head in the door. "It has started," he told her.

Francine sat up, grabbed the remote control, and turned on the bedroom's television. Now that Norris was gone, she could finally bring modern conveniences like remote controls into Gogol, but she had limits. The only computers in Gogol, for example, were those brought in by Klaudaine and his men.

Francine didn't have to turn channels, because coverage of the battle was on every station. There was sporadic fighting on Earth, but most of the Danaans had returned to their ships as soon as the lunar mothership had blown up. The news agencies lacked reporters on the Moon itself, so the fighting was covered using ground and space-based telescopes—the ground telescopes were radar-based to penetrate Earth's cloud cover. There was even a hapless reporter stuck pointing his camera at the Moon from the Space Dock, after he had been stopped from stowing away aboard a Moon-bound freighter.

In her mind, Francine trusted in Nimmul's cynicism to stay out of the thick of fighting. He had his "drone" fighters on foot, the moon buggies and the shuttles, and the big guns mounted on the mountains, all of them powered by Nimmul Power Cubes, little blue boxes that the operators had all been told were observation devices until the last one had been installed and the whole set had been irreversibly activated by radio control immediately before the battle. There was no need to be in the front lines. That was the work of heroes and fools, two words Francine held to be synonymous. On the one hand, Nimmul had Miss Weir beside him, a person Francine put into both categories at times. On the other hand, he also had David Kano with him, and a more levelheaded man Francine had never met.

“THEY’RE RETREATING!” DAVID KANO TOLD Nimmul. He was not elated. In fact, he sounded horrified.

“Let them!” replied Nimmul, sitting back in his chair at the Moonbase Alpha command center. “They’re headed right for the central force field roller. However did you think of that, anyway?”

“It wasn’t me; it would have been Professor Bergman’s contribution if he had been made emperor. But it’s not moving!”

“What!” Nimmul shouted, standing up. “Where’s the crew?”

David checked his instruments. “They fled as soon as the Danaans started heading their way, and it appears they sabotaged the remote controls on the way out.”

“That was the roller Commander Gorski volunteered to pilot. This is treason! When I get my hands on him . . .”

“There’s no time! If the Danaans get past that roller, they’ve got a straight shot at Waste Area Two!”

As David gestured at the electronic map, the left sleeve of his bulky sweater was pulled up his arm, revealing a peculiar wristband that looked an awful lot like one of Nimmul’s Metamorphosizers, but he didn’t have time to dwell on that in the middle of a battle. Looking instead at the map he said, “Yes, that’s where Earth stored most of its radioactive waste. So?”

“So, they have the whole area rigged to explode!”

“Explode? Don’t be ridiculous! They would never survive an explosion of that magnitude, now that their mothership is gone.”

“*Neither would humanity.* Think, Nimmul! What do the Danaans want? And the answer is not ‘conquest’.”

“Destruction? They would sacrifice themselves to destroy all of us?”

“Yes! They would have done it on September 13th against Emperor Bergman, so I’m dead certain they’ll try to do it again!”

“What?” Nimmul shook his head to clear it of cobwebs, consulted an electronic map showing where everybody was, then picked up the microphone. “Captain Cellini, we need your troops in Clavius Crater immediately! We cannot let the Danaans reach the nuclear waste!”

Cellini face appeared on the screen. He appeared to be fighting off a lot of fatigue. “My forces are boxed in at Theophilus Crater, but we’ll try to flank them.”

“They’ll never make it in time,” David said, pointing at the map. “No, *we* have to go out there and man that roller.”

Nimmul hesitated for a moment, then reached down and picked up his equipment bag. “Alright, I’ll try to rig up another remote control unit on the way.”

Laurel caught up with them on the way to the Eagle shuttle. “Where are we headed?” she asked.

“Just over that ridge,” Nimmul replied. “If I can fix the remote control unit, we can just stand back and let *it* handle the Danaans.”

Laurel nodded. “I’ll fly the Eagle, you two do the rest.”

THE DANAANS WERE CONTINUING TO fire their electron beam weapons as they retreated, so Laurel needed some fancy flying to keep the shuttlecraft in one piece as she flew around them to reach the enormous cylindrical roller. After landing, the three occupants suited up and bounded across the lunar surface to the open airlock at one end.

Once inside, Nimnul wasted no time in finding the damaged remote control unit and quickly started repairs. A few minutes later, he was finished and the whole vehicle powered up upon receiving the signal from Laurel's computer. David sat down, booted up the computer controls and started entering commands. The cylinder levitated upwards and was immediately surrounded by a larger cylindrical force field. Another control caused the unit to begin rolling back towards the Danaans.

"What are you doing?" demanded Nimnul.

"I'm making sure your victory in this battle is total, Emperor," David replied. Ahead were six other rollers, all of them manned by crews who had not deserted. David ordered his roller to speed up to close the gap.

"We're leaving, *now!*" Nimnul ordered, grabbing David. Seeing that the roller was locked on course, David allowed himself to be dragged away.

Nimnul, David and the silent Laurel sped down the corridor to the airlock. A set of lockers nearby had held rocket packs, but all of them had been taken by the deserting crew. "How do we get out?" Laurel asked. "We're fifty feet above the surface, and miles away from the Eagle."

The wily scientist turned to another locker with a padlock and twirled it open. Above it was the sign "For Imperial Use Only!" Inside were two rocket packs. He put on one and handed the other to David. "These can support two people each," he explained. After cycling through the airlock, Nimnul stood for a minute at the open edge and looked around at his surroundings through the shimmering wall of the force field and the sheer drop down to the lunar surface. He then removed a device called a "comlock" from the side of his suit. Commander Gorski had issued one of these to everyone on Moonbase Alpha as soon as he had returned from Earth; they acted as universal remote controls, among other functions. Nimnul pressed a button, and the force field became completely transparent. Over the suit radio, he announced, "we have two minutes—after that, we'll just bounce off the inside of the field." Putting the comlock back, he took hold of the two control handles of the rocket pack, jumped away from the airlock, and activated the rockets. He passed through the field, quickly followed by David Kano with Laurel Weir strapped facing him.

As they were flying back towards the waiting Eagle, there was a tremendous flash of light behind them, followed by a great percussive force that plucked them out of the sky and hurled them into the ground. Nimnul's training paid off as he rolled into a safe landing. Standing up and seeing chunks of metal flying past him to embed themselves in the lunar regolith, he looked back to see that the axle of the next roller over had been snapped by an electron beam discharge, and had collapsed, leaving a hole in the trap. This as the outer edges of the line of rollers had already contacted the enemy. Then he heard a scream over the radio.

He turned around to see Miss Weir, who had unstrapped herself from David, removing his right glove. Nimnul opened his mouth to protest, but then saw that one of the shards of the shattered roller had already destroyed the left glove, including the

mysterious wristband. A glimmer showed that the removed glove was sealed by a miniature force field. He bounded over to see what had happened. To his bafflement, David's suit was empty. Without saying a word, Laurel secured David's right glove to her suit and then used the rocket pack to continue her flight to the Eagle. Nimmul mutely followed.

When he entered the Eagle, Nimmul saw Miss Weir putting a small creature into a compartment in the cockpit and locking it. "You know, I think you're much cuter this way," she appeared to inform the animal. From the way she was cradling her right arm, it appeared she had broken it in the same accident that had damaged David's suit. The next thing she did was pull out a pocket mirror and examine her reflection closely. "But it looks like I'll remain Laurel Weir for now," she concluded.

"What's going on here?" Nimmul demanded.

She responded by pointing out at the screen with her good hand. The view showed the Danaans streaming through the gap in the force field trap and heading straight for the Eagle.

Nimmul strapped himself into the pilot's seat, while Miss Weir did her best with the co-pilot's seat. He started up the controls, and then considered his next course of action.

Run for it! the logical, scheming part of his brain told him. *That gap is tiny and I can see Cellini's forces returning. Let them handle it.*

You have to stop them, Nimmul, Gadget's disembodied voice told him. *The fate of all life on this Earth depends on it.*

I . . . Miss Weir could get hurt! Nimmul's self protested.

His inner Gadget smiled. *Isn't this a perfect Earth?* she argued. *They elect scientists to rule over them. They think, like you, that optimism is a waste of time. They recognize and applaud your genius. Would you allow such a world to be destroyed? A world without 'meddling vermin'?*

"Let's show them that we don't take kindly to being invaded!" Nimmul cried. He aimed the Eagle straight for the breach, lasers blazing.

"THE BATTLE FOR EARTH IS over, and humanity is victorious." So stated Galt Braunbight, the legendary television news anchor who had covered the manned space program from the beginning, and had returned from retirement to cover the Battle of Clavius (as it was now being called). "The number of casualties is still being determined. Among them is Norton II, the most recent Emperor of Earth and mastermind of the effort that liberated humanity from alien annihilation. We have been following the aftermath of the battle on Earth, and . . . hold on." Braunbight picked up the piece of paper that had been set before him. "It appears . . . that Emperor Norton is alive! Yes, the Emperor has been found in a crashed shuttle near the site of the battle and he and a Miss Laurel Weir have been taken to Orlac Lunar Hospital. We bring you now a live announcement from the hospital spokeswoman, Doctor Helena Russell."

Francine leaned forward, staring intently at the screen. The scene before her shifted to a curtained backdrop with a podium. A young austere woman with wavy, nearly white hair stepped up to the microphone. Since there were still no press on the Moon yet, the sound of her organizing her notes was the only sound to be heard.

“Ah, Emperor Norton was brought to Orlac Hospital at 03:18 Lunar Time. His co-pilot is in stable condition, with a fractured radius bone that is expected to mend. As for the emperor, he was severely electrocuted and his spine was severed in several places. Luckily the cervical nerves were still intact, so the patient is still alive, but he is paralyzed from the neck down. He is currently being prepped for surgery, and we have high hopes to have some sort of artificial lung set up shortly to help him with breathing. He is currently unable to speak, but . . .” at this point Dr. Russell looked down at her notes, and a rather unpleasant look flashed across her features. “But,” she forced herself to continue, “*Doctor* Harold Largess is preparing a radical new technique which will allow him to say whatever he wants him to . . . allow him to speak his will to the people.” A hopeless look came in the spokeswoman’s eyes as she spoke her final sentence: “Largess expects that the emperor will have plenty to say when he comes out of surgery.”

18. VOICES IN THE DARKNESS

T-35 days, 5 hours, 6 minutes and 30 seconds (May 8, 3:53 PM PDT).

“ALRIGHT, I’M STILL NOT HAPPY with the busboy scene.”

So said the woman’s voice coming out of the speakers. It was a little recording studio located somewhere in the vast suburbs of Los Angeles, and this was a recording session for a cartoon show. Normally, that would mean that each voice actor would record all of their lines in isolation, but this particular episode’s recording had been lost at the last minute, forcing a rare meeting of the entire seven-member cast, five men and two women. A somewhat large cast for this series, but this episode was set in the 1930’s and required plenty of celebrity impersonators. The group stood in a semicircle, wearing headphones to help them concentrate. Before each actor was a music stand holding their scripts, and behind each of those was a microphone.

“Err, is that before or after the attack of the paparazzi?” asked Moe L. March, star of the cartoon series *Pinky and the Brain*. He played The Brain, a mouse that continually plotted to take over the world. Physically, March didn’t resemble his character at all, being a tall, slightly overweight man with a thick head of black hair and wearing a large pair of glasses.

“After,” replied the disembodied voice.

March flipped a couple of pages in the script on the podium before him. “Got it.”

Jay Cummins, the voice actor playing the guest role of the Busboy, gave a thumbs up to the one-way glass that separated the cast from the director and the recording engineers. Cummin’s hair was long and black with a fair amount of gray, and totally unmanageable. It was matched by a thick mustache and a small goatee. The man seemed to have a permanent twinkle in his eye.

“We only have five minutes left in the session,” announced the voice of the director, “so I’m going to risk doing the whole scene at once. Don’t make me have to buy another session! This is *Pinky and the Brain*, episode 347A: ‘Whatever Happened to Baby Brain’, Scene 7, Lines 11 through 18, Take 5. And . . . action!”

“Back, back you animals!” proclaimed March as the character of the Brain.

“These people are savages!” commented Cummins as the Busboy, using a voice virtually identical to Brain’s.

“Yes,” agreed “the Brain”, “cannibals gorging themselves on the red meat of celebrity.”

“Bloodthirsty hounds scavenging the field of battle,” soliloquized “the Busboy”.

“Yes!”

Together they proclaimed, “things will be different when I take over the world!”

The Busboy introduced himself. “Welles, Orson.”

“Brain, The.”

“Cut!”

The actors waited while the director and the engineers reviewed the take.

“Perfect!” the director finally announced. “That’s a wrap, people!”

THE GROUP OF VOICE ACTORS made their way out of the studio. After following a maze of hallways and staircases, they ended up in the atrium, a large round room surrounded by one-way glass. March got ahead of the group and addressed them.

“You know,” he suggested, somewhat sheepishly, “Rob and I were thinking that now would be a perfect opportunity for a lunch date, to celebrate the completion of the recording session.”

“And . . .” prompted Rob Polson, voice of Brain’s brainless sidekick Pinky. Polson was short and skinny, with thin brown hair. He tended to be the “class clown” in any group he found himself in.

“Oh, and the end of the war,” March remembered.

“With the Danaans taken care of,” Polson remarked, “maybe the Emperor will finally have time to tackle the cloud problem. Just once I’d like to get a tan on a beach, like folks in the 1920’s used to do.”

Pam Haydn, one of the guest stars for the episode, and Jeffery Burnet, a regular on the show, declined the lunch date, as they had prior engagements.

The same went for the best-known member of the group, Gary Elway, live-action star of *The Princess Bride*, *Hot Shots!*, and many more films. The three of them exited the building.

“Sure, you talked me into it. Didn’t have anything better to do this afternoon.” This was Tress McNell, a woman with wavy reddish-brown hair.

Polson turned to the last holdout. “Please say you can come, Jay. I desperately need somebody who hasn’t heard all my jokes yet.”

Cummins took a look out the window. “Maybe you’d better go without me,” he said, regretfully, “it looks like I have a little work to do first.”

Waiting outside the front door of the studio complex was a group of about two-dozen excited people, aged from 8 to 38. Based on their clothes and signs, they were all fans of Jay Cummins’s work as the character Winnie the Pooh.

“That’s OK,” said March. “We’ll wait.”

“Thanks.”

The crowd erupted into cheers when Cummins emerged to greet them, recite some lines in character, and sign autographs.

McNell blanched at the sight of the crowd. “What are *they* doing here?” she asked.

“Disney probably told them where he was recording today,” guessed Polson.

“They can do that?” asked McNell.

“It’s Disney,” Polson replied. “You might need to check your contract with a high-powered microscope to find that clause, but it’s definitely there.”

“Well if you ask me, that seems like a terrible invasion of privacy.”

“We all know your feelings on the subject, Tress,” Polson said, for once with a straight face, “but the fans aren’t all bad. Just a couple of months ago I ran into a couple of *Rescue Ranger* fans at a convention. Nicest, most polite kids I ever met. I think I have their business card.”

He pulled out his wallet and searched a bit before retrieving the card to pass around. On the left side was a stick figure of a girl next to a younger boy, the two of them in front of a complex bank of audiovisual equipment. The right side proclaimed the company's name as "Jane and Michael . . . Banks".

"Cute," commented March. "So, did they want to hire you to play the part of Lassie, or Ben Turner?"

"Not *Lassie's Rescue Rangers!* *The Rescue Rangers* was a 1989 series by the Rockwell Studio."

"Aren't they the guys that made *Mystery Mantis and the Clew Crew Review*?" March interrupted.

"Don't forget *Intergalactic Battle of the Network Stars*," McNell added.

"Or *Three's a Crowd*," said Polson. "As close as you can get to an animated rip-off of *Three's Company* without calling in the lawyers! Now with Don Knotts!" That got a chuckle out of the others. "Yeah, Rockwell made nearly every cartoon stinker imaginable in the 1970's and '80's, but sometime after *Weeble Wobbles: The Animated Series*, they finally turned their act around and made *Darkwing Duck*."

"Rockwell made *Darkwing Duck*?" asked March in amazement. "That was like the number one cartoon in the late '80's."

"They followed that up with *Rescue Rangers*, which in my opinion was even better, although since it never went into syndication, is largely forgotten nowadays. Anyway, *Rescue Rangers* was about two chipmunks, a couple of mice, and a fly, that solve the cases the human police overlook. Miss McNell here played Chip, the fearless chipmunk leader, and Gadget, the brilliant and beautiful inventor mouse miss. Personally, I think Gadget was one of your best parts, Tress."

"Thanks," the actress addressed replied. "It's certainly in my top five."

"Let's see," Polson continued, "Jay played burley-mouse Monterey Jack (half of the time—it gets complicated), and Corey Button played the rest of the regulars. I did a lot of bit parts for the show, while Jay also voiced both of the main villains in the show: Fat Cat and a certain Professor Norton Nimnul."

March's bushy eyebrows shot up at the mention of that last name.

"Yes, interesting coincidence, don't you think?" remarked Polson wryly. "Anyway, with only 43 episodes in the can, *The Rescue Rangers* met an untimely end when Mr. Rockwell was arrested for tax evasion in 1990."

Tress shook her head. "Correction: the warrant went out, but The Company never caught Rockwell. He's still at large."

"The Company?" asked March. "I didn't think taxes were in their jurisdiction."

"Neither did I," replied Polson. "Although, given the current *imperial* situation, it's beginning to make sense. Like they say, if it's weird, you know The Company's involved somehow. Anyway, to return to the plot, the lawyers made sure that *The Rescue Rangers* never aired again. Nevertheless, a fairly respectable fandom has emerged, trading black-market fifth-generation videotapes in back alleys at three in the morning, I imagine. Even more incredibly, this group has managed to contact the show's head writer and got him to put onto the Wired all twenty-five of the scripts to the episodes that had never been completed. Seeing that nobody owned the characters anymore, the group decided that between them they had the technical expertise to make the missing episodes themselves."

“Really?” asked an incredulous March.

“Well, not to the level of the original episodes. The Navis today are pretty advanced, but they still can’t replace cell animation.”

“Alright then,” March summarized, “the A/V branch of this *Rescue Rangers* fan group wanted to hire you to do some voices for them.”

“No, they plan to do all the voices themselves. I checked out their website, and either through natural talent or electronic trickery, they have come up with pretty good matches for all of the regulars. All Jane and Michael Banks wanted was to ask me how I would do a Hawaiian surfer character in one of the episodes. I read a couple of lines into their tape recorder for their guy to imitate, and that was it.”

McNell took another look at the business card. “You know, I think this same pair may have approached my agent. Something about voicing a witch character. I still remember one of the lines: ‘It’s an ill wind that blows no one any good!’” She delivered the line using the voice she intended to use. It sounded remarkably familiar. “He turned them down, of course. I wonder if . . .”

“I hate to interrupt, Tress, but I think you better see this.”

McNell joined the two men at the one-way glass window. Outside, they could see that a black limousine had pulled up to the curb. A large bear of a man dressed in a black suit had emerged from the limousine and was now talking in hushed tones with Jay Cummins. Flanking the two and keeping the Winnie the Pooh fans at a distance were two more men in black with dark sunglasses obscuring their eyes. The more paranoid of the two kept checking over his shoulder, as if he were expecting a team of rivals to swoop in at any moment.

“Is . . . is that The Company?” McNell asked.

“Sure looks like it,” replied Polson.

As they watched, Cummins turned to address his fans, which replied by groaning loudly and dispersing. He then joined the three men in the limousine. It appeared that he had done this freely, but this was The Company, so you never could be sure. The limo pulled away from the curb and quickly made its way out of sight.

“Wow,” said March.

“I wonder if Jay paid *his* taxes,” joked Polson.

McNell replied to this remark by bonking Polson on the head.

19. CHOOSING SIDES

T-34 days, 17 hours, 54 minutes and 47 seconds (May 9, 6:05 PM OMSST).

ELEVEN HOURS LATER, JAY CUMMINS emerged from a plain private airplane at a small airport located next to the Vostaach Space Center in central Russia. He was escorted by a man in black to a table at the back of an almost-empty cafe. Although the cafe looked run down, this table had been cleaned and polished so thoroughly it looked brand new.

“Delivering Mr. Cummins into your custody, Empress,” the agent addressed a large cardboard box that was atop the table.

“Thank you, Agent,” Francine replied from behind the box. She transferred it to the floor so she could be seen. “I hope I don’t have to fill out any forms to receive him?”

“No, Empress. Mr. Klaudaine filed the 1115S on your behalf.”

“Ah, good.” She spent a moment studying the agent, an intense-looking young man with swept back brown hair. Behind the intensity she detected sparks of wonder and curiosity, traits she once possessed and treasured. “Tell me your name, Agent,” she asked him, with a trace of a smile.

“Agent Keigh, Empress, Reynard Delano Keigh.”

“And you were assigned this job by Mr. Klaudaine . . .”

“I volunteered, Your Excellency,” Agent Keigh gently interrupted.

“And why did you volunteer?”

“For a chance to get off-world,” he replied, softening. “I’ve always been fascinated by the mysteries of outer space.”

“Ah. Will this be your first time leaving Earth?”

“Yes.”

“The same with me,” said Francine.

Francine noted the other man watching their conversation, which caused her to recall the circumstances that brought her here. Sitting up straight, she addressed the agent with steel in her voice. “Get some seats reserved for us, Agent Keigh,” she said. “I assume The Company has some suitable aliases for us to use on this occasion.” Standing, she picked up the box.

“Your Excellency,” Cummins said, bowing, as the agent walked passed him.

Francine shrugged. “You can call me whatever you want. I don’t care anymore. I’d like to thank you for volunteering to help me save the world, Mr. Cummins. I’m not sure what I would have done if you had refused, as you are essential to my plan. There’s a rocket waiting for us, so we should board immediately. I don’t suppose you’ve ever been exposed to space flight?”

“As a matter of fact, I was chief janitor for Space Dock Centauri in 1984. I’ve been getting in a few flights every five years or so since then.”

“Really?” asked Francine, curious. “I didn’t see any mention of that in your official biography.”

“Well, I didn’t want to brag or anything, so I just grouped it in the ‘odd jobs’ category.”

“A very ‘odd job’, indeed! Well, good, that means you won’t have to take the drug cocktail the casual passengers have to take. It would be a boring trip if my flight companion was semi-conscious the entire time.”

A FEW MINUTES LATER, THE empress and her party boarded the small transport rocket. For once the rocket was nearly full, the majority of passengers being non-essential crew members of Moonbase Alpha that had managed to escape to Earth during the early moments of the Danaan invasion. Francine and the voice actor were sitting in adjoining seats at the back of the passenger compartment. Agent Keigh and the cardboard box took the seats in front of them, and the aisle was fairly wide, allowing the two of them a moderate degree of privacy. From time to time the agent would glance over his shoulder at them.

“You know,” Francine told the agent with a smile, “we’re not going to disappear if you’re not looking at us.”

“Did you . . . um, yes, Empress,” Agent Keigh replied sheepishly, before turning around and grabbing an in-flight magazine to hide behind.

“I . . . I don’t mean to pry,” Cummins said to Francine in a low voice, “but about this mission to stop Harold Largess: could you tell me a bit more about the man? All I’ve ever heard about him was the fact that he runs Orlac’s Machines with his wife, your sister, and that he gives a large percentage of his earnings to various charities.”

Francine Orlac Norton grinned darkly. “Harold tried courting me originally. He switched his attentions to Dinah when he realized I would not allow him to exploit the company to further his own criminal schemes. I didn’t know it then, but Harold was the North American head of T.H.E.M. Perhaps you’ve heard of them, they nearly enslaved the planet a couple of times?”

Cummins nodded, his eyes wide.

“Of course nobody was able to find enough evidence to convict Harold, even after the collapse of T.H.E.M. By this time he had married Dinah, who was fully complicit in his crimes. In fact, I have strong suspicions that the T.H.E.M. agent known as ‘The Grimemaster’ was in fact my sister—she always had a way with *dirt*.” Francine spoke this last word like it was a curse word for her.

“These two now have possession of the unconscious body of the emperor, and are even now in the midst of masquerading this body as a puppet that they control. We must not allow this to happen. The first thing Harold Largess did when he moved to the Moon was order the Research and Development arm of Orlac’s Machines to come up with a way for sharks to swim on the Moon. He keeps a pool full of sharks on the Moon, into which he throws anyone that displeases him. When he runs out of people that displease him, he just chucks somebody at random. Can you imagine what he would do with absolute control of Earth?”

Cummins shook his head, once again stunned into silence.

Francine sighed. “We have a long flight ahead of us, and I’d rather not dwell on such unpleasant subjects. Do you mind if I ask *you* a question?”

“What is it?”

“Where do you get all your voices from? I ask because there was a character you voiced several years ago, Darkwing Duck, with a voice identical to someone I met once.”

“I remember that character,” Cummins answered. “I just . . . invented it. I wasn’t trying to mimic anyone.”

“Are you sure? The match was unmistakable.”

“No, I swear I came up with the voice myself. It’s a funny thing: you’re not the first person to ask me about that sort of coincidence. It seems to be one of the odd quirks of the voice acting business, exactly mimicking people we’ve never met before, and none of us have ever been able to come up with an explanation.”

Jay Cummins was not quite telling the truth with that last statement. It would be more correct to say that there were no *sane* voice actors who had ever come up with an explanation.

Just then a voice came over the intercom. “Ladies and gentlemen,” the voice drawled in an Australian accent. “This is your captain speaking. We have just received clearance to take off, so I will be turning on the seatbelt sign. As soon as the stewardesses have confirmed that everyone is strapped in, we will be ready to begin our flight.”

Cummins chuckled. “Well, I feel a lot better about our trip.”

“Why’s that?” asked Francine.

“You don’t recognize the voice? That’s Alan Carter himself as our pilot!”

“Alan Carter? The name sounds familiar . . .”

“That man is the greatest pilot in the solar system, taught me everything I know about surviving in space.”

“Wait, I remember, he was the third person to set foot on Mars, wasn’t he?”

“That’s right.”

“But that voice . . .”

“Yes, that voice. He always had a flair for the dramatic, Alan had, so he took my advice to take a few side jobs in voiceover work.”

“Ah, of course! He narrated the *Jurassic Park* trailer.”

“And *Free Willy*, *Last Action Hero*, *Stargate*, *Richard III*, and . . .”

“It is morning,” said the voice of Captain Alan Carter over the intercom. “You wake up, you board a shuttle. And although it seems an ordinary day, it isn’t, for one extraordinary reason: you’re going to Moonbase Alpha.” The passengers cheered in response.

“ . . . *Independence Day*. The guy’s a genuine hero, but also a bit of a ham, I’m afraid.”

CAPTAIN CARTER KEPT THE CROWD entertained with stories and jokes about the Moon and lunar exploration (including the old chestnut with the punchline “training: it makes the job look easy”) for the entire trip up to Space Dock Centauri and, after transfer to another ship, for the shorter journey to Moonbase Alpha itself. It was an extraordinary, if unusual, display of stamina. He ended the flight seemingly as energized as he began it,

by switching to an American accent to parody his most famous voice-over line: “I welcome you to the Moon, an adventure 4.5 billion years in the making!”

FRANCINE FORBADE CUMMINS TO TALK with Carter during or after the flight, as the success of her plan depended on speed and a reasonable degree of secrecy. As soon as the door of the shuttle opened, Francine and her party rushed out. They barely noticed ex-Commander Gorski passing them in chains, being escorted into the departing shuttle by two MPs.

Consulting a color-coded map of the uncompleted station, Francine and her companions boarded a travel tube, a squat cylindrical object used to commute between the far-flung sections of Moonbase Alpha, and made their way to Orlac Lunar Hospital. During the trip, Francine could feel occasional vibrations—the effect of ongoing construction in the airless vacuum of the lunar surface. Construction that had been continuing at an advanced pace, because that had been Emperor Norton’s last order before the battle began. The casualty rate among the workers (or, to remove the euphemism, prisoners) must be immense.

Entering the hospital, they bypassed the front desk and entered an elevator. Without hesitation, Francine pushed the button for the fifth floor. “My next-door neighbor is a wiz at the Wired,” she explained to Cummins. “Found out what room Nimnul is being kept in without triggering any alerts. He’s also the one to get me some good screenshots of this baby, so I’d get the paint job right,” she said, patting the box being carried by Agent Keigh.

Exiting the elevator, the group made their way down deserted hallways to Room 586. Francine peered in the door’s window to make sure that the room was occupied, although with the lights turned down it was impossible to be sure by whom. Checking a notepad, she then turned left and led Cummins and Keigh to a storage closet. Giving the box to Francine, Keigh removed a device shaped like a brick and by pointing it at the door and pressing a few buttons, got it to unlock. The three hurried inside.

Putting down the box, Francine opened it to remove a large object that looked like a hairdryer from a 1950’s salon, decorated with any number of wires and microchips. Flicking a switch caused several lights on the device to start flashing slowly, accompanied by a low “woop, woop” sound. Turning back to the box she pulled out a pair of headsets. She examined the pair until she determined which one worked as it was supposed to and gave that set to Cummins, putting on the other set herself. “You will hear everything said within Nimnul’s room, thanks to this,” she said, pointing at the strange helmet. “When I press the talk button on my dummy unit, it will turn on this light on your headset. As long as that light is on, repeat everything I say, but in Nimnul’s voice. I trust you can figure the rest out on your own.”

“What does that thing do, anyway?” asked Cummins.

“You’re looking at everything it does. Other than the microphone and speaker, it’s an empty shell. After all, I only had ten hours and one of my husband’s drawings, and I’m no mad scientist. No, the success of this plan depends on Norton Nimnul, and how well I can trick him into snapping a twig or two.”

“Good luck, Empress,” said Agent Keigh, somewhat mystified.

“Now remember agent, if anything goes wrong, you know what to do.”

The agent pursed his lips and glanced at Cummins, but said nothing.

CARRYING THE HELMET UNDER ONE arm, Francine exited the closet and entered Room 586, then approached the bed. Turning on the light, she saw that the patient was indeed Norton Nimnul. The parts of him that weren't bandaged looked awful. A machine in the corner was attached to him by wires and a thick tube that ended at his mouth. Bellows on the machine inflated and deflated with audible wheezing sounds. Another machine was wired to his chest and by its beeping appeared to control Nimnul's heart. Francine quickly examined the displays on both machines. This done, she carefully lifted up his head and put on the helmet. She started fumbling with the controls of her headset when the door suddenly opened to admit Harold and Dinah Largess, accompanied by two men dressed as orderlies. Their laser rifles belied their dress, however. The group had been summoned by a silent alarm connected to the door.

"A family reunion!" squealed Dinah Largess in a very unpleasant voice, "and you didn't invite us."

"Hello, Dean," hissed Francine, refusing to turn around.

"Don't call me Dean!" barked Dinah. "You never get my name right! Never, never, never!"

"She's just pushing your buttons, babe," soothed Harold, in a voice remarkably like Rob Polson's. Harold was, if possible, even oilier in person than on his ads. "So, what brings you to the Moon on this bright and airless day, a-heh! a-heh! a-heh!" His laugh rivaled Dinah's voice for noxiousness.

Francine finally turned to face her captors. "I came to get you two out of trouble, for once," she said.

"Oh!" exclaimed Harold sarcastically, "*we're* the ones in trouble! However will you save us?"

"You know what?" retorted Francine, "You gloat too much. Every idiot on Earth could tell what you were really up to with the emperor here."

"You know," Dinah said nasally, "my sister's got a point. Even Frankie could figure out our plan."

"Don't call me Frankie!"

"Hah! How's it feel now, with the slipper on the other shoe, huh?"

Francine rolled her eyes. "How you two idiots managed to steal Orlac's Machines from me, I'll never know."

"These 'two idiots', as you so grandoelequan . . . oquen . . . so nicely put it," replied Harold, "stole your company because we were willing to cheat! The only thing that made defeating you a challenge last time was your namby-pamby lawyer boyfriend, and oops, I'm sorry, he's not here for this round!"

"YOU LEAVE DOUGLAS OUT OF THIS!"

"I think you touched a nerve," commented Dinah caustically.

"Well, that piece of paper I bought does say I'm a surgeon," replied Harold. "Ah, dear old Douglas. My sharks were *very* fond of him."

"That was you?" asked Francine in horror, as the emotional wound of losing the love of her life was viciously ripped open again. Her rational mind was nearly overwhelmed with grief and helplessness, but as she had been forced to do so many times before, she

transformed her despair into rage, and then buried that under the cool facade that everyone else thought was the true Francine Nulton. “Un, unfortunately for me, I have no room for sentiment at the present moment,” she said, once again in character.

Harold cast a sideways glance at the orderlies’ rifles. “Indeed.”

Francine looked down at her shoes. “I . . . I burnt too many bridges as Empress. If I had stayed down there while you took over the Emperor, I’d be finished. So I’m throwing in my lot with you two.”

Dinah snorted through her nose, thereby revealing that her laugh was even worse than her husband’s. “That’s rich! Give us one good reason to keep you out of the shark tank!”

“This!” Francine exclaimed, gesturing at the helmet on Nimmul’s head.

“That thing?!” exclaimed Harold. “It looks like the sort of toy I’d give our daughter, if we had a daughter.”

“If we had a daughter, you’d spoil her rotten,” said Dinah. “You’d probably name her something like ‘Shnookums’, or ‘Buffy’.”

“Ah, you know me too well, my little mud pie.”

“Do you want to know what it is, or don’t you?”

“Very well: what is it?”

“It’s a reproduction of the Nimmul Thinkomatic 5000. Copied from a prop on the show, so nobody will suspect Nimmul didn’t build it.”

“What does it do?”

“Watch, or rather, listen!” Francine said, pressing the “talk” button on her dummy headset. “People of Earth,” she said into the microphone in a near-whisper. Her voice was drowned out by the same words emerging from Nimmul’s helmet, in Nimmul’s own voice. “You will each deposit one-tenth of your paychecks each week in the bank account of Mister Harold Largess. Consider it a Largess Tax. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

The perfect Nimmul laugh was the clincher for Harold and Dinah, who rushed over to examine the helmet. “This is perfect!” Harold exclaimed.

“Even better than *your* brilliant plan, O Wise One?” sneered Francine after releasing the button on her controller.

INSIDE THE STORAGE CLOSET, AGENT KEIGH was stewing. “You know,” he told Cummins, “if I didn’t know any better, I’d say that was no act on the Empress’ part!”

“She’s really selling out to the Largesses?” asked Cummins in alarm. “Then that means . . .”

“You’ve got yourself a new job as the emperor’s voice. Permanently.”

DINAH TAPPED A DIRTY FINGERNAIL against once of the lamps on the side of the helmet. “What did this thing do, anyway? On the show, I mean.”

“Oh, it was a thinking cap,” Francine explained. “Nimmul used it to help come up with new inventions. He called it his ‘second brain’.”

Nimmul’s eyes suddenly shot open.

“He shouldn’t be conscious yet!” Harold exclaimed. “Brown, hold him down! Hash, put some more of that knock-out stuff in his veins! Pronto!”

The second orderly addressed put down his rifle and fished a vial and needle from his pocket, then advanced on the bed to join his companion. Just before he inserted the needle, he was stopped by the hand of the patient.

“But that’s impossible!” shrieked Dinah. “Dr. Russell told us he was a vegetable below the neck!”

Meanwhile Francine was frantically ripping sensor wires and equipment off of Nimmul’s body, including the heart and lung machines that should have been keeping him alive.

With a lurch, Nimmul got up off of his bed and threw Brown off of him. “Traitors!” he screamed. “Traitors all of you! When I get my hands on you . . .”

The Largesses and their three toadies made a break for it. “That guy’s not human!” exclaimed a fleeing Brown. “Leave us get out of here!” added Hash.

“Let them run!” exclaimed Francine, stepping in front of an advancing Nimmul. “This is the Moon—where are they going to hide?”

“I suppose you’re right,” said Nimmul, suddenly sagging as the adrenaline wore off. Francine helped him get back into bed. “Thank you for getting my thinking cap to me. How were you able to recreate something so complex?”

“The Internet,” Francine lied.

20. WHERE'S WALDO?

T-27 days, 11 hours, 41 minutes and 52 seconds (09-14 ∇10:03).

“**T**O WHAT DO YOU ASCRIBE your miraculous recovery?” the reporter asked.

“It was certainly no miracle,” the Emperor of Earth replied from his hospital bed. “You hear about injuries similar to mine on my world all the time. The victim partially recovers, but bears some lasting damage for the rest of their lives. Similarly, in my case I was able to recover control over my upper body, but I will never be able to walk again.” Nimmul was calmly sitting up in his bed. His sheets were cluttered with intricately hand-drawn mechanical plans of robots and positronic brains, and a pencil was tucked behind his ear. He was wearing a pair of dark goggles to shield his sensitive eyes, but the parts of him that were visible above the sheets looked completely healed.

“That may be the case on your world, Your Excellency, but wasn't it true that your thoracic spinal cord was severed in four places? I fail to see . . .”

“It was a standard case,” Nimmul stressed, looking with some distress up at Francine, who was standing beside the bed.

“But it was *severed* in . . .”

“The Emperor has answered the question,” Francine sniped, “and no more need be said on the subject.” A couple of attendants took the hint and escorted the complaining reporter out of the room.

“I have something to say before moving on,” Nimmul announced, waiting a few moments until he had regained the attention of everyone in the room. “I have heard enough talk about my ‘miraculous’ recovery and my ‘miraculous’ defeat of the Danaans. Let me make this clear: I am no different than any other ordinary person, and I possess no extra-ordinary powers. From an early age, I was surrounded by those who, by virtue of unfair advantages at birth, claimed the right to be my superior, because they had family fortunes to draw on, or were gifted with the ability to calculate impossible calculations in their head. I was born with none of those, yet I got where I am today because I worked longer and thought harder than any of my rivals at unraveling the secrets of the universe. Those secrets I will continue to use for the benefit of the people of this, my adopted home.”

The people gathered duly applauded at the conclusion of this little speech. Francine responded by shaking her head at the depths of Nimmul's self-deception. While this was happening, a couple men in white pushed a large-screen television on a stand into the room. After plugging in the power, one of the men played with the controls of the television and the equipment sitting in the cart below it for a few minutes. When he stepped away, the face of Commissioner Simmonds beamed on the set. “Emperor!” he cried. “I'm so glad to be seeing you in such excellent health!” A corner of the television image showed the output of the video camera that was mounted on top of the set.

“Really?” Nimmul asked accusingly. “Are you really glad? Your lieutenant, Commander Gorski, did not want to see me in such excellent health! He was paid by Danaan gold to betray me, to betray the entire human race!”

The dignitaries in the room with Nimmul looked away, not wanting to get involved in a possible shouting match. They included veterans and commanders of the recently-concluded war, engineers and scientists and three reporters, who were eagerly transcribing every word. Francine and Reynard Keigh now stood behind the television set, unnoticed. On a table next to them were stacked four videotapes with sarcastic labels that showed they contained every episode of the *Rescue Rangers* show that was ever aired.

After a pause considerably longer than the 2.56 seconds it took for light to make the round trip from the Moon to the Earth, Simmonds responded. “Anton Gorski is currently under maximum security, awaiting his trial for treason in a military court. I assure you that I had no part whatsoever in his actions during the Battle of Clavius.”

Nimmul glared at the image on the screen. “You’re as addicted to money as Gorski,” he accused. “The same corruption of greed that infects the entire World Space Organization, and The Company. You’re not interested in the greater good, only in lining your own pockets! However, I believe in the rule of law, and it’s true that the communications uncovered between the Danaans and Gorski do not involve you. Yet. If you are innocent, you will have to work hard to regain my favor.”

Simmonds paused. “Yes, Your Excellency.”

“Expedite the trial. I will let the general public decide on his punishment. While we are on the subject of crime and punishment, have the Largesses been caught?”

A man in the room spoke up. “Yes, Your Excellency.”

“Good. While I may be angry beyond words with them, I will not be having them executed. In fact, I will even go so far as to completely abolish the death penalty.”

This announcement electrified the reporters.

“Yes, I thought you might like that,” Nimmul said, although he was addressing the inhabitants of his head rather than anyone in the room. “With that business out of the way,” he continued, “I have a rather optimistic announcement to make. The power generators that won us our survival will be going public, and the nuclear waste on the Moon will become a new energy source. I have had the time to finally name the devices: the Nimmul Weak Force Transducer.”

The reporters were beginning to think they might need more paper in their notebooks.

“I’ll get the word out,” replied Simmonds. “There is one final order of business: the matter of appointments. The job of administrator for Nimmul Lunar Hospital was simple enough. Doctor Helena Russell had the best qualifications for the position.”

“Inform her immediately,” Nimmul ordered. “We’ll evaluate her performance in three months.”

“The tougher position to fill is that of Commander of Moonbase Alpha. We currently have . . . ” (the Commissioner looked down at his computer screen) “. . . Paul Morrow as acting Commander, but I think we need someone more prestigious to take over on a long-term basis.”

“Who were you thinking of?” asked Nimmul, his eyes wandering to his plans.

“Actually, I was thinking of naming you to the post,” Simmonds replied. “In your current physical condition, the Moon’s lower gravity would be ideal.”

Nimnul looked up in annoyance. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? Leave me so busy managing construction up here that you have free reign down on Earth. Well, the needs of the Empire outweigh any physical discomfort on my part, and just as soon as I'm strong enough to make the trip, I'm going back down there. Name somebody else."

Simmonds sighed. "Very well. My second choice would be Captain Anthony Cellini. A decorated war hero would do very well for publicity, and given the recent construction mishaps, Moonbase Alpha needs all the publicity it could get."

Francine looked over at Captain Cellini, who was in the room. He looked very uncomfortable. "Do you want the job, Tony?" she asked.

Cellini put a finger under his collar. "If you appoint me, I'll do my duty to the best of my ability," he stammered.

"But you don't think your abilities are best suited to the job of command," she completed his thought.

"I . . . I'm an explorer, Empress. The unknown is where I thrive. People I don't really understand."

"But you commanded men in the field," Simmonds observed, trying to get the camera to pivot far enough so he could see the captain. "You were essential in the recent victory."

"That wasn't really me," Cellini replied, sheepishly. "I worked on strategy, true, but the command, the camaraderie that led to victory, that was the work of Captain Koenig here."

All eyes turned to the man mentioned.

"Do *you* want the job, then?" asked Simmonds.

"Ah, well, that is . . . if, if you will have me," Koenig answered.

"Fine with me," remarked Nimnul, who was already working on another diagram.

The sounds of keys being tapped came up from the television screen, as Commissioner Simmonds reviewed Koenig's file. "Yes, this is acceptable. John Koenig, I hereby appoint you Commander of Moonbase Alpha, effective immediately. The requisite paperwork will arrive via the next Earth-to-Moon shuttle. Please get it back to me promptly."

"Yes, sir."

"This concludes our business today, Emperor."

The people in the room turned to congratulate the new commander, as the image on the screen went black.

MOST OF THE GROUP LEFT then. Nimnul reached over to a side table that was covered with videotapes and picked one up labeled "The Underwater Menace".

"Could somebody get this into the VCR? I left off on Chapter 3."

Keigh stepped forward and put the cassette into the machine that was under the television. The image on the screen changed to a monochrome scene of humanoid creatures swimming underwater. Nimnul picked up a remote control and pointed it at the machine, pressing a button to cause the scene to fast-forward to the next scene, which showed a wild man in a surgeon's smock and a theatrical black cape. Facing him was a young man wearing a black wetsuit, but the scientist was addressing someone off-screen.

"I underrated you, Doctor," the man on the screen said in a German accent. "I hardly imagined you'd have the nerve to kidnap Zaroff himself!" Professor Zaroff laughed evilly. Like many mad scientists, he had a habit of referring to himself in the third person.

Nimnul smiled. "I love *Doctor Who*," he confessed. "That show always had the best villains. On my world, most of the early episodes were erased by those idiots at the BBC, but here, I can watch every serial!"

"I'm sorry to interrupt," said Professor Bergman, one of the scientists who remained.

"What is it?" scowled Nimnul.

"It's the matter of the Danaan's records. The ones we were able to recover from their mothership."

"Yes?"

"We've discovered the key to decoding their written language, with the help of one of the patients, a Miss Laurel Weir."

"Miss Weir?" Nimnul asked in surprise. He saw her standing at the doorway and beckoned her forward. She was wearing a cast around her right arm. She was wearing street clothes (including the obligatory long-sleeved blouse to cover her left arm to the wrist) and had a suitcase at her feet.

"Yes, Emperor?" she asked, walking up to him.

"I didn't know you had a talent for languages."

"Neither did I," she confessed. "Funny what amnesia can hide from you, isn't it?"

Examining her critically, he reached forward and plucked a small object off of her sleeve. "What is this?" he asked.

"Oh, that's a wood shaving. I must have missed it when I cleaned up after Sparky."

"Sparky?"

"Yes. That's . . . that was David's pet mouse. You remember, the one I found in his glove?"

"He kept a vermin, as a pet?" he asked, dangerously. "The man must have been deranged. Perhaps it is best that he didn't survive. If you wish to remain my assistant, you will space that animal immediately!"

"I can't believe you, Emperor! David saved my life. I think the least I can do to repay him is to take care of his pet."

"Get out of my sight!" Nimnul ordered. "I never want to see you again!"

"Fine! Consider me walking out that door as my resignation from your service!" She picked up the bag, and a small wooden box that was next to it. Small scratching noises could be heard from inside it. She was followed by Francine, who gave Nimnul a dirty look before leaving.

"As I suspected," said Nimnul, reviewing the pages which Professor Bergman had handed him, "this is just the opportunity I was waiting for. I want you to put all your men to work on decoding the rest of those alien texts, immediately! Soon, we will be able to proceed to the next stage of my master plan." He handed back the pages. "Take good care of these translations, translations which were made *by nobody*." He looked around the room at all the people that were milling about. "Well, you have your assignments, now get out of my room! All but you, Agent Keigh."

The scientists and reporters rushed out of the hospital room. Nimnul picked up a comlink and pressed a button, causing the door to close itself. "I'm getting tired of remotes," he muttered. "What's taking those engineers so long?"

Keigh had the distinct feeling that the eccentric emperor had forgotten him, so he picked up the stack of *Rescue Rangers* videotapes, cleared his throat, and stepped in front of the television. "Did you want me for something?" he asked.

"Yes. First of all, I've been told you had a major part in saving my life. For that you have my gratitude. I can grant you anything in my power."

"Well, it's not precisely in your power, but I'd appreciate a recommendation to the Company—I'd really like to stay on the Moon."

"You actually *like* this place? I admit, the fact that the inhabitants of Moon Base Alpha are 100 % human is comforting, but I feel too constricted here. Everything is preplanned. No surplus parts to play with. But I can understand that you might see things differently. I'll do what I can for you.

"With that settled, there is another thing I need you to do for me."

"What is it?" the agent asked.

"I need you to go upstairs to Harold Largess' room and search it again. You need to find proof that the man was a fanatical *Rescue Rangers* fan, that he was impelled by that fanaticism to attempt my assassination."

"I was already in charge of the investigation, Your Excellency, and we found no such evidence. By all accounts, Harold Largess was a megalomaniac, pure and simple. He was motivated by no cause greater than himself."

"Then you weren't looking hard enough," said Nimnul carefully. "Go back there and find me the proof I need." Nimnul reached forward and took one of the videotapes Agent Keigh was holding. "In fact, how about you find me *this* in Harold Largess' bedroom. You obviously forgot to press the 'Eject' button on his VCR."

"Are you asking me . . ."

"Don't *ask me* what I am asking you to do. Just *do it. Now.* And don't try anything funny, because I have my ways of watching you. Now give me these other tapes—I'll need something to watch when *Doctor Who* is done, and I need to become better acquainted with my true enemies. No wait, hold it, this is my favorite scene!"

ON THE SCREEN, THE KING of Atlantis was addressing Professor Zaroff, who was accompanied by a pair of henchmen. Zaroff's cape concealed his right arm. "Zaroff!" the king complained. "You are subject to me in all matters. I will not have my people . . ."

"Your people?" Zaroff interrupted incredulously. "Your people? They are *my* people now! I hold their entire world in my power."

The king was shocked. "The Doctor was right about you. I order your project stopped at this moment. Guards! Take Zaroff to the temple and hold him there."

"You're a fool! You're a fool! I'll send you to your beloved goddess Amdo to discuss the future of the universe with her."

"I demand that you . . ."

"You demand?" asked Zaroff, laughing. "You demand? Well since your . . . since your beloved goddess has developed such an *enchanting* appetite for people, it is only

fitting that the great Thous should offer himself. No. No, *I* shall offer him.” He pulled the cloak off of his right arm to reveal that he was holding a pistol. He fired at King Thous, point-blank. The king fell.

“Kill those two men,” Professor Zaroff ordered. Two shots were heard off-screen. To the audience he victoriously screamed, “NOTHING IN THE WORLD CAN STOP ME NOW!” Roll credits and the familiar *Doctor Who* theme music.

AGENT KEIGH STEPPED OUT OF the hospital room and into the corridor, passing a group of engineers who were pushing a large metallic . . . something down the corridor. Curiously, it looked like it could be a prop from *Doctor Who*.

Keigh looked accusingly over his left shoulder at the invisible *somebody* that he now realized had been watching his every move for the last twenty-four hours.

FRANCINE GOT DELAYED IN THE elevator, and was unable to find Miss Weir when she reached the ground level. Then she tried to think if there was anywhere on the base the woman might want to visit before returning to Earth.

As she suspected, Francine found Miss Weir at the observatory, looking through the lens on the visitor's telescope. A small monitor showed the object of her observations: the gray globe of Earth. “Laurel . . .” she said.

“So are you going to fire me, too?” Miss Weir asked without looking up.

“I would never do something like that,” Francine told her. “There's plenty you can do that does not involve the emperor ‘seeing’ you.”

“Thanks, boss,” Miss Weir said, facing her. “This war has changed him for the worse. As for me, I'm taking the next shuttle back to Earth. There's nothing for me here.”

“I'll join you. We just need to make one more stop, first.”

“IT'S A FAR-SIDE MOON ROCK. Do you know how much those are worth? I can get it past Customs and straight to your desk in less than 48 hours. It even glows in the dark, thanks to a completely safe level of residual radiation from the nuclear containment facility. Surely that would . . . no, no I suppose that has nothing to do with lifesaving. Yes, yes, I understand. I will repay this debt, Miss Maughlarde, mark my words!”

Klaudaine hung up the pay phone and then walked away, leaving a glowing rock behind. A few minutes later, Francine and Miss Weir passed the phone from the opposite direction. After walking a few steps past it, Francine doubled back and pocketed the Moon rock. “‘Impulse purchase’,” she explained with a shrug.

The main branch of Moonbase Alpha's circulating library was located between the travel tube entrance that led to the shuttle launching bay and the local branch of the Seymour Travel chain. Once inside, the reference desk was right in front. Behind it was a bookshelf that went up at least twenty feet. The left side was labeled “Robert A. Heinlein” and the right side was labeled “Reference.” Manning the reference desk was a young woman with a dome of brown hair; her green eyes were behind a large round pair of spectacles that were perched on her nose. She was wearing a green turtleneck sweater,

and Francine noticed she was in a mechanized wheelchair. "Can I help you?" the librarian asked.

"Yes, I have a question," said Laurel before Francine had a chance to open her mouth. "Do you know if the Earth was always covered with clouds?"

"Oh, it was not always that way," the librarian responded. "I have plenty of old books describing 'sunny days' and 'starry nights' on Earth in between the expected cloudy, rainy and snowy periods."

"Well, what happened?" asked Laurel.

"Nobody's really sure. It started fifty years ago, at the end of the First Interplanetary War, so the general opinion is that the Fomorianians are to blame, but nobody has been able to determine the exact mechanism, or a way to reverse the effect."

"Oh," said Laurel, disappointed. She turned to Francine. "Did you have a question?"

"Yes," said Francine, stepping forward. "I need to track down a reference to a fictional character or historical personage named 'Waldo'. I'm not sure which."

"Well," the librarian replied, "the *Where's Waldo?* series can be found in the children's section. It's to the left through that archway."

"Care to fill me in on this?" Miss Weir asked Francine.

"Probably nothing," Francine answered. To the librarian, she said, "No, I don't think that was it. When was that series started?"

"Around 1990, I think," answered the librarian, adjusting her spectacles as she thought.

"Then that won't do," said Francine. "This reference would have come from the 1960's."

"Well, there's the short story 'Waldo,' written in 1950."

"Could you describe the main character?" Francine asked.

The librarian smiled. "I can do better than that," she said. Working the control on her wheelchair, she pivoted around to face the left-side bookshelf behind her. A button caused her chair to lift upwards, pushed by a scissor-lift system. She plucked a paperback book from the shelf, then lowered herself, turned and handed the book to Francine.

"That's quite some chair you've got there," said a wondering Miss Weir.

"Yes," the librarian replied, blushing. "I designed it myself."

"By the way, why do you have such a big section devoted to one author?"

"Most of that is just one book. *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* is very popular with us Loonies," the librarian explained.

"Let's hope it doesn't give Nimnul any ideas," Miss Weir warned.

"I doubt it," the librarian laughed, misunderstanding her. "The book is very anti-authoritarian."

"That's exactly what I mean," said Miss Weir.

The battered and much-read book in Francine's hands was *Waldo & Magic, Inc.*, by Robert A. Heinlein. The cover depicted a man in a spaceship standing before a window. Outside the window floated the Earth in space. The man was fat and bald, and probably short, with electronic gadgetry covering his outstretched arm and hand. He was looking over his shoulder at the reader with an annoyed expression.

"Yes," said Francine triumphantly. "This is what I was looking for. Could I borrow this for the trip to Earth?"

“Of course,” replied the librarian. “We have an arrangement with Vostaach for just this situation.”

“Very well. Thank you very much.”

Francine turned to go, but was stopped by Miss Weir. “Don’t you have to get a library card or something?” the pilot asked.

“She’s the Empress of Earth,” remarked the librarian. “I trust her not to lose a book.” Francine laughed, and the two walked out of the library.

AS THEY EXITED THE TRAVEL tube, Francine spotted Emperor Norton waiting. She gave the book to Miss Weir and signaled her to remain out of sight, then stepped out to confront him.

Nimnul’s lower torso and legs were encased in a white plastic box covered with electronics. Working some controls, Nimnul caused the box to levitate and take him to intercept the approaching empress. His eyes were still obscured by the goggles.

“You didn’t tell me you were leaving today,” Nimnul told her. “No matter. I would have asked you to meet me here in any case. I have something to show you.” He led her to the door of the shuttle and beckoned her to look inside.

The shuttle was full of children aged from thirteen to seventeen. All of them were wearing the orange jumpsuit of lunar prisoners. The girl in front looked at Francine beseechingly. The name on her jumpsuit was “A. WENTWORTH”.

“Wh . . . what have they done?” Francine asked in shock, clutching desperately at the rail of the shuttle door’s stairway.

“Don’t you recognize them?” asked Nimnul ominously, floating beside her. “These are the *Rescue Ranger* fans you saw fit to remove from the list I sent you. Let this be your one and only warning: obey my orders in future, or you shall be joining these brats in eternal servitude! *Shut up, Gadget! Shut up, all of you!*” Clutching one hand to his head in pain, he shoved the control on his hover unit with the other, causing it to rapidly leave the scene. This was the cue for several armed guards to climb the stairs, shoving her aside to remove the prisoners.

It was at that moment that a fundamental discovery was made.

“*I miss Norris,*” Francine Nulton whispered to herself.

21. BAD MOON RISING

T-27 days, 22 hours, 13 minutes and 47 seconds (09-14 ∇11:32).

ONCE THE SHUTTLE HAD LEFT the Moon, Francine opened *Waldo & Magic, Inc.* and began reading. “Waldo” began with a man demonstrating impossible feats of physical agility and strength. A reporter asked him, why did he choose dancing as a career?

MEANWHILE, EVENTS WERE TRANSPIRING THAT Francine and Miss Weir knew nothing about:

IMPERIAL LAW 567423

The animated television program known as *The Rescue Rangers* has been found to be treasonous to the Emperor. Henceforth, all individuals associated with the creation of this program are to be shipped to the Moon, where they will spend the remainder of their lives serving the State.

IN THE ALTERNATE FUTURE DESCRIBED in “Waldo”, all power was transmitted through the air in the form of high-energy radiation, replacing electrical lines and gasoline engines alike. This radiation had unknown effects on the human body, but the benefit was thought worth the possible risk, until the power receptors of North American Power-Air, or NAPA, started failing, and planes started falling out of the sky. Neither the Chief Scientist, Doctor Rambeau, nor the chief engineer, Stevens, could find the cause of the problem, since the deKalb receptors were supposed to be infallible, and had been manufactured correctly. Because of the strong dependency on radiant power transmission, the spreading failures threatened to topple the whole of civilization. The company had no choice but send Stevens to beg for the help of the man their lawyers had stolen millions from in the form of forged patents: Waldo Farthingwaite-Jones.

The same penalty of perpetual servitude applies to all individuals who are members of groups that promote *The Rescue Rangers*, or who are found to possess videos or memorabilia associated with this program. A reward of Ten Thousand American Dollars will be given to anyone that assists in the detection and apprehension of these traitors.

WALDO HAD BEEN BORN WITH myasthenia gravis. In fighting his physical weakness he had developed his intellect to genius levels, and the inventions that he had created to live like a human being had revolutionized the world. He had been living in a permanently weightless space station for the past seventeen years, nursing his grudges with humanity, which he considered his inferiors. His primary means of interacting with the world was a series of scaling manipulators controlled by the hands. The public called them “waldoes” in his honor.

The words “Rescue” and “Ranger” are no longer to be used in the same sentence, other than in the context of discussing this law or attacking the program. Violation will be punished with a fine of One Thousand American Dollars for each occurrence. Any organizations that might use these words and are not associated with the treasonous television program will have to change their name immediately, at their own expense.

Finally, the same penalty applies to the use of any of the following words when used as names: “Chip”, “Dale”, “Gadget”, “Monterey Jack” (or “Monty”), “Zipper”, . . .

STEVENS REALIZED THAT THE ONLY way Waldo would let him set foot on his station, Freehold (called “Wheelchair” by the public), would be in the company of the closest thing the genius had to a friend, Doctor Gaines. Gaines had been the family physician when Waldo was born. He was also one of the few men to believe that radiant power had been slowly sapping the physical strength of the human race over the years. In a few years, he predicted that the whole of humanity would be as weak as Waldo. With Gaines’ help, Waldo was finally convinced to help NAPA. Gaines also challenged Waldo to come up with a solution to the problem that involved an end to radiant power.

An Open Letter to the Emperor

June 1st

To Professor Norton Nimmul,

The World Space Commission and the government agency popularly known as “The Company” would like to congratulate you on your successful work in liberating the planet Earth from control of the Danaan race. We will forever be in your debt.

WHILE STEVENS WAS GROVELING BEFORE Waldo, his assistant McLeod had been investigating one of the airplane crashes when his personal skycar failed as well. He found himself in the Amish country of Pennsylvania, the place he had grown up. While waiting for help to transport the failed skycar back to headquarters, McLeod bumped into Grandpa Schneider, an impossibly old hex doctor. Bored, he told his problems to the man, and Grandpa Schneider fixed the deKalb receptor by means of chalk lines and an

incantation. Not only did this fix the device, but as a result the antennae of the receptor were now alive, flexing and writhing. He brought the skycar back to headquarters.

However, with that crisis resolved, we humbly request that you relinquish your powers and duties as Emperor of Earth to the civil governments. In return, we are prepared to provide you with generous living conditions, and enough money so that you never have to lift a finger for the rest of your life.

Please return your answer in the next twenty-four hours.

Sincerely,

The World Space Commission, Geneva, Switzerland

The Company, Washington, D.C.

IF STEVENS WAS DISCONCERTED BY the change to the receptor, the chief scientist, Dr. Rambeau, was driven insane. Rambeau called Waldo with the revelation that that he had reproduced Grandpa Schneider's results, proving that nothing was certain anymore. He then demonstrated this by cutting his finger without bleeding and causing the knife to defy gravity. "Chaos is King," Rambeau cried, "and Magic is loose in the world!" Francine gasped in shock at this passage.

NBS News Bureau

This is the six o'clock news for Tuesday, June 2nd.

Our top story: the cities of Washington, D.C., and Geneva, Switzerland were destroyed today. The former city was crushed by an enormous silver dollar, approximately three hundred million tons in weight, while the latter was crushed by a similarly sized gold euro. Both objects were launched from the Moon. Thanks to early warning by Emperor Norton, there were no casualties.

These two cities were the headquarters of the two most influential organizations on Earth, and both of them had sent an open letter to the Emperor yesterday asking him to resign his post. When asked for comment, the World Space Commission had no comment. Members of The Company could not be found for comment. In fact, it appears that the organization has completely ceased to exist.

All praise Norton II, Emperor of Earth and Protector of the Moon!

Phantoma. It's the hottest new videogame out of Japan, but could it be dangerous? Find out, after the break.

FRANCINE CONTINUED FRANTICALLY READING, HER mood mirroring Waldo's desperation in the story. Waldo was forced to return to the Earth and the crushing forces of its gravity to learn Grandpa Schneider's secrets. He then studied every book on magic that he could find, striving to extract the scientific truths hidden inside about the Other

World, the world of magic and infinite possibilities, which Schneider spoke of. Waldo surmised this Other World to be a parallel universe operating on different physical laws than our own, and apparently full of energy, which the modified receivers were using instead of radiant energy. It was the solution to the crisis, the solution to Mankind's energy needs forever, and potentially the end of NAPA, if they weren't willing to pay though the nose to Waldo. The crisis itself was proof of the existence of magic on a mass scale: the depression which was a side effect of radiant energy on the human brain had caused a global loss of faith in humanity, and it was therefore the gloom of the pilots themselves that had caused their planes to drop out of the sky.

Waldo eventually realized that if the modified deKalbs could pull energy from the Other World, then so could he, and he could use this energy to finally free himself of his debilitating illness. Losing his disability caused him to shed his contempt and hatred of humanity. And it was he who was demonstrating unbelievable feats of physical agility at the start of the book.

Excerpt from The Company's Report on Norton Nimmul:

. . . These objects were fashioned from no observable source, killed no one, and succeeded in destroying the cities without causing any additional damage to the surrounding area. The silver dollar contained as much silver as all the silver that has ever been mined on Earth, and the gold euro contained twice as much gold as has ever existed.

All of these events are impossibilities.

We are led to the inescapable conclusion that Norton Nimmul is no mere scientific genius, and is rather some sort of god.

We recommend The Company go underground until such time as this being's weaknesses, if any, can be determined.

22. VICTORY SPEECH

T-18 days, 0 hours, 57 minutes and 2 seconds (May 25, 8:03 PM PDT).

IN HONOR OF HIS DEFEAT of the Danaans, Emperor Norton was putting on the biggest party in the history of the world.

No man-made structure was big enough to contain it, so Crater Lake in Oregon was drained at enormous expense and converted into suitable standing room.

After raucous musical concerts given over the course of several days, Emperor Norton finally emerged, to a deafening ovation that lasted twenty-six minutes. Many of the celebrants' hands were bleeding by the time they were finished clapping. They had waited so long to glimpse the one man capable of lifting their spirits and dispelling their permanent state of depression. What they saw was a small man floating in mid air, his eyes encased in a visor and his lower half encased in a gleaming titanium shell that tapered to a point. The upper part of this shell was shaped into a thick ring. Although this certainly wasn't the effect he intended, Norton Nimmul rather resembled an acorn.

"People of the world!" Nimmul cried, his voice carried across the lakebed and to every television and radio in the world. "I greet you tonight as a planet of free people!"

Another ovation, even louder than the first, although thankfully much shorter in duration.

"I, Emperor Norton, have organized the immense effort and requested the immense sacrifice needed to do this! But this is not all I have done. I have solved your energy problems, eliminated starvation with super grains and wiped out disease with nano machines. I have found ways to ease the pains of the elderly with automatic nurses and banish the boredom of the youth with games that are not only entertaining, but educational as well!

"You might think my work here is done. But it is not."

The hundreds of screens mounted around and throughout the lakebed came to life at this point, and began displaying a diagram of the Milky Way galaxy.

"You see before you a video made by the Danaans to train their new recruits. It explains the great mystery of why Earth has been targeted for destruction so many times. See this narrow cloud that remains stationary as the galaxy rotates through it? This band is considered holy ground, forbidden territory by the space-faring races of the galaxy. The origin of this absurd superstition is lost to the dim pre-history of the eldest of these races, but yet they still obey the one unwavering rule: no living creatures are allowed to exist in this cloud. See how these other systems have been targeted!"

The video showed solar system after solar system edging into the cloud as it was dragged by the rotation of the galaxy, only for armadas of spacecraft to arrive each time to blast the life-bearing planets to oblivion or bathe them in sterilizing rays.

“For more than a million years, entering that cloud has been a death sentence. Our Solar System entered that cloud in 1906. History records what followed.”

The screens now showed photos of the aftermath of the Tunguska Explosion of 1908, which the Soviet Union had later revealed was the crash-landing of an alien scout ship. This was followed by black and white footage that was part of the childhood education of everyone watching: the Fomorian Invasion of America and then the world, 1938 - 45, the film showing the petrification rays sweeping out from the triangular spacecraft. There was some footage of the failed Firbolg invasion of Brazil in 1967, and finally the just-concluded Danaan invasion and the Battle of Clavius.

“We have been extraordinarily lucky,” said Nimmul, “because the Galaxy has been embroiled in an immense and multi-sided civil war for the last five thousand years, and only splinter groups of each race have been fanatical enough to sacrifice the possible existence of their own race to attack us. This luck cannot last.

“Therefore, I am preparing the world for a preemptive strike. I have already mastered their technology. Within a year, we will have our first faster-than-light warship. We can build a mighty armada, step out boldly onto the galactic stage, and claim our rightful place. More than our rightful place—for our pains, we demand compensation!

“We demand worlds to settle on. We demand that the species that tried to conquer us must be our slaves! Under my leadership, the Terran Empire will be the greatest empire in the history of the Universe! Are you with me? Do you believe in a future of greatness?”

From thousands of speakers, the syllable “*NIM*” was intoned in a deep mechanical voice.

The voices of Earth responded: “*NUL!*”

“*NIM!*”

“*NUL!*”

“*NIM!*”

“*NUL!*”

NORTON NIMNUL, THE MAN WHO had been expelled from MIT for the contents of his doctoral dissertation, the man who had had such dark thoughts the night before Aldrin Klordane had recruited him, the man who was now absolute ruler of the planet, gazed out at the tens of millions of adoring followers, and through the television cameras at hundreds of millions more. It was the greatest moment in his life.

In the corner of his eye he saw Francine, standing in the wings. She alone, alone in the whole world, was not cheering for him. Her arms were crossed and she had a look of contempt in her face. It was the same look on the faces of the Rescue Rangers in his head.

Suddenly, none of the adulation mattered. The only person he wanted to respect him was her.

She turned and strode away, and he raced after her, leaving the crowd in the lurch.

BACKSTAGE, NIMNUL CAUGHT UP TO Francine and turned her to face him. “What is with you?” he demanded.

“Are you proud of yourself?” she asked him, calmly.

“Yes!” he shouted. “I think I have very good reason to be proud. I have . . .”

“You have finally proved that you are not a failure,” Francine stated firmly. “You. Nobody else. And that is all you have ever tried to do. Yet you still insist on living this lie.”

“Lie? This is no lie! What are you talking about?”

“Your grand imposture. Your insistence that you are Norton Nimmul.”

“I AM NORTON NIMNUL!” he shouted in her face.

She stood her ground, continuing to stare at him until he faltered. “You are *not* Norton Nimmul,” she repeated firmly. “You are Norris Nulton. You were born in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, on October 2nd of 1950. Your father left your family before you were born, and your mother got so tired of tending to your childhood illnesses that she wished you would just give up and die.”

“I am . . .” Nimmul began, feebly.

Francine continued on. “You were one of the most-respected science fiction illustrators in the industry, and your prop designs for the cartoons of Rockwell Studio are the only redeeming factors of the vast majority of garbage they produced.

“Norton Nimmul on the other hand is a sick joke, created out of jealousy by a bitter parody of a studio producer that never understood why you were wasting your talents on his studio.

“You have to let go of him now, Norris,” Francine said, pleading, taking his hand in her own. “Nimmul was a millstone around your neck, like the failure of the Alien Detector. But you have redeemed yourself. You have saved humanity from destruction, and brought the world into a new Golden Age. Let go of Norton Nimmul. Let him go so I can have my husband back.”

The man before her reared back his head and screamed at the top of his lungs. “WHAT DO I HAVE TO DO TO CONVINCING YOU, WOMAN?! Norris Nulton is gone, dumped into a dead-end waste of a universe! I am Norton Nimmul! *I am Norton Nimmul!* I have created wonders the world has never known! I have slain the mighty dragon that has kidnapped the fair princess! What more could I possibly do to convince you?”

Francine’s brow furled in confusion. “And *how* did you get here again, Mister so-called Nimmul?”

“I used a machine! A machine to switch my mind with my counterpart’s in this universe! The mechanism is absurdly simple!”

“Sure it is,” Francine said, turning and walking away.

Nimmul’s pod raced in front of her. “I’m not finished! I . . . I could re-build it. Use it on someone. *Then* would you be convinced?”

Francine still remained skeptical. “*Who* would you switch?”

“I could switch anyone in the world! I could switch you!”

Francine inspected her nails. “Yes, I suppose you could. Replace me with some witch who rides a canister vacuum. But why do that, when you could do something *really* satisfying?”

“What do you mean?”

“The Rescue Rangers. You may have defeated them by coming here and winning the world, but do they know that? Or do they mistake Norris for you? Just think of that weak milksop of a man sobbing in a corner—the Rangers think that *he* is *you*.”

“No, they can’t think that!” Nimmul retorted. “I’m the great Professor Nimmul! I have never admitted weakness!”

“Norris admits weakness,” Francine sneered. “He proclaims it from the rooftops. It is why I despise him.”

“Wait . . . no. I can’t. Bring my worst enemies here? Ridiculous!”

“They will be completely in your power. You have all of humanity behind you, and no animal has the intellect to help them—pure black and white. I mean, what could they do?”

“Well . . .”

“Not to mention, if you have the Rangers in your possession, you can reverse the Modemizer mishap. Those dissenting voices in your head will be gone!”

“But it’s impossible. To get the Rangers using the Switcher, I would have to use the Rangers’ counterparts in this world—wild animals! How can I possibly tell which vermin correspond to the Rangers?”

“You forget,” Francine said, tapping the side of Nimmul’s head, “a bit of the Rangers are *in there*. Rig up some sort of tracking device to find the matches to the parts of you that are not really part of you!”

“Yes! Yes, that could work! I’ll rebuild the Dimensional Switcher! I’ll swap the Rescue Rangers, and then you’ll *have* to believe me!”

Nimmul turned and headed back to the crowd.

“Yes,” said Francine, smiling darkly, “then I’ll have to believe you.”

23. SUBSTITUTION

T-0 days, 0 hours, 37 minutes and 0 seconds (June 12, 11:23 PM EDT).

IT WAS NEARING MIDNIGHT on the evening of Friday, June 12th. In homes across America, high school students were winding down from their graduation ceremonies and parties.

Miss Weir often wondered what her high school graduation was like. She wondered if she ever dated somebody like Lou, because they seemed to act like friendly exes whenever they got together.

Miss Weir closed her eyes and guessed. “So, is it a super-weapon for destroying an entire planet with just one shot?”

Lou smiled. “No, but I saw the movie.”

Lou was standing outside the double doors of a bunker less than a mile from Gogol mansion that led deep underground. The bunker had been excavated within the last week from an abandoned bat cave that was said by the locals to be an entrance to the Underworld. Two guards had stood at the door ever since, refusing entry to any “unauthorized personnel.” And Laurel Weir was near the top of the unauthorized personnel list.

Lou was currently alone, as the call of Nature had temporarily claimed Bud. This was Miss Weir’s best chance of getting inside.

“Aw, come on, you can tell me. We’re friends, remember?”

“Well, yeah,” Lou replied, “but . . . *it’s a secret!* I could get in an awful lot of trouble!”

“And who do you think can keep a secret better than me? You know, I still haven’t told anyone about that, ahem, questionable collection of you-know-what fan pictures you keep on your computer.”

“Shhh . . . not even Bud knows I collect *Harvey the Wonder Hamster*, and he knows stuff I never knew I knew!”

“Exactly my point. I’m good at keeping quiet, so you can tell me what Nimnul is up to without having to worry about him tracing any leaks to you! Plus, if you let me see, I’ll take you up with me the next time I get access to the company jet.”

“I’ve always wanted to fly. What does it look like above the clouds?”

“More beautiful than anything on this gray earth. What do you say?”

Lou appeared to be deep in thought. It looked painful. “Alright,” he said finally, “I’ll tell you.”

“Tell her what?” asked Bud, who had just turned the corner.

Lou nearly jumped out of his pants. “B . . . b . . . bud! What a pleasant surprise!”

Bud got in Lou’s face. “Alright, out with it, squirt. What were you going to *tell* her?”

“I was just telling her . . . just telling her . . . my recipe for almond cookies!”
Bud looked hurt. “You never told *me* your recipe for almond cookies!”
Lou was now doubly on the spot, as he didn’t have a recipe for almond cookies.

JUST THEN, THE DOORS BURST open and Francine emerged. She was wearing a white lab coat with welder’s goggles matching Nimnul’s perched on her forehead. She bounced off of Bud and landed on Lou before righting herself. “Boys!” she cried jovially. “I need you to take me to a pilot! Immediately!”

Bud smiled. “How much will you pay me for even faster than immediately?”

“One hundred dollars!” Francine proclaimed.

“Done!” Bud cried, shaking Francine by the hand. He then stepped aside to reveal Miss Weir.

“I just stepped right into that one, didn’t I?” laughed Francine.

“Sorry Boss, I’m afraid you did. But I was here the whole time, so I don’t think Bud deserves that money.”

“Nonsense!” insisted Francine. “A deal’s a deal!” She reached into a pocket of the lab coat, extracted a hundred dollar bill, and slapped it into Bud’s outstretched hand.

As she and Miss Weir walked towards the helicopter, Francine told her, “You don’t know how badly these two are paid, especially with all of the infractions on their record. They earned that money. Come on, we need to be in the air an hour ago.”

“So, where are we going?” Miss Weir asked as they climbed into the aircraft.

“Hartford. I need to borrow something from the neighbors.”

“The Empress needing to borrow something from the neighbors. This I’ve got to see!” said Miss Weir as she buckled her safety belt.

THE COPTER SET DOWN IN the middle of the court, facing the Nulton house. “Keep the engine running!” Francine shouted from the open door. “This won’t be a second!”

She ducked under the blades and ran to the door of the d’Foote home, a wooden box under one arm. After several poundings at the door, the lights in the windows went on and she was let in by a groggy Herbert, Sr.

Miss Weir noted that the time was 12:04 am.

At 12:07, Francine came running out at top speed, with Herbert, Jr., and his entire family at her heels. “Go, go, go, go, go!” she shouted as soon as she had set foot inside the copter.

The helicopter lifted up in to the air. Francine looked down at the family, who were shouting and cursing at her. She turned to a questioning Miss Weir and declared, “At some point in life you get to the age when explaining yourself is a big fat waste of time. You just do what needs to be done, and deal with the consequences later.”

Once the helicopter was in the air and headed back towards Gogol, Miss Weir cast a glance at her employer and at her box, which was jerking randomly around in her arms. “I take it they weren’t too happy with your request?” she smirked.

Francine smiled. “Well, if I weren’t the Empress, you would have been accessory to a theft just now.”

“Why’d you take it, anyway?”

“If I were to waste my time being defensive, I’d say that the d’Footes had no right to this animal. It’s on the endangered species list. It needs to be in a zoo, or in a habitat among its own kind. Since I’m not being defensive, I had a need for this particular bat, at this particular time.”

“And what’s this have to do with whatever Nimmul’s up to in that bunker?”

“It’s the cherry atop the Nimmul sundae. Or completely unnecessary. Not sure which. Do you mind if I call you ‘Insurance’, bat?” It was entirely possible that Francine was drunk.

Miss Weir smiled. “You’re trying to make Nimmul shoot himself in the foot, aren’t you?”

Francine sprouted an identical smile. “And it’s not a crime if I’m the one selling him the bullets.”

“Of course not. It’s his fault if he doesn’t read the friggin’ manual.”

The laugh left Francine’s face. “But that’s the problem,” she told Miss Weir. “Norton Nimmul’s the only person in the whole world with the manual, and he’s reading it upside down!”

“Isn’t that worse for him than not reading it at all?”

“Precisely, my dear Laurel, precisely! I *know* . . . I know a little now. Enough to be dangerous, I thought. Enough to take him on, I thought.” Francine pulled her legs up on the seat so she was facing Laurel. “Do you know I spent seven hours in the ‘Thirteenth Room’ yesterday?” she confided. “Just me, the Book of Asteroth, and an old chair. Chipendale, I realized after the fact. Kinda appropriate, don’t you think? Seven hours of Substitutiary Locomotion until my throat was sore. And the chair refused to budge! Refused! How dare it? Doesn’t it know who’s its master?”

Miss Weir tried to avoid eye contact. She remembered the week she was hired by Francine, there was a vast bonfire in the backyard. Hundreds of old books and parchments burning in strange colors with loud popping noises that kept her up all night. A departing servant warned her to beware of the evils of witchcraft. At the time, she had dismissed this as the ravings of an overworked mind. “Um . . . Boss?” she asked cautiously.

“It was never the books. All this time, all that money, all those charlatans, and it was never the books or the spells. It was me, Laurel, me all the time! *I’m* the reason my life has gone so badly, and no spell in the world will ever make things right until I truly *want* it to go right. Right . . . should have taken that right turn at Albuquerque.”

“Boss, how long has it been since you slept last?”

“No time, no time! The clocks will not stop when you bop them on the snoot! Wait, that didn’t rhyme!”

“You really should get some sleep.”

“Just . . . just let me deliver this bat! This cute little pink bat. Thompson swings her . . . and THWACK! Into the left field stands! The Giants win the Pennant! The Giants win the Pennant! The . . .” And at that moment she fell asleep.

Miss Weir landed the helicopter on the pad outside Gogol and tried to wake Francine, but to no avail.

Gently taking the box, she walked purposefully to the bunker, where she found Bud and Lou sharing a bottle of champagne.

“Hey boys!” she greeted them. “The Empress is out like a light, and I need to deliver this package to Nimmul.”

“Go right in,” slurred Bud, “The cat’s out of the bag now!”

Without waiting to see if either of the guards would come to their senses and stop her, Laurel slipped inside. Just inside the door was a large platform with a railing that could be swung aside if you wanted to jump down to the ground level, assuming that you could survive the fifty-foot drop. Laurel elected to use the stairs instead to reach the lower level, which opened out into a large natural cave. Various pieces of equipment lined the walls of the cavern. A forty-inch plasma screen television mounted on one wall was playing sports highlights for the week. Sitting in front of the television were the rest of the guards, who were well on their way to a level of intoxication usually only found on Saturday night leave.

Miss Weir was expecting anything other than what she actually found in the center of the cavern, for it looked like it belonged in a carnival midway. A long sloped track led from one side to the other, with a small cart on top, the perfect size to put a four-year-old in. It would not be a very pleasant ride for the tyke, however, because at the end of the track was a brick wall. Only, it didn’t really look like brick right now. The red shifted and shimmered into silver and back in a slow, steady rhythm.

Nimmul was next to the wall. He had somehow found a way to pilot his hover-pod into dancing an Irish jig. A set of electrodes were on his head, attached through a box-shaped device to more electrodes connected to several animals kept in a wire mesh cage on a table. “Free! Free! At last my mind is free!” he sang.

“Emperor!” called Miss Weir as she approached him. “The empress sent me something for you!”

Nimmul stopped singing and scowled. “Took her long enough!” he said, removing the electrodes from his bald scalp. “Tell her she missed out on all the fun.”

“She fell asleep in the helicopter on the way back. I couldn’t wake her.”

Nimmul shook his head. “That woman mystifies me,” he stated. The emperor met Miss Weir at the half-way point of the track and took the box from her, sliding a wooden panel aside and holding the box up to his goggles. “Hmm . . . ah, yes. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if the entire reason she goaded me into this little demonstration was just so she could put the ‘whammy’ on her counterpart’s arch-nemesis. Well, I’ll show her, I’ll do the swap when she isn’t even here! I’ll just put this in the . . .” Nimmul realized that the cart was way down at the other end of the track. “WILL SOMEBODY GET THAT CART OVER HERE!” he shouted.

A couple of men dressed in lab coats raced up. Since the disappearance of The Company, Nimmul had been forced to form a new group to guard him and do the things he liked to delegate. They were called the Nimmul Security Agency. “What can we do for Science!?” they shouted in unison.

Nimmul floated over to them, raised himself so he was towering over them, and pointed down the track. “Do you see that cart over there?”

“Sir! Yes, sir!”

“And you see that it isn’t over here?”

“Sir! Yes, sir!”

“Well, bring it over here!”

“We hear and obey!” They ran down the track and tried to pick up the cart.

“No! You’ll break it! *Slide* it down here! Slide!”

“Oohhh.”

“When did I get the cat’s henchmen?” Nimmul asked himself.

“A bit dim, aren’t they?” Miss Weir observed.

Nimmul turned his head sharply and finally noticed whom he was talking to. He was especially annoyed by the fact that Laurel was irresistibly drawn to the reflective surface of the hover-pod, so she spent more time looking at it than at his face. “Hey! When did I give you permission to enter my sight?”

“I had to make the Boss’s delivery for her.” She shook her head. “I really don’t understand her at times.”

“Well, you’ll have to explain her to me during the times when you do.” Nimmul turned to the guards. “Finally! I could have been on ‘It’s a Small World’ three times while you were bringing that cart up here. Ooo! I just thought of another punishment for my political enemies! Who here has a notebook?”

As he was saying this, he put the wooden box down on the cart, which immediately started to roll downhill. “I usually have one in one of the compartments of this thing, but wouldn’t you know it, I had to make room for that pack of cards . . .”

Everybody started checking their pockets. “What’s this doing here?” Nimmul asked, producing a pack of cigarettes. Realizing what was in his hand, he dropped it with a shudder. “Alright, fine, forget it, folks! I’ll just rely on one of you to remember. A lost cause, as we all know . . .”

One of the guards clapped his hands. “Yay! I love rollercoasters!”

“What are you babbling about now . . . the cart!” Nimmul raced down the side of the track, trying desperately to outrace the accelerating cart. With a last desperate lunge, he managed to slap a large green button mounted next to the brick wall just before the cart hit, and the wall turned fully silver. When the cart reached the end of the track, a slide on top extended, which the box traveled down until it hit the wall. If this were a brick wall, the box would be fairly broken up by the impact, but instead it bounced gently away from the wall along the slide, sliding and bouncing a few more times before coming to a stop.

Nimmul pressed a red button below the first, which caused the wall to go back to “standby” mode, and gently removed the box, putting it beside the wire cage.

“There, we’re done for the night. I don’t care if that’s actually Foxglove or not, I’m going to bed. Somebody cut the power on the way out!” Nimmul stacked the cage and the box on the edge of the hover-pod, floated up fifty feet, and opened the platform railing to exit the bunker.

THUNK! went the lights.

“Why am I always in the dark?” asked Miss Weir.

“**H**ERE’S A SUMMARY OF THE news at the top of the hour: Africa suffers from an outbreak of Dengue fever, Moscow remains submerged after yesterday’s torrential flooding, Britain continues to endure its year-long heat wave, Michigan has supplanted New Jersey as America’s most depopulated state, and Japan is gripped by hysteria as thousands claim to have witnessed a new ‘Goddess of the Wired’ saving the nation from the Phantoma attacks. Emperor Norton promises to have all of these problems cleared up

within the next week, with the exception of Japan—‘I can’t cure crazy,’ he is quoted as saying.

“All hail Emperor Norton, the great and powerful.” The announcer looked less than enthused by this last statement. Watching the broadcast, Nimmul made a mental note to have that corrected within the next week as well. He looked over at Francine to judge her reaction, but she kept her face studiously blank.

Nimmul and Francine weren’t the only individuals watching the news broadcast from the comfort of their separate beds. The wire cage with two chipmunks, two mice and a turtle had been given a permanent place in the master bedroom of Gogol a week ago, with the bat from the box added to complete the group. The cage faced the television set, and Nimmul made sure the set was tuned to the more depressing of the news channels when he didn’t have anything in particular to watch, just so the Rangers would know what they were up against. A big sign was installed above the cage, which said “THE RESCUE RANGERS. No touching.”

Nimmul’s grim enjoyment of the new program was interrupted when a small woman’s choir arrived outside the bedroom window to serenade the Emperor. While he was thus distracted, Laurel entered the room, disguised as a maid. In the midst of her dusting, she managed to “accidentally” open the cage door.

Francine walked up to her. She looked at the cage door, then looked at Laurel, and then shook her head in disapproval. Then she turned the cage around so that Nimmul could not easily see the open door and nodded conspiratorially.

THE TWO WOMEN SNUCK OUT OF the room and went to Miss Weir’s room. Francine took a moment to take in Laurel’s costume, a frilly pink outfit that looked like it belonged on a three-year old. “Where did you even find one of the old uniforms?” she asked. “I thought I had the lot of them ceremoniously burned the day I inherited the mansion.”

“You missed Nimmul’s re-orientation meeting for the servants. He discovered your father’s designs for ‘company dress’, and apparently thought they were a better idea than the more-sensible dress code you had in place.”

“I’m not surprised,” said Francine. “Nimmul and my father have in common the same reaction to status: suck up to your superiors, and humiliate your inferiors at every opportunity. Now, with that cleared up, why don’t you show me this pet of yours?”

“He’s over here,” said Miss Weir. “Meet Sparky. Sparky, wave hello to Francine.”

Francine waited a moment, then waved her hand frantically.

Miss Weir was shocked. “You saw Sparky wave? I didn’t think any human could see that!”

Francine smiled. “I saw no such thing, Laurel, but if I did, I wouldn’t be surprised. That pillow over there could wave at me right now and I would not be surprised, not anymore.”

“Does your new attitude have anything to do with that book you read on the Moon-Earth shuttle?” asked Miss Weir.

“Laurel, let me tell you about Waldo.”

“You better not be referring to me, ladies,” said Nimmul, who was hovering in the doorway. He was not in the best of moods, to put it lightly.

“Norton!” Francine said, turning around suddenly. “What brings you here?”

“Oh, just looking for my darling ‘wife’, the one who hired that band of fake opera singers.”

“Um, happy birthday?”

Nimnul sighed. “Come on,” he ordered. “We are going to finish this farce, once and for all.” He grimly led them back to the bedroom.

The cage was just as they had left it. The door was wide open, and none of the animals inside had left.

“Come on!” urged Nimnul them. “Make your grand bid for freedom!”

One of the mice sniffed in his general direction.

“So that device you showed me before was your ‘Dimensional Switcher?’” Miss Weir leaned over and looked closely at the inhabitants of the cage. “No, that’s not really the Rescue Rangers,” she declared.

“Sure it is!” countered a manic Nimnul. Pointing at each of the animals in turn, he introduced them. “This is Chip, this is Dale . . . no, wait, this is Dale and this is Chip. That’s Monty, and the particularly stupid-looking one is Gadget. The turtle is that blasted fly of theirs—trust me on this, alternate universes are not an exact science, and sometimes species get a little mixed up. The bat of course you met earlier, Foxglove.”

“Forgive me for being skeptical,” said Miss Weir, “but they’re not acting anything like their characters on the show.”

“Ah, now we are getting to the fun part,” said Nimnul, an evil glint in his goggles. “You see, once you arrive in this universe, you are bound by its laws. This is a universe of super science and proper respect for human minds, which is why I chose to move here. It is not, and never has been, a universe for nosy vermin that don’t know when to leave a hard-working scientist alone! No other animals are sentient here, so neither are the Rescue Rangers. Oh, they’re here, all right—see, just now, that glimmer in Chip’s eye? That’s his intelligence, intelligence trapped in bodies that will not obey them.”

He turned to the Empress. “I really have to thank you, Francine, for the excellent idea of bringing the Rescue Rangers here, to this universe. Now I have the satisfaction that not only will they never bother me again, they will never bother anyone again for as long as they live!” He reached into the cage and pulled out the two chipmunks. They screamed and squirmed in his hands. “They are completely ruled by their hormones. Any desire to be heroic is overridden!”

Francine and Laurel’s hopes slumped.

Nimnul returned the animals to the cage and triumphantly shut the door. The vibration shook the water bottles, and in a Pavlovian response, this made the animals thirsty, so they started fighting each other for access. Seeing this, Nimnul started laughing. “Don’t you realize what this means?” he crowed. “*I’ve won!* I’ve finally, *utterly* won!”

“NOTHING IN THE WORLD CAN STOP ME NOW!”

PART THREE: Carolyn

*That's not the beginning of the end
That's the return to yourself
The return to innocence.*

*Love - Devotion
Feeling - Emotion*

*Love - Devotion
Feeling - Emotion*

*Don't be afraid to be weak
Don't be too proud to be strong
Just look into your heart my friend
That will be the return to yourself
The return to innocence.*

*If you want, then start to laugh
If you must, then start to cry
Be yourself don't hide
Just believe in destiny.*

*Don't care what people say
Just follow your own way
Don't give up and use the chance
To return to innocence.*

*That's not the beginning of the end
That's the return to yourself
The return to innocence.*

*Don't care what people say
Follow just your own way
Follow just your own way
Don't give up, don't give up
To return, to return to innocence.*

*If you want then laugh
If you must then cry
Be yourself don't hide
Just believe in destiny.*

—“Return to Innocence”, Enigma

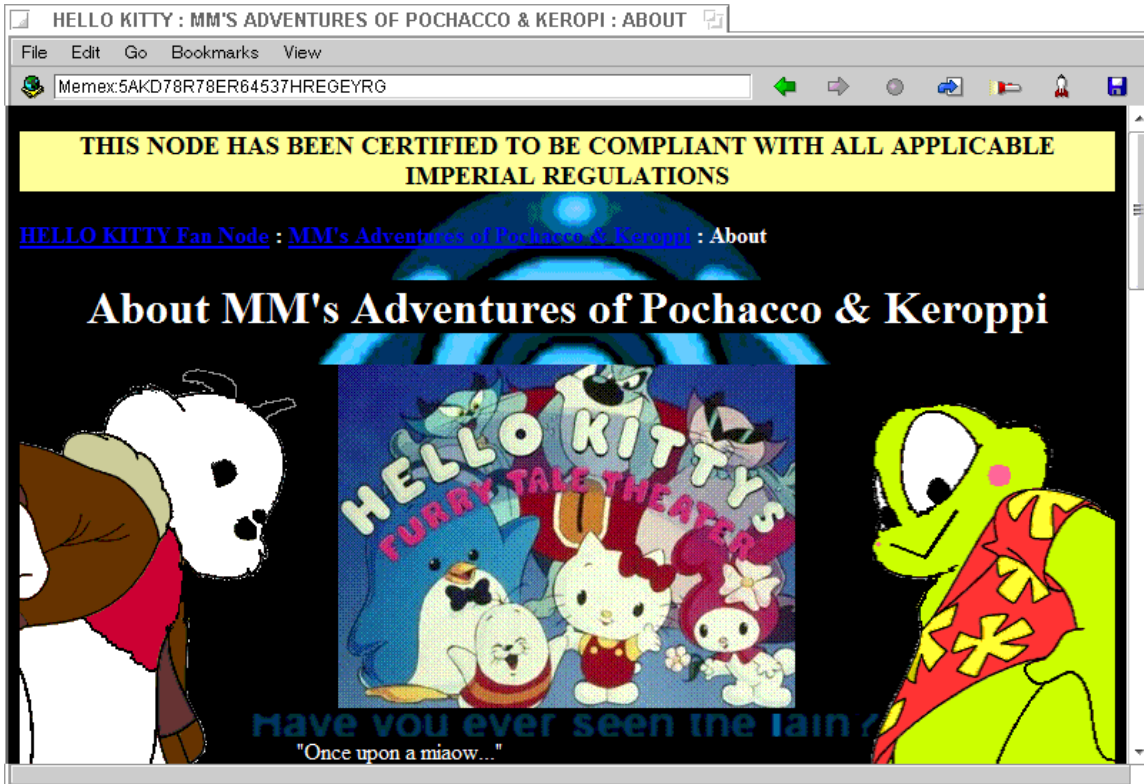
24. GRADUATION

Earth-A

Triangle News Service

EMPEROR PROCLAIMS INTERNET SAFE FOR HUMANITY
Over 20 Million Sites Purged of Objectionable Material, Including
Every Trace of *Rescue Rangers*

AUTHOR'S NOTE: "Purged"? "Purged"??? But I was using that fandom! Now what am I going to do? Alright, readers, let's go look at the website for this random fandom over here while I re-group:




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MM's Adventures of Pochacco & Keroppi : Membership.
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Unauthorized access is considered trespassing
and will be prosecuted.
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> The date is Friday, June 12. The time is 23:08 EDT.

> Login: **MourningDove**

> Password: *********

> Welcome to the chat, MourningDove.

> MyMelody is already here.

> 4096-bit encryption has been engaged.

MyMelody: Greetings, MourningDove. Welcome to the Pochacco & Keroppi chat.

MourningDove: Hi.

MyMelody: I see you are a new member. There is a task I like to give new members, to gauge how much they will be able to contribute: please come up with a new character for the series.

MourningDove: A test, huh? Hmm . . . well, I don't know which Sanrio character would be best, but how about a neighbor and best friend for My Melody who keeps her crush from getting too out of hand? They both graduated from high school today.

MyMelody: That will work. :) Glad to see you found us, Honker.

MourningDove: Thanks, QQ. So, a test to distinguish the "true believer" from the merely curious. Good idea. But I'm still worried. Are you sure that you-know-who won't find out about this? The one who pointed me here said she was pretty confident she could use "his" computers without him catching on. Who is she, anyway?

MyMelody: That was ConMouse. I know as little about her now as I did before. But she's proven her worth many times. The guts of this site are all her work, although the basic idea was mine. I've been planning this ever since "he" got his job.

MourningDove: But you don't know who she is? You may have even met her.

MyMelody: Wouldn't be surprised. But I'm not going to pry. ConMouse guards her secrets well, and the last thing we need right now is to drive her off by being too nosy - this movement will end when that happens. How was graduation?

MourningDove: A complete and utter blur. I know I said something between "I've been curious about how the world worked" and "the key to contentment is to always try whatever makes you uncomfortable", but I'll be darned if I can remember a word of it. How was your graduation?

MyMelody: A complete and utter disaster. I don't want to talk about it.

MourningDove: I wish I could have shared it with you.

MyMelody shrugs.

MourningDove: It's been less than two weeks since the edict. You and ConMouse must have been busy. I suppose that means you haven't had any time to write.

MyMelody: I've been writing. Don't have a choice - my counterpart lives her life regardless of what happens to us.

MourningDove: So how far are you?

MyMelody: I'm finished! Other than waiting for you, my main reason for logging in tonight was to tell the fanfic news to anybody who would be willing to hear.

MourningDove: Congratulations!

MyMelody: To be honest, I wasn't sure I'd ever have the patience to follow this thing through for four years.

MourningDove: Can I see it?

MyMelody: Sure. Go to the Fanfiction section on my node, and then add "Academy Days Chapter 12" to the address.

MourningDove: Reading it now.

IN HIS ROOM IN HARFORD, Connecticut, Herbert d'Foote, Jr., one-time next-door neighbor to the Emperor of Earth (and known to his closest friends as "Honker"), sat at his Navi and downloaded the last chapter of a four-year saga covering the high school years of the Sanrio character My Melody. A series of search-and-replace operations later, the document was now about Tammy Chestnutt. The final section of the chapter read as follows:

“DON'T TAKE TOO LONG WITH that breath of fresh air,” Foxglove told Tammy, who nodded. She then turned and returned to the party.

Tammy took her promised breath, then sat down to wait for the end of the party. As she sat, she thought back on the tumultuous last four years of her life. Years of joy and heartbreak, of new friends and self-discovery. Four years ago, Tammy Chestnutt entered the Allegheny River Academy not knowing who she was. Well, now she knew who she was, she knew her destiny, and she was determined to make the most of it, to reach out her hand like her father had, and to serve her fellow animals like the Rescue Rangers had. She was ready.

A chipmunk's hand came to rest gently on her shoulder.

Tammy turned her head, smiling. “Yes, Chip?”

THE END

> You have been inactive for 5 minutes. Do you wish to log out?
> Disconnected.

*T*OUGH SECURITY SYSTEM, THOUGHT HONKER. *But then again, I certainly can't blame her.*

Honker logged in again as MourningDove.

MourningDove: OK, read it.

MyMelody: And?

MourningDove: It's good. Better than anything I can write.

MyMelody: Well, you draw much better than I can, so I say we're even.

MourningDove: Point taken. I do have bad news, however: your site's been hacked.

MyMelody: What?! Let me check.

MourningDove: It's the background image on your pages.

MyMelody: Yes, I checked the logs, and it looks like that's all that was affected. I'll let ConMouse know. "Have you ever seen the lain"? What does it mean?

MourningDove: It's Japanese. Something weird has been going on in Japan for the past couple of months, but I haven't been able to get a straight answer on any of the English-language nodes. Something about a new "God of the Wired".

MyMelody: Creepy. Are you going to be on much longer?

MourningDove: Yeah, I was thinking of staying online all night. Maybe ConMouse will log in.

MyMelody: As far as I know she hasn't created an account yet. She said she was going to be very busy this week. Well, I'm barely conscious, so I'm going to bed. Be sure to ask any new people that character question I asked you, and treat anybody who fails as a potential spy.

MourningDove: Will do.

> MyMelody has logged out.

> You have been inactive for 5 minutes. Do you wish to log out? No

> You have been inactive for 5 minutes. Do you wish to log out? No

MourningDove: BRB

> You have been inactive for 5 minutes. Do you wish to log out? No

MourningDove: Unbelievable. And nobody here to tell.

> You have been inactive for 5 minutes. Do you wish to log out? No

> You have been inactive for 5 minutes. Do you wish to log out? No

> You have been inactive for 5 minutes. Do you wish to log out? No

> Amnesia1983 has joined.

Amnesia1983: Hello?

MourningDove: Welcome to the Pochacco and Kerapi chat. I take care of the place when MyMelody is away. I see you are a new member. There is a task we like to give new members, to gauge how much they will be able to contribute: please come up with a new character for the Pochacco & Keroppi series.

Amnesia1983: I'm rather attracted to Mimmy Kitty - a Hawaiian lookalike of Hello Kitty who happens to be a con-artist and Hello Kitty's dark side incarnate. Who did you pick, BTW?

MourningDove: The neighbor and best friend for My Melody who keeps her crush from getting too out of hand.

Amnesia1983: Err . . . I don't remember that character in the cartoon. Oh wait, Herbie? That was a fanchar in QQ's fiction, right?

MourningDove: Bingo.

Amnesia1983: You know, I've been trying to ask QQ about this for the longest time, but she keeps avoiding the question: Where does she get her material? That Academy Days series has been going on forever, and near as I can tell, she's got the characterization nailed. I've never seen anything like it. What's her secret?

MourningDove: I'm sure she's mentioned the subject of "counterparts" before - that ring any bells?

Amnesia1983: Oh, wow. You're kidding. Well, if you're going to share something that big with me, the least I can do is to give you my identity - I'm "her" pilot.

MourningDove: I know.

Amnesia1983: You do?

MourningDove: You already said you work for "them", and you're the only one of their employees that could create all this.

Amnesia1983: Thanks.

MourningDove: That, and you don't sound anything like Lou.

Amnesia1983: Well, if you're going to be that way about it, no more secrets for you. ;) Seriously, though, after what I went through tonight, I'd really like to get in touch with QQ - is she going to log in tonight? She really needs to hear what happened.

MourningDove: She's been and gone, and is not coming back tonight. I can't imagine your news beats mine, though.

Amnesia1983: Oh? You first.

MourningDove: Not twenty minutes ago, "she" dropped out of the sky in a helicopter and stole my pet bat! Can your story beat that?

Amnesia1983: Yes.

CAROLYN MAUGHLARDE WAS SOUND ASLEEP. Physically, Carolyn was in her bed in a small apartment in Inverness, Florida, that bordered Withlacoochie State Forest.

Mentally, Carolyn Maughlarde was outside amidst the trees in broad daylight, having the time of her life, leaping from branch to branch hundreds of feet above the ground, the wind rushing through her hair. The trees were immense, not only in height, but in every dimension; the average branch was much bigger than she was. Her method of travel was to leap off of a branch, arms and legs outspread, and let wind resistance slow her and the next branch stop her. Something else was helping, though, a steady pull from behind that kept her from slamming into the tree too fast. Carolyn looked back, and saw her tail.

“Tail!”

With a start, Carolyn was suddenly awake. The dream had been so vivid that for a moment she had to check herself to make sure she was still human. She thought back on the dream, and she recognized the tail, and the animal it belonged to. Turning on a bedside lamp, she got out of bed. The outer layer of her bedclothes consisted of an extra-large white tee shirt, on which the following had been silk screened many years ago:

Where Will the Little Green Man Be Next?

Enter the Contest, Daily in the Chronicle!

The back of the shirt read “Ragle Gumm Knows.”

Carolyn walked to the closet, opening it to reveal a red football helmet adorned with antennae, wires and various electronic attachments. The helmet was a top-secret prototype, developed by Doctor Elena Irwin for The Company. She called it the Kaon-Emission Paravoyant Neurolyzer, or KEPN. It was designed to read the brainwaves of anyone in the world and to relay those thoughts to the person wearing the helmet. However, on testing it on Agent Drew Maughlarde, it was discovered that the helmet actually detected the thoughts of the user’s counterpart in an alternate universe (this meant that the “P” in the acronym had to be replaced with an “E”, for “Equivoyant”). While still locked on Agent Maughlarde’s avian counterpart, the helmet was stolen by agents of T.H.E.M., who accidentally lost it. From there it passed through the hands of E. Thaddeus Rockwell, who used it to create *Darkwing Duck*, and, after accidentally changing the frequency of the device, *The Rescue Rangers*. Rockwell had surrendered

the helmet to Maughlarde in return for a chance to hide from the IRS. Carolyn's use of it had resembled Rockwell's, with two differences: she wasn't trying to get rich or famous, and she had tuned the device to her own counterparts in the worlds depicted in the two cartoons.

Suddenly, the door to Carolyn's bedroom burst open and her father pointed an accusing finger in her direction. "Don't you dare!" he cried.

"What?" she protested.

"You were going to put the KEEN on," he said. "Less than six hours after the last time."

"And so what if I was going to put it on?"

"I won't have you abusing this device!"

"You're one to talk—how many versions of yourself have you spied on since we got it?"

"That's different."

"That's different because using it changed you but it didn't change me. You used to be the Masked Marvel. That was your true identity. 'Drew Maughlarde' was just a disguise you put on when you needed to pretend to be normal. What happened to you, Dad? Did you see so many other you's fail that you decided to follow their example?"

This was an argument the two of them had had many times over the past few years, and Drew simply brushed it off. "This isn't about me, it's about you, young lady. Staying on one counterpart and one universe for too long has long-term consequences. The fate of poor Rockwell proved that. That's why you're limited to one session per day. It would have to be an exceptional circumstance before I'd allow you to use it again."

"It is exceptional! I think she's trying to contact me."

"You think Tammy has her own neurolyzer?"

"Yes. I can feel her watching me right now." Carolyn gestured over her left shoulder for emphasis. "Gadget must have invented the device independently while Tammy was in school."

"W . . . well, that's even more reason to be concerned! We have no idea what would happen if two KEENs got together! I might end up with a squirrel for a daughter!"

"And then maybe you'd get off your behind and save somebody for once! Look, it's perfectly safe. I've practically been in her head for four years now, off and on, and I'm the same person I was before, right?"

"Well, yes, as far as any eighteen-year old can be said to be the same as the fourteen-year old she used to be."

"There, you see?" Picking up the helmet with one hand, she led her father to the kitchen table. She sat him down in one chair, and she took the adjacent chair. "You watch everything that happens, and if you see anything go wrong, you turn it off, OK?"

"You're sure you want to go through with this? Now?"

"Yes and yes, and you're not going to be able to dissuade me." The Masked Marvel would have had a chance, but Drew Maughlarde was hopeless.

And he knew it. "I know that from bitter experience. Good luck, and be careful."

"I will." And in one motion she pulled on the helmet and flicked the switch at the side.

25. CROSS-OVER

???

AT THAT MOMENT, THE CHAIR vanished, causing Carolyn to fall right through the linoleum.

She landed on the floor of a slowly descending freight elevator, the sound of its antique pulley system simultaneously squeaking and roaring in her ears. She descended mostly in darkness, past rows of shelves containing puppets, playing cards, an oil lamp, a metronome, animal skulls, and jars of preserves. Some of the jars appeared to be using the preserves as a preservative: a large one contained sheep intestines, another pocket watches. Carolyn reached out and picked up a jar, to see that this one was preserving thumbtacks. She looked down to see that her bedclothes had been replaced by a faded pink dress, shoes and socks. Her normally braided hair was hanging loose around her shoulders, and she was no longer wearing the KEEN. She placed the jar back on a shelf beside a stuffed and mounted jackrabbit.

“Jan Svankmajer”, concluded Carolyn.

“Said Alice,” her own voice echoed.

THE DESCENT APPEARED TO BE endless.

Carolyn turned around to look out the side of the elevator opposite the shelves. She spied a distant light far below illuminating what looked to be the walls of a proper Victorian sitting room. However, this room was shaped like a well, and seemed bottomless. Also, the walls looked like they came out of an illustration rather than real life.

Carolyn crouched down to try and get a better look. She saw portraits on the walls, but they were all hung upside down. In addition, there were little tables and desks floating in mid-air, also upside down. Also, something was rising towards her, going about the same rate as the elevator was descending. It was a perfectly round circular object, ruffled like the underside of a mushroom. In its center were two black smudges. No . . . actually, more like two black fruiting bodies attached to white stalks. Oh dear, that’s really not right, either. Better to say that it was a young woman in a powder-blue dress, large white petticoat, white apron, white stockings and black shoes, falling up towards her. A young woman with a large fluffy squirrel tail. In fact, it would be best to say that this was Tammy, if Tammy were playing the lead character in a 1951 Disney feature and was voiced by Kathryn Beaumont.

“I say,” Carolyn called down jokingly. “Have you seen a white rabbit?”

Tammy pushed her dress aside to look at Carolyn. “Oh! Is that . . . ?”
Unfortunately, this act caused her to fall a lot faster.

Carolyn braced herself and stretched out her arm, catching Tammy and pulling her into the elevator. The moment she crossed the threshold, gravity reversed itself for Tammy, and she fell down on the floor of the elevator with a thud.

IT WAS AN ODD THING, sitting next to a cartoon character. Lighting had absolutely no effect on colors; or rather it had a very extreme effect. Objects in light were one shade, and objects in shadow were a distinct shade. There was no graduation. Also details, like the texture of Tammy's dress, were completely missing. The squirrel's hair was a single orange color, differentiated only by a mass of thin black lines. Like Carolyn, Tammy's hair was straight, to increase her similarity to Lewis Carroll's iconic character.

During this time Tammy was silent, engaged in a similar study of the live-action young woman beside her. Indeed, it appeared that Tammy had some difficulty distinguishing Carolyn from her surroundings.

"H . . . how did I get here?"

"A shared dream world," Carolyn speculated with a shrug. She held her hand out. "Hi, I'm Carolyn."

"Said Alice," her echo replied from above.

Carolyn looked up, annoyed. "Alright, Mike, that was a funny-once joke, so you can stop now."

Tammy, who was trying to see Carolyn's hand in order to shake it, looked up in confusion. "Mike'?" she asked.

"It's the name of a self-aware computer from a book," Carolyn explained. "*The Moon is a Harsh Mistress.*"

"Oh," replied Tammy, not getting the reference. Squinting, she finally found Carolyn's hand and grasped it with her left hand. "Hi, I'm Tammy. Wait, you know that already. What's next?"

"Your Gadget impression needs work," Carolyn laughed. She noticed that Tammy's right arm was stretched out before her oddly, like the hand was resting on an invisible object. She also noticed that Tammy's hand in her own felt like warm rubber. "I hope you didn't mind my spying on you for the last four years."

Tammy broke contact as soon as she could politely do so. The touch of Carolyn's hand was even more disorienting than her physical appearance. "I . . . don't mind. The watching, that is. Made me think there was somebody else watching over me, even though I knew you couldn't do anything."

"I never judged you."

"I know."

"Perhaps I can even things out by telling you about myself. I started like you, the daughter of an adventurer and his stay-at-home wife. Only my father eventually convinced my mother to join him on his travels, leaving me with my grandfather. As a result, I remained an only child. I lost both of them when I was six, and then Grandfather got in over his head with some gangsters . . . long story short, I was in an orphanage at eight. And my time was running out—the men who had targeted Grandfather thought I knew what he would never reveal, so they came after me."

Tammy's eyes had been getting wider and wider as she soaked in this story. "And then what happened?"

“And then I met the Masked Marvel, the first person in my life whose ideals were matched with the wit and strength to make those ideals reality. The Masked Marvel saved my life, in every meaning of that word. Together, we defeated Terrance Barra. And then, he adopted me.

“I learned later that this act was at as significant for him as it was for me. The Masked Marvel had been nothing but the Masked Marvel for decades. His original identity of Drew Maughlarde was dead to him, for reasons too painful for him to ever tell me. He brought that back, he became *normal* again, for me.”

“Drew Maughlarde’ . . .”

“In your world he was Detective Drake Mallard.”

“Detective Drake was your stepfather?” The story kept getting better and better in Tammy’s eyes.

“Was, and still is. The Masked Marvel rid the city of crime, and as Drew Maughlarde, Agent of The Company, he was largely responsible for the defeat of the evil T.H.E.M. organization.” Carolyn decided to end her tale there, feeling reluctant to say any more to the innocent squirrel before her. “Do you have any questions?”

Tammy nodded eagerly. “I have so many questions. Your world, how does it operate? Is it filled with a sense of purpose? Are there other creators with separate worlds they have created, or is mine the only one?”

“Wait, one at a time, one at a time! First our world stumbles along as best it can, with whatever purpose we can guess for ourselves. To say that it is filled with any more sense and purpose than that, beyond some artist’s *feeling* of purpose, is hard to say; then again, that assumes that it was created. And while I don’t know for sure, I would suggest there are many separate worlds that have been created by various artists, probably including my own.”

Tammy realized that Carolyn did a much better Gadget impersonation than she did.

“Your own?” Tammy interrupted. “If yours is not the Real World, where is it?”

“Well who’s to say that any of these worlds are the original one? How would we even know? It could just be a never-ending chain of created worlds.”

“This creator, he sounds like he has too much free time on his hands. And I’m not sure about your theory, since your world has a TV show depicting my world, while my world does not have a show about your world. That implies that your world created mine.”

“That’s just a theory though, it may be that neither created the other. What if the show wasn’t a creation but rather a window into your world?”

“A window? And is that metaphorical pane of glass still in existence, or was it smashed long ago? Is that pane what you’re using to talk to me now?”

“I suppose so, after all it feels like we’ve met through the looking glass almost.” Carolyn chuckled.

“My world may have an independent existence, but your world could still be the Real World.” Tammy speculated.

“No! Because I look like this, you might think I’m from the Real World, but I know better now. I live in a mad, out of control world, a world far too wrong to possibly be real. This cartoon series I mentioned, the one about the Rescue Rangers—it should have included an episode about you, but it was never completed. You know why? Because

there are no squirrels on my world. No squirrels! How can a world be real without squirrels?"

"No squirrels?"

"No squirrels, and no doves."

"So Herbie's counterpart, is he human? Do you know him?"

"Yes, he's human, and I know him. We're very close, but also about a thousand miles away from each other. A world with no squirrels, and no doves. If given the choice which world to live in, I would gladly choose yours. Your world is governed by the laws of drama, while mine is controlled by the cold hand of science. The difference is like black and white. In your world, anything is possible, so long as the villain rises to a position of great power, in order to be toppled in an even more improbable victory by the powerless but stalwart hero. In my world, evil is done with good intention and what little good exists only happens by accident. A world that drives heroes to give up and retire to Florida, to spend the rest of their lives wallowing in the past. It is a world of gray, dim hopelessness."

Tammy's brow furled. "I don't think the difference is quite as stark as you describe," she said, hesitantly. "In fact . . . no, wait. I contacted you for a reason, Carolyn."

"You did?"

"Yes. I desperately need your help. I believe that Nimnul's loose on your world, and he's captured the Rangers of my world. Is there any way you can find him?"

Carolyn chuckled, a pained look in her face. "There isn't a man, woman or child on my world that doesn't know where Nimnul is. He's emperor now, emperor of the whole world!"

"Emperor? Emperor?! But he's crazy! Who in their right mind would give *him* that kind of power?"

"We were desperate, and he was able to save our world from utter destruction, not knowing or caring what the price for our deliverance would be. Even now, the majority of humanity supports him. He allows the world to run itself the way it was run before, just so long as he can have his way with anyone on his list of personal enemies."

"Are you on that list, Carolyn?" Tammy asked, wide-eyed.

"Fans of *The Rescue Rangers* just went to the top of the list," Carolyn told her. "So what you're asking me to do is to break into the most famous home on Earth to rescue a group of animals from the Emperor, knowing that I will be hounded by a billion loyal subjects."

Tammy nodded mutely.

"I like those kinds of odds! I'm in. And I'll rally as many fellow fans as I can to help me. But you have to help me, too."

"What can I do?" Tammy asked.

"Tell me more about how Nimnul stole the Rangers."

"Well, it's Nimnul, so the default answer applies: he invented a whatsit. The first time he used it, it swapped his mind with that of his counterpart on your world. He must have rebuilt it to swap the minds of the Rescue Rangers with their counterparts on your world."

"Can you get a hold of the machine in your world?"

"Nope. It blew up when he used it."

“Oh. The same thing probably happened to the machine in this world. We’ll have to force Nimmul to build another one.”

“Not necessarily. Foxglove was swapped a full half-hour after the other Rangers.”

This brought two thoughts to Carolyn’s mind: to ask Tammy the significance of the word “other”, and the realization that she would have confirmation of this story by asking Honker about his pet bat. She decided to bring up neither point for now. “Get in touch with Nimmul’s counterpart on your world and find out everything you can about him and his wife—he’s married to the counterpart of Winifred the Witch. Any piece of information we can use against them would help.”

“Already on it.”

“Try to find out about Nimmul’s machine. If you find plans, try to rebuild it. That way you can fix things from your side even if I fail.”

Tammy nodded, then added, “but you won’t fail, Carolyn. I believe in you.”

Carolyn smiled. “Thanks. Contact me if you find anything—I’ll keep the ‘window pane’ with me at all times. You take care of my world’s counterparts of the Rangers, and we’ll get everything sorted out on our end. You’ll see.”

“Good luck!” Tammy lifted her right arm, and instantly vanished.

CAROLYN LIFTED HER HELMET, AND found herself back in the kitchen.

“Well?” Drew asked.

“There’s hope.”

26. NORRIS NULTON

Triangle News Service

EMPEROR ORDERS CYBERHUNT FOR “VERMIN VIGILANTE” LEADERS

Reward of \$2M for Accurate Identification of “QQ” and “ConMouse”

Earth-1

THE BEIGE PLYMOUTH CAME TO rest in a narrow spot at the rear of the large parking lot behind the mental institution. Traffic had been horrible.

Winifred adjusted her watch. “Hold on,” she told the pink purse, “I have to get something from the trunk.” A few seconds later, she returned with a glass rod wrapped in a silk scarf. She placed the rod in her handbag and then picked up both bag and purse.

“Could you turn me, please?” the voice from the purse asked. “I’m facing the wrong way.”

Winifred obediently reoriented the purse.

“What was that, anyway?”

“Something Doctor Rogers asked for. You better keep quiet when we get closer to the building. Some of the inmates are very paranoid about animals, which led to the creation of some very strict rules about what can be carried inside. Am I going to be able to open that thing for inspection?”

“Yes,” Herbie answered from inside. “But don’t let them look too close.”

“In that case,” she replied, “let me make it useful.” She opened the top of the purse, revealing a small cloth compartment edged with what looked like a lipstick container, a coin purse, a wallet, and several other items. None of these surfaces were real—they just gave the illusion of a very full purse. Digging through her handbag, Winifred found a few small items to place in the available space. “That should do it,” she said. “Anything else I need to know?”

“I’m allergic to X-rays.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Francine said with a smile, as she began a rapid walk between the parked cars towards the rear entrance. The low heels of her shoes made a distinct clack-clack-clack sound on the blacktop.

INSIDE THE PURSE-SHAPED COMMAND CENTER, Herbie the dove sat strapped into a small chair, monitoring a large screen showing the scene captured by a tiny camera located at the top front of the purse. A speaker over his head allowed him to hear Francine’s shoes

and her gentle breathing, while a second screen showed measurements that included altitude, velocity, compass direction and several others that were as yet a mystery to him. He had tried consulting the manual Gadget had written during the drive over, but it had been a bit much for him. In the center of the control panel before him was a microphone grill, its switch set to off.

Flicking another switch, the first screen now showed a view straight up at Winifred's head. It was not a flattering angle. Herbie was still not entirely sure about this human. From her ramblings on the car trip, it appeared that she had jumped spontaneously into witchcraft one day after trying out a spell in a book and discovering that it worked. It was obvious to him that there was a lot she wasn't telling him, of what drove a self-professed animal lover into being the violent and hate-filled person the Rangers had encountered. Also unexplained was the nature of her sudden transformation in the wake of her defeat. She had mentioned the small animal group known as the Prisoner's Aid Society, which had approached her during her time in solitary confinement, so perhaps they were a factor. Undoubtedly, so was Norris Nulton.

Herbie sighed. Perhaps he was being too cynical. Foxglove had had a change of heart. Even Nimmul had gone straight for a while. He put the matter out of his mind.

"Where are you?" a new voice emerged from the speaker. "No, there's no change; he's still in Fantasyland."

Herbie returned the view on the screen to the world in front of the purse. He saw a woman with straight short red hair, a pale complexion, and dark clothing, talking into a cell phone and sitting in a white Ford Taurus rental car with the window down. Winifred had stopped, and was looking at her. The woman seemed to notice Winifred out of the corner of her eye, and turned away, cupping a hand around the phone. "Could we talk later?" she whispered.

Winifred turned without a word and continued walking. "I swear I know her from somewhere, but I can't remember where," she told Herbie when she was out of earshot.

"Anyone important?"

"I *think* so," she replied, hesitantly.

"But . . ." Herbie prompted.

"But, I can't remember for sure, OK? That explosion-thing at the end of my run-in with the Rangers, the one that made me magic-free, did a number on my memory when it ripped all the spells out. I sometimes have trouble remembering stuff from before then. That woman must have been from that part of my life. Or maybe I saw her on a commercial—she could be a spokesperson for all I know."

A HUNDRED FEET LATER, WINIFRED reached the door. She removed a card from the purse and slid it through a reader to gain entrance. Inside she turned a corner into a locker room and exchanged her coat for a plain gray jumpsuit.

"OK," she said as softly as possible. "This is it. Inspection is just beyond that door. Any last words?"

"What are you going to say if they find me?" Herbie asked.

"I could say you're another exhibit for Doctor Rogers, but only if you can convincingly impersonate a stuffed dove. Otherwise, I lose my job and my parole, and you get fed to the alley cats."

“I can do stiff and motionless,” Herbie said, a little nervously.

EMERGING FROM THE LOCKER ROOM, Winifred turned a corner into a small room, occupied by a folding table and a walk-through metal detector, and sighed. There were two men in the room, wearing jumpsuits similar to Winifred’s. One of them was nearly bald and was absorbed in watching the small black and white television mounted in one corner of the room. His nametag identified him as Ernesto. The other, named Bernie, wore an obvious toupee and was staring fixedly at the red-haired woman. Herbie recognized that look from his brother Tank. In his case, that look usually meant that Herbie would be spending the rest of the day walking funny.

“Morning, *Freddie*,” Bernie sneered.

Ernesto looked up. “Ah, good morning, Señora Winifred,” he said, getting up. “I think you are late.”

Winifred ignored Bernie and turned to Ernesto, handing him her handbag. “Unavoidable, I’m afraid,” she said. “Has Doctor Mitford-Pritchard come by?”

“Not yet,” replied Ernesto as he put the handbag down on the table and started searching through it. “I heard him bellowing in the North Ward, so you might want to avoid that.”

“Will do. How is Olivia?”

“Her fever broke last night.”

“Thank goodness for that.”

Bernie was becoming annoyed at the lack of response to his earlier taunt. “I say, *Freddie*, how’s your cat?”

“I did not know you had a cat,” said Ernesto.

“Of course the witch has a cat, Ernie. A black cat. And whenever it sees her it goes like this: *MREEOWW!*”

Winifred and Herbie both blushed—Bernie had accidentally said a rather bad word in Cat.

“I still don’t think the señora has a cat,” Ernesto said, confused. He turned back to the bag. “I’m sorry to be taking so long, but you have an awful lot in there today.”

“Yes,” Winifred explained. “Doctor Rogers asked me to bring in some items for the inmates to play with.”

Ernesto glanced up at the wall clock. “I . . . I trust you, señora. I think that’s good enough.”

“Well I don’t,” interrupted Bernie, pushing Ernesto aside. He pulled out the glass rod and silk scarf. “Aha! This wouldn’t happen to be a magic wand by any chance, would it?”

Winifred took the rod and scarf out of his hands and started rubbing them together. “Actually, Bernie, this rod is only magical if you think the triboelectric effect violates the laws of Nature.”

“Don’t you go using your big words on me, you old . . .” As Bernie’s hand reached for the rod, a blue spark of electricity leapt from one to the other. With a gasp of surprise, Bernie fell flat on his bottom.

“She turned you into a newt!” Ernesto joked, pointing.

“What, really? Get me a mirror, Ernie! Somebody get me a mirror! I can’t feel my rear!”

Winifred quickly picked up the handbag and swinging both bags high, walked through the metal detector into the hallway beyond. She managed to suppress a laugh at Bernie’s expense. “You know,” she confided to Herbie with a smile, “I think he’d make a rather handsome newt.”

AFTER OBTAINING A CART OF janitorial supplies, Winifred made her way to the common room, where the calmer inmates were gathered. The pink purse was placed on a lower shelf where Herbie could still see what was going on. At the far end of the room, Herbie spotted Nimnul, or rather Nulton, sitting in a nook and staring out the window. Winifred went first to a different corner, where a man and a woman in white lab coats were consulting in low voices. Winifred waited patiently until she was noticed.

“Ah, Miss Cadwallader,” the woman, Doctor Rogers, addressed her. “Do you need anything?”

“I have those toys you asked me for. I even had a chance to try one of them out.”

“Very good. Put them on that table over there. I’ll gather the patients at 8:30 for the demonstration.”

“A moment, there, Miss Cadwallader,” the man said in a superior tone. “Did you come straight here after signing in?”

“Yes, Doctor Mitford-Pritchard,” Winifred said meekly, looking down.

“It is now 8:14,” Doctor Mitford-Pritchard said, consulting his watch. “Given the walking time from the check-in station to here, that makes you ten minutes late.”

“I am?” Winifred asked innocently. “I have 8:08 on my watch.”

Doctor Mitford-Pritchard examined Winifred’s watch and compared it to his own. “Yes, it appears that your watch is slow. It is now 8:15.” He watched as the janitor adjusted her watch to the correct time. “Let’s not see that this happens again, yes?”

“Yes, Doctor Mitford-Pritchard,” Winifred said, backing away slowly.

“Honestly, Philip,” said Doctor Rogers. “Sometimes I think you treat her worse than the patients.”

“The patients do not have criminal records,” muttered Doctor Mitford-Pritchard.

AFTER PLACING HALF OF THE contents of her handbag on the table, Winifred came up behind Norris Nulton.

“It’s such a beautiful landscape out there,” he said without turning around. “So few colors are needed to render an entire world. The soil is the perfect shade of brown, the foliage is the perfect shade of green, the sky is the perfect shade of blue, and the clouds are titanium white. The hills are made up of sine curves, and those happy little clouds would make Bob Ross proud. It’s all so simple—no distractions. There’s only what is necessary, and no more.”

“Norris?” she asked, quietly.

Nulton turned and looked at her, smiling. He had allowed a scruffy orange beard to grow in. “You shouldn’t call me ‘Norris,’” he said in a near-whisper. “All evidence indicates that I am Professor Norton Nimnul.”

One look at those gentle eyes were enough to convince Herbie that this was most definitely not Professor Norton Nimmul.

“But that’s not true,” Winifred countered.

“If I’m ever going to leave this place and get away from the constant questioning, then that’s who I have to be. I am Norton J. Nimmul, scientist. I own a ray gun and a lab.”

“Norris, I went to see the Rescue Rangers.”

“The Rescue Rangers are a figment of my imagination.”

“The Rescue Rangers have been kidnapped. Well not ‘kidnapped’, exactly. It’s rather complicated. Professor Nimmul stole them.”

“I am Professor Nimmul. And I can invent anything I set my mind to. When I’m released, I’ll come up with brilliant inventions for the good of mankind. I think I’ll start with Super Toast.”

“You are not Professor Nimmul. Professor Nimmul’s in your body right now, in your universe.”

“In . . . in my body? W . . . with Francine? What is he going to do with her? Who’s going to defend her? I have to go back! I have to go back, immediately! That man is a monster, and he must be stopped!”

The other inmates were looking at the two of them curiously. Luckily, Doctor Rogers was involved in setting up the morning’s demonstration, and hadn’t noticed. Doctor Mitford-Pritchard was long gone, having better things to do than interact with his patients.

Winifred took Nulton’s hands in her own, an act which did a lot to calm the man down. “It’s alright,” she told him soothingly. “I met Tammy, and she has a plan.”

“Tammy?” Nulton asked, his eyes wandering. “Ah yes, Tammy. Never got to air that episode. A shame, really. I put a lot of work into that conveyer belt. Of course, I warned Mr. Rockwell that nobody would believe a can that small could hold such a big cat, even as a joke.”

Winifred reached out and grabbed Nulton’s chin, forcing him to look at her. “Focus, Norris, focus. We need to know if there’s anything we could use against Nimmul.”

“‘We’?”

“I brought Herbie, a friend of Tammy’s.” Winifred picked up the purse and sat down, her back to the other inmates.

“I don’t remember a character named Herbie in the show,” Nulton declared. “Unless . . . my neighbor’s kid is named Herbert . . . you don’t mean to say that Gadget mastered the Szalinski process to shrink a human boy into that tiny space?”

“I’m not human, Mr. Nulton,” said the voice from the purse, “I’m a dove.”

Of course Nulton could not understand what the voice from the purse was saying. “Sounds like a pigeon,” he remarked.

Herbie’s opinion on being mistaken for a pigeon resembled Chip and Dale’s opinion on being mistaken for squirrels.

“A mourning dove, actually,” Winifred corrected Nulton. “Counterparts between the same universe are not always the same species. I can translate for him.”

“Well!” Nulton took a few seconds to absorb this. “Wow, that explains a lot. I think I’m going to have a long talk with that girl that used to live next door to the d’Footes when this is all over.”

“We don’t have much time,” Winifred urged.

“Yes, well, let’s see. How to stop Professor Nimnul? I dunno. He’s in my body, right, just like I’m in his. And last night I accidentally ate some crab linguini with no ill effects, so maybe you could try using my shellfish allergy against him.”

“Shellfish allergy,” Winifred repeated, disappointed. “Is that all?”

Nulton shrugged. “Sorry.”

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,” DOCTOR ROGERS announced. “If you’d gather around, I’ve got something interesting to show you.”

Winifred sighed. “You better join them, Norris,” she said.

Nulton opened his mouth to apologize once again, then shut up and walked meekly to join the other patients.

Winifred wheeled her cart to an abandoned corridor, then picked up the pink purse and brought it close to her face. “I have to stay here for the rest of my shift,” she whispered. “Do you have a way of getting back to Tammy?”

“I’m a bird, remember? I think I can trust you with the purse. Besides, I think it’s best if we kept you updated about what Tammy found out.”

“I’ll be at the tree around 5:30, then. Now then, you need a working window. There aren’t too many in this place, for obvious reasons. Let’s see if we can find one.”

After a bit of searching, she ended up in Doctor Roger’s office, opening the door with her card key. Closing the door behind her, she walked to the window, opened it, and put the purse on the sill. The back of the purse opened up and Herbie walked out with a single-button remote control. Herbie pressed the button, which caused the purse to lock itself up with an audible “chirp”. With a nod at Winifred, he took to the air and flew out the window.

ELEVEN HOURS LATER, WINIFRED RETURNED to the park. Given what she had gone through at work, she would have much rather gone straight to bed, but she had promised to show up. She was startled to see the rental car from the asylum parking lot here at the park, with the same woman sitting at Winifred’s usual bench, talking on her cell phone. At one end of the table before her was a large metallic box with rods soldered on either side, next to a strange device consisting of an upright cylinder wrapped in thick copper wire, topped with a thick metal donut, and letting off sparks every few seconds. The device seemed to resemble something Winifred remembered from the *Mister Whizzer* TV show, but much smaller in size.

As Winifred cautiously approached, she saw that Tammy, her hand resting on one of the silver box’s bars, and Herbie were also standing on the table, and that they also appeared to be part of the cell phone conversation. Standing between the animals and the human was a black plastic box, nine centimeters by four centimeters by one centimeter in size. Attached to the top of the box was a black microphone, while the front of the box acted as a speaker. Everything said by the animals was immediately repeated by the box at a lower frequency. To Winifred, this sounded like trying to hold a conversation in a box canyon, but hearing the woman (and the man on the phone) talking with a dove and a

squirrel, she soon figured out that the box was an animal-to-human translation device of some kind.

Tammy was the first to notice her. “Winifred! We’ve been waiting for you.”

“I’m sorry about that—there was a ‘incident’ at the hospital, and it took quite some time to restore calm to the patients.”

The woman stood up and walked around the table to greet Winifred. “Dana Scully, FBI,” she said, in about as gentle a way as you can say something that ends with “FBI”.

Winifred shook the outstretched hand. “I didn’t think that the government was aware of the existence of talking animals,” she said cautiously.

“They aren’t. Our relationship with the Rescue Rangers is strictly off the record.”

Winifred thought about this as the two women sat down on opposite sides of the table.

“We, that is, Agent Fox Mulder and myself . . .”

“Hey,” said the voice on the cell phone.

“ . . . became involved in this case by accident. At the FBI, we are usually assigned the more unusual cases, which means we were very familiar with the criminal career of Norton Nimmul. One day we noticed that an abnormally long time had passed since Nimmul had come to our attention. Some investigation revealed his current whereabouts and condition, and a little more digging showed that he had been in possession of the Dimensional Viewer shortly before the incident that landed him in the asylum.” The object she was referring to was the metal box. For the first time, Winifred saw that a screen on the box was showing a moving image of a young human woman with a strange helmet on her head. Unlike everyone else who had encountered the Viewer, Winifred adapted to its strange display instantly, perhaps because of some of the things she had seen during her days as a witch.

Scully continued. “The Viewer had been constructed in 1940 as one of a pair, and Mulder possessed the other copy. From the remains of his laboratory, we recovered a notebook written by Nimmul filled with pages of settings for the device and observations of Nimmul’s counterparts. The notebook concluded that one world in particular was ‘ripe for conquest’, and when Mulder set his Viewer to those coordinates, he learned that that world had in fact been conquered by Nimmul. I came here to see if Gadget might be able to help us to reconstruct the Dimensional Switcher that Nimmul had invented based on the Viewer, but as you know he had already reconstructed the device to use on the Rangers first.

“Mulder is now across the street at the police department’s evidence room with Sparky, looking for clues to the construction of the Switcher.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, Scully,” said Mulder over the cell phone, “but we concluded our search a couple of minutes ago. No plans survived. We’re heading back to you, so expect to see us in a few minutes.”

HERBIE TURNED TO WINIFRED. “I told everyone what happened when we interviewed Norris. Did he tell you anything else after I left?”

“Well, he did, but I don’t see how it can be useful. He told me that the Moon in his universe has a base on it, and that it might be used to attack Nimmul’s bases on Earth.

But from what you tell me, Nimnul is Emperor of Earth, so surely he controls all means of communication between the Earth and the Moon.”

The eyes of Dana Scully and the girl on the Viewer display lit up simultaneously. “Actually,” said Scully, “Mulder’s counterpart, a government agent named Reynard D. Keigh, is currently on the Moon.”

“Reynard D. Keigh”? That’s a very different name than ‘Fox Mulder’.”

“I didn’t get it either, but Mulder did. ‘Reynard’ is the name of a famous fox, and ‘D. Keigh’, i.e. ‘decay’, is a synonym for ‘molder’. Anyway, Keigh is in a position to really help us, and he has his own reasons for opposing Nimnul. Best of all, his mind is very susceptible to picking up Mulder’s thoughts when he uses the Viewer. Therefore, I think Nulton’s idea stands a very good chance of working!”

“I NEED EVERYBODY TO PLEASE stay very still.” All eyes went to Tammy to see why she said this, then followed her gaze to the end of the table opposite the Dimensional Viewer. There they saw a trembling Foxglove-A.

Hoping for this very eventuality, Winifred slowly removed a little jar of banana-flavored baby food from a coat pocket. Opening the jar, she scooped some of the food into the lid and then carefully slid the lid towards the bat. It took a couple of minutes for the bat to nerve itself to investigate the source of the fruity smell.

The woman on the Viewer tried to say something, but the machine was not equipped for sound, so Tammy had to repeat her words: “Foxglove’s counterpart is domesticated. Perhaps she’s calmed down enough to remember that.”

After finishing the meal, Foxglove-A crept forward. To Winifred’s surprise, the bat headed not for her but for Herbie, rushing forward and embracing the startled dove in her wings.

“She appears to recognize her master,” said Tammy. “Or at least her master’s counterpart.”

“Yes, but I’d prefer if she were a little less tense,” said Herbie.

Winifred took out her tin whistle. “Maybe music might help,” she said, before starting to play the pavane from before.

“Oh, I hope that isn’t the only song you know,” said Tammy. “That one is pretty, but also rather depressing.”

Winifred responded by launching into rather spirited version of “The Irish Washerwoman”, following this with “She’ll Be Coming ‘Round the Mountain”, which soon had everyone singing along.

“I’m sorry, this doesn’t appear to be helping,” said Herbie. Foxglove-A appeared to be more confused by seeing animals singing than comforted. “Carolyn, do you know any songs that the Foxglove on your world liked?”

Carolyn nodded. “Honker taught himself ‘The Inner Light’ on penny whistle. Foxglove seemed to like hearing that whenever I’d visit.” As before, only Tammy could hear this.

“Do you know ‘The Inner Light’?” Tammy asked Winifred. “It was from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.”

“No, I’m afraid not.”

“I know it,” said Herbie, gently disengaging himself from the bat and walking up to the tin whistle. “I can feather the notes if you provide the lung power. I’ll use my tail to signal the octaves, OK?”

Winifred nodded, removing her fingers from the holes and playing a middle C. Herbie signaled her to go up an octave, and then slowly used his wing feathers to play out the notes in the song. About halfway through they were joined by a wordless voice at a higher octave: Foxglove-A, singing in the ultrasonic range, but shifted down by the translator into a range that could be heard by humans and rodents.

Everyone applauded at the conclusion of the song.

“Thank you.”

“**A**LRIGHT, MULDER, I THINK IT’S safe to approach.”

“Ah good. I’ve already been electrocuted twice just standing here.” Agent Mulder stepped out of the shadows and took his place at the table. He was a tall man with black hair, a black trench coat, and an intense expression in between. From a pocket he gingerly extracted Sparky, getting accidentally sparked once in the process. He then placed another Dimensional Viewer on the table, identical to the first one. An image flashed on the screen of the new Viewer as soon as it was close enough to the Tesla coil to be powered, of the young man who was Mulder’s counterpart on Earth-A.

“I wonder what my counterpart looks like?” Sparky wondered, reaching out his hand.

“NO!” yelled everyone in warning, but it was too late. As soon as Sparky touched the handle, the screen of the Viewer cracked and a puff of smoke rose from the Tesla coil as it too died. The face of Tammy’s counterpart faded from the first Viewer, but other than the loss of power, it did not appear to have suffered any damage.

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

“That’s alright,” said Mulder. “I’ve got access to a full-sized Tesla coil, and I’ve been told these Viewers are very easy to repair.”

“Did you manage to see anything?” Herbie asked.

Sparky’s normally pale face was now even paler. “No,” he said, “but I think I had a vision, or a memory, of the place I originally came from. A world with Nimnul but no Rescue Rangers. Guys, we can’t let Nimnul come back here. It would mean the end of the world.”

AnnaComnena: The character named QuiverwingQuack was the secret identity of the character Gosalyn Mallard from Darkwing Duck. The fan named QuiverwingQuack wrote several well-received works of fanfiction centered on Gosalyn, but was eventually ostracized from that fandom because her stories conflicted with the fanon established by the Quackerwitz brothers.

AnnaComnena: Welcome, Amnesia.

Amnesia1983: Hello, everyone.

> MyMelody is not in this chat.

TuxedoSam: Hi.

Wexler: Amnesia1983? Are you the chick that made this chat such a pain to use? I had to upgrade my software just to use it!

Tom: Thank you, Anna, for that report.

Wexler: And the user interface is awful. All the cool Japanese chats have video avatars and sound clips. We're just stuck with text!

> MourningDove is in this chat.

Tom: Oh, and good evening, Amnesia.

Amnesia1983 to MourningDove: Do you know where MM is?

Amnesia1983: Would you rather have a flashy interface and risk being caught by you-know-who?

Wexler: Oh, he's not so smart. He's just a cartoon, after all.

Amnesia1983: I'd like to see you say that to his face.

Amnesia1983 to MourningDove: Are you there?

AnnaComnena: I finished the tally, and it's official: there are more British than American fans of "P&K" on this board.

TuxedoSam: That's because most of the Americans from the first fandom are now "lunatics". Still, I am surprised - I thought the show never aired outside the U.S.

Tom: It didn't. I don't know about the others, but I've always been fascinated by American culture and being a citizen of the world's lone superpower does give one plenty of free time.

TuxedoSam: Oh sure, rub it in, why don't you. ;)

Wexler: Alright, you tell me: how much security is enough security to keep the "big bad wolf" from the door?

Amnesia1983: My local computer is set to a foreign keyboard, performs triple encryption on EACH keystroke, encrypts the message to be sent, sends it to a router that takes a virtual address and translates it into one for one of 16 proxy servers, encrypts that and sends it off to the proxy. The proxy then decrypts what it got and sends it onto another one selected from 16.

Amnesia1983: Repeat that another 7 times before it gets to the proxy server running the actual chat client, there the message and keystrokes from my computer are decrypted, mapped to a QWERTY keyboard and fed into the same software you use.

Amnesia1983: And you thought you had a hard time chatting without the wolf finding you.

Wexler: Whoa. Hardcore.

> You have received an invitation to a private chat room by MyMelody. Do you accept? Y

> Welcome to the Administrator Lounge, Amnesia1983.

> MourningDove, MyMelody and Monkichi are already here.

> 4096-bit encryption has been engaged, and this chat is not being logged.

This chat room resembled a text editor from a decade ago, with only one line of text displayed at a time.

MyMelody: MourningDove, what is this?
MourningDove: What is what?
Amnesia1983: Hello.
MyMelody: The file you sent me.
MourningDove: It's the mathematical proof I promised you.
Monkichi: Good evening.
MyMelody: Yes, but what is it?
MourningDove: It's mathematical proof that the probabilities in a Sum of Histories can't add up to more than a hundred percent.
MyMelody: But why did you send it to me?
MourningDove: Because you told me that . . . hold on, when did you tell me? I could have sworn . . . I'm confused.
MyMelody: MourningDove, you're a dear and all, but you're also very strange. Now get back to the main chat.
MourningDove: Yes'm. Hello, Amnesia. And bye. ;))
MyMelody: Ah, welcome, Amnesia.
Amnesia1983: We should be safe to speak freely in this chat. So, who is Monkichi? I've been out of the loop the past week.
MyMelody: My father. He will be representing The Company.
Amnesia1983: Was he the one impressed with Nimnul's robot dog?
Monkichi: Well, it was a pretty good trick. Nice to meet you again, virtually speaking. I'm still not very comfortable with this internet thing, so expect some mistakes every time I open my mouth. Or type.
Amnesia1983: That was no trick. I examined the software and hardware for that robot myself. Dual CPUs and self-modifying code.
Monkichi: Except self-modifying code of that complexity had never been accomplished in my time. Unless you've seen otherwise?
Amnesia1983: Err . . . not that I can remember, but I think it's clear that he's sitting on the border to creating artificial sentience.
Monkichi: It's not a border I'd like to see him cross. I've heard rumors that he's up to something in that field, something big. Yet one more reason why we need to act fast.
MyMelody: Honker will be busy with the crowd out there, but he'll be keeping an eye on this chat in case he is needed. He's told me that you've been informed about the KEEN, my version of Nimnul's Dimensional Viewer.
MyMelody: It turns out the Rangers got a hold of Nimnul's viewer after he left their world, and Tammy used it to contact me. Thanks to her, I think we have a way to defeat Nimnul.
Amnesia1983: So what's the plan, Fearless Leader?
MyMelody: War.
Amnesia1983: Fearless, indeed. I'm in. What's the plan?
MyMelody: Nimnul's control of Earth depends on the Moon, which he is just about to lose. Our job is to make sure that Nimnul does not interfere before the transfer of power is complete.
Monkichi: The Company has taken control of the Vostaach airfield and rigged it to explode at a moment's notice. We have contingency plans for any other space port Nimnul might choose to use.
MyMelody: "We", meaning Assistant Director Klaudaine and his cronies.

Monkichi: No, "we", meaning my hand-picked team. I'm coming out of retirement, starting today.

MyMelody: . . . Dad, you didn't mention this before.

Monkichi: I didn't truly know how much this show meant to you before I finally went on the Internet and saw it with my own eyes. This is a level of organization to rival anything at The Company.

MyMelody: Thank you. You don't know how much this means to me.

MyMelody: Well, sorry to distract you all with that little family saga, but we still have a war to plan.

Amnesia1983: And what's the fandom's job in this plan? Distraction?

MyMelody: Distraction in the form of taking the Rangers out from right under Nimnul's nose and returning them to their own universe.

Amnesia1983: You're planning to just waltz into Gogol?

MyMelody: The fandom in the main chat is made up entirely of volunteers that have agreed to gather in front of Gogol and provide a distraction while I break in to get the Rangers. One of those fans is Thomas Grey, the Earl of Dorset, and he insists on paying for all of the plane tickets and bus fares. Those fans are even willing to be deported to the Moon if this whole plan fails, which is why it cannot fail. We must succeed, for the fans' sake as much as for the Rangers' sake. If you agree to join me, I'm sure together we can do this.

Amnesia1983: You're forgetting something. The bunker that contains the Dimensional Switcher is several hundred feet from the mansion. Once Nimnul knows what you're up to, he'll head straight there. I propose that I take control of the bunker at the same time as you get the Rescue Rangers. We will rely on Honker and the fans to keep the way between the mansion and the bunker open.

MyMelody: What about getting past Gogol's security?

Amnesia1983: Nimnul re-wrote the software from scratch after The Company disappeared, and he thought of nearly every angle.

MyMelody: So do we have a chance?

Amnesia1983: That depends. Are you still interested, Lain?

Lain: Yes, this sounds like fun. You can count on me to take care of security.

MyMelody: You brought Lain in here??? And how come I can't see her in the list of members?

Amnesia1983: I couldn't exactly stop her - Lain goes wherever she wants to. She also only allows people to see what they want to see of her on the Wired, hence her invisibility.

MyMelody: Well, Lain, if you truly believe in our cause, then I welcome your help.

Lain: This Rescue Rangers program interests me, especially the strong feelings of loyalty it inspires in its fans. For such a small fandom, you have quite a large body of work. More importantly, I do not desire for any person to control humanity, even if the majority of them appear to welcome their chains.

MourningDove: But aren't you in just such a position?

Lain: Not by choice, Honker. I do not wish for power over others. I am ready to give up everything I hold dear to guarantee freedom for humanity, and expect to receive only oblivion in return.

MyMelody: I trust you, Lain. Is everything in the main chat arranged?

MourningDove: Yes.

MyMelody: Then in the words of our heroes and inspiration: Rescue Rangers, away!

28. THERE AIN'T NO SUCH THING AS A FREE LUNCH

Earth-A

IT WAS A BLACK SKY with stars, and a blazing sun hung just over the horizon. It was morning on the far side of the Moon.

A figure in a spacesuit emerged from a crashed Eagle shuttle and started loping across the barren landscape at top speed, not once looking back.

All Francine could hear was the sound of her own labored breathing in the suit.

Minutes passed in monotonous travel, then a voice cut in on the radio: "I see you." It was Norton Nimmul's voice. The voice was not addressed to Francine alone. "I see all of you, people of Earth. Here in the limitless reaches of space, I can see Eternity. And compared to that, you are a contemptible lot of vermin."

Francine ignored the voice. All of her attention was focused on the ring of lights ahead that marked the position of Nuclear Waste Disposal Area 2. Slowly, far too slowly, it edged closer.

"I have raised you from darkness into light, from ignorance into reason. And yet you resist me. You flaunt my laws, reject my inventions, and spurn my invitation to conquer the universe. In this you are aided and abetted by those I would call my closest friends. Friends like Francine Nulton, who has made a habit of subverting my guiding instructions at every turn."

Francine reached the entrance to the complex. A clumsy glove danced across a keypad. "REJECTED." She tried another code, and another.

"I never asked for much: a little respect, no interference, and your firstborn children to man my army of conquest. Is that so much to ask?"

The door finally opened, and Francine passed into the airlock. She stood there impatiently as the lock cycled, continually checking the chronometer on her arm. It informed her that it was September 13th, 20:39 Lunar Time. She did not bother to remove her suit.

"Well I have taken the only part of Earth worth taking: its technology. And that leaves me free to pronounce sentence."

The lock opened, and Francine rushed forward through seemingly endless corridors at an impossible speed, towards a single flashing green light on a panel in a darkened room at the other end of the control center. Above the panel, through a wall-sized window, lay miles of radioactive

waste buried underground. Waste that has been rigged into the biggest bomb Man had ever made.

“For the crime of failing my expectations, the penalty is: Extermination. And ‘The Moon’ will be the name of your exterminator.”

Francine’s hand fell down towards the abort button, but was a second too late. The field before her erupted into light, and the window splintered into dust. Francine instantly blacked out.

S*HE AWOKE IN SPACE. By all rights she should have disintegrated, but somehow Nimmul was keeping her alive long enough to witness his revenge on humanity in full. Francine could not move a muscle, could not breathe, could not even will her eyes to close or look away.*

She saw the Moon, propelled by the blinding extended explosion on its far side, begin to move, first nearly imperceptibly, then gradually faster and faster, heading for the Earth. She could hear the screams of panic from all of humanity.

But before the Moon could collide with Earth, Nuclear Waste Disposal Area 1 on the Moon went up in a distinctly smaller explosion than NWD Area 2. Since this was on the near side of the Moon instead of on the far side, this explosion served to steer the wayward satellite into a course that took it past the Earth instead of into it. It continued on into deep space, seemingly only a little scorched but otherwise intact.

The result of this course correction on Earth, however, was to change an instant doom into a long, drawn-out one. Immense tidal effects caused massive earthquakes, tsunamis and volcanic eruptions that overwhelmed the Earth, ironically causing the clouds to clear for the first time in a half-century. Vast cracks in the ocean floor caused the oceans to drain, exposing the lost, and now dead, continent of Atlantis.

And above it all she heard the screams, the groans, the gasps of every living thing on Earth, as she saw its atmosphere turn a deep red in color.

The date was September 13th. And there never would be a September 14th.

W*ITH AN AUDIBLE SNAP, FRANCINE woke up. For a minute she lay still, listening to the sound of her heart. Then she opened her eyes and found herself looking into the impassive green face of Sparky. The mouse’s cage had been placed on her nightstand next to her glowing Moon rock. The clock told her it was 2:18 am on the morning of June 26th.*

She turned on the light and sat up. Nimmul’s bed was empty. Francine noticed that the cage had a false bottom. She pulled it out to discover a tape recorder. She made sure to lock the bedroom door before she hit the “play” button.

The recording began with an electronic voice announcing the date and time the recording was made: yesterday afternoon, while Francine was out dedicating an

elementary school. The same voice then continued: "Call for Francine Nulton from Vostaach Space Center."

"Francine's not here," said Nimnul.

"Shall I take a message?" the computerized voice asked.

"No, I'll take the call."

"Mrs. Nulton, this is Doctor Russell."

"You've wasted a trip to Earth, Doctor. There's no way I'll let you get me back into a hospital."

"Emperor Norton . . . this is an honor. I do wish you'd reconsider. I've finally found the results of the tests performed on you when you were admitted to the hospital and . . ."

"Those tests were an invasion of my privacy, given without my consent! I demand the results be destroyed immediately!"

"But Your Excellency, the CT scan shows a subarachnoid hemorrhage of the right frontal lobe, accompanied by high ICP! You must undergo surgery to relieve the pressure!"

"I will *not* have you, or any other doctor, cut me open!"

"Please, Your Excellency! Untreated, your TBI is liable to affect your personality, leading to emotional instability, paranoia, mania and inappropriate rage."

"I think my rage is very appropriate at the moment, considering that you wish to play around with the very gray matter that made me emperor! If you contact me again, I will have you arrested for harassment."

"I'm begging you, Nimnul! Just look in a mirror—if your pupils are still of uneven size, it's a sign of serious damage!"

"End call!"

"Call terminated," replied the electronic voice. "Shall I save this call?"

"No, delete it. No one must ever hear it."

The recording finished, Francine put the tape recorder back in the secret compartment in Sparky's cage. After all, it was the last place that Nimnul would care to look.

FRANCINE HEARD THE SOUND OF excited voices and rapid footsteps walking through the hallway outside the bedroom door, and judging by the brightness of the light under the door crack, every fixture in Gogol was on. Putting on slippers and a robe, she headed to the command center to see what was going on.

The room, although gigantic in size, was so crammed with computers and humans to operate them that there wasn't room to move. Dominating the proceedings was Norton Nimnul. The shell of his hover-pod was now a deep black in color, with silver hemispheres studded over its surface. His goggles were the same colors. He was floating a full ten feet in the air, turning constantly to keep his hidden eyes on the walls. Those walls were covered with Nimnul's plasma screens. Some of them showed news programs, while others showed the views from Nimnul's numerous cameras. All were focused on the Moon. The sound from the screens was muted, but the headline was clear enough: Nimnul's prisoners were free, and they were converging on Moonbase Alpha and demanding independence. One photo appeared over and over in the news coverage, the likely Pulitzer Prize winner of this story. Across the rubble of a collapsed wall, the diminutive form of Alice Wentworth in a yellow spacesuit led an enthusiastic rabble

onward. In one hand she gripped a laser rifle, and in the other was the home-made flag of the Loonies: “a black field speckled with stars, a bar sinister in blood, a proud and jaunty cannon over all, and below it the motto: ‘TANSTAAFL!’” The photograph was attributed to “J&M B.”

The private cameras showed the current stage of the revolt, as the crowd gathered in a corridor in front of the Main Mission area of the moon base. About seven of the large mountaintop lasers were trained on that corridor.

“All lasers locked on target,” announced a technician, one of dozens sitting at posts in the large room.

“You can’t!” cried Francine, stepping forward. “The only allies you have are in Main Mission, and an attack of that size will kill them as well!”

“I must make an example!” said Nimnul. “Fire!”

The technician pressed a button, and the corridor exploded. The technicians cheered.

“Silence!” yelled a suspicious emperor. “Aim the Number 6 laser at a random patch of ground.”

“But . . .”

“Just do it!”

“Laser aimed.”

Nimnul floated down and pressed the button, then frowned as the patch of lunar surface instantly exploded. “We’ve been duped!” he told them. “These displays are faked—it should take two and a half seconds for anything we do down here to have an effect on the Moon. How come none of you idiots noticed that during the drills?”

“Um, we thought you had increased the speed of light.”

“What do you take me for, some kind of miracle worker? Nobody can increase the speed of light!” An arc of electricity shot out of one of the silver domes on the hover-pod, and the technician fell unconscious. Nimnul dived down to take his place, and a rapid series of schematics started appearing on one of the monitors. “Ah, there it is! The source of the false signals. Now let’s see what’s really going on.”

The scenes changed, to show that Nimnul no longer had control of anything on the Moon. The revolutionaries, led by *Rescue Ranger* fans, had been given control of Moonbase Alpha by a willing public, and the lasers were no longer accessible from Earth. Commander Koenig and his staff had surrendered without a fight, and were currently in detention. And Nimnul’s hand-picked representative on the Moon, Reynard D. Keigh, appeared to be the mastermind behind it all.

“Treason! Treason, treason, treason, treason, TREASON!” The hover-pod rotated erratically, as Nimnul’s blood-shot eyes dared someone to give him an excuse to try out some more of the pod’s armament. Everyone’s eyes wandered nervously.

Nimnul returned to the Navi. “It’s time to bring out my ace in the hole. The robot army is not finished, but there’s more than enough of them to recapture the Moon before it’s too late.” The screen showed the contents of a large artificial cave containing tens of thousands of humanoid metal figures, with the form of Emperor Freewheel’s robot soldiers, and the minds of Emperor Nimnul’s robot dog.

“Emperor!” Bud announced from the doorway. “There are protesters gathered on the front lawn!”

Nimnul flicked a switch. The large center screen showed a group of several dozen people, chanting and marching with signs. A zoom showed that one of the signs read, "Release the Rangers!"

"*Rescue Ranger* fans?" asked Nimnul incredulously. "Now?"

"Maybe you should take care of them first," said Francine.

"Are you nuts? I may have a vendetta against them, but the situation on the Moon is life or death right now!" He turned to Bud. "Is the convoy ready to move?"

"Yes, your Excellency."

"Then we move, now." He floated out the door, followed by most of the technicians.

"But what do I do?" Francine asked.

Nimnul snapped his fingers, and Bud gave him a manila folder stuffed with papers, which Nimnul then passed to Francine, leaning in close. "*These procedures* are in charge while I am gone. All you have to do is follow them, *to the letter*. Bud, your job is to make sure she never deviates from my instructions. Let's see if you can do *that* right, Empress."

"Yes, your Excellency," Francine replied through clenched teeth. She wasn't sure, but from what she could see of Nimnul's eyes through the reflective lenses of his goggles, it appeared that his left pupil was considerably larger than his right.

29. THE RESCUERS

“*I THINK YOU SHOULD SWITCH to the dress now.*”

“I am *not* putting on that dress. Not until it becomes absolutely necessary.”

“*But it’s just a dress.*”

“It is *pink*, and *frilly*, and I hate it.”

“*Well, how else are you expecting to enter Gogol?*”

“That’s what the other box is for.”

“*The other box? No competent guard will fall for that!*”

“That’s what you don’t seem to understand. I know these men. They used to work for T.H.E.M., every one of them. They are all idiots, as the Masked Marvel has proved again and again. This plan will work.”

“*The henchmen of Japan are much more competent.*”

“I’m sure they are.”

IT WAS EARLY MORNING AT Gogol, and the guards standing at every door and window were tense. For the past four hours they had stood and watched as a group of nearly a hundred angry *Rescue Ranger* fans had marched up and down before them, waving picket signs with slogans using clever puns based on the words “Rescue” and “Ranger”. The police had refused to arrest them until a decent hour, so Francine had taken out her frustrations on the guards, making frequent circuits of the mansion accompanied by Bud and his manila folder. Once the police and their paddy wagon arrived, however, she returned to the control room, allowing the guards to stop holding in their guts. There was the mysterious matter of the unmarked ambulance driven by Lou, which arrived at the mansion at a perfectly respectable rate of speed, parked in the garage, and was then covered with a large tarp. Lou and his passenger, a commanding woman with platinum blonde hair, disappeared into Gogol, after which any questions asked about the matter were answered with a blank look and the words, “Ambulance? There was no ambulance.” On top of this, the mechanical dog was patrolling the grounds, and seemed to have trouble distinguishing between the protesters and the guards when deciding whom to apply its tinny bark to. The guards had been on duty for six more hours than they were used to, and hadn’t eaten for those six hours. Now they were stuck watching the lone paddy wagon come and go—there were a lot of *Rescue Ranger* fans to arrest.

The two guards posted at the servant’s entrance were sitting on the ground playing marbles when their sunlight was suddenly cut off. Looking up, they saw a teenage girl wearing penny loafers, cut-off blue jeans, a white tee-shirt, and a white baseball hat. The girl’s incredibly red hair spilled out in a ponytail from the back of the hat. Two pink cardboard boxes were stacked at her feet. A tiny radio was clipped to her hip, and two

wires led up to buds in her ears, from which the song “I Think We’re Alone Now” could be heard.

The two guards quickly stood up and grabbed their rifles, which had been so far away that the girl could have easily grabbed them before they did. “Halt! Who goes there?”

The girl grinned. “Hi! Like, the police sent me, or some such junk.”

One of the guards thought for a bit, a process that looked rather painful. “Shouldn’t you have a pass or something?”

“Well, yeah, duh, but like, I lost it. I’ve got donuts.”

“Did she say donuts?” the second guard asked, drooling.

“Yeah, they’re donuts. The cops sent them to the Empress to apologize for taking so long.”

“Well, I don’t know . . .” said the first guard. “We had strict orders not to let anybody in or out.”

“I suppose you could ask her . . .” the girl suggested, looking cute and holding out a cell phone the size of her head.

“BRING ME MY DONUTS—NOW!” screamed the voice of Francine Norton from the cell phone, followed by a loud dial tone.

SITTING AT A CAFETERIA TABLE in Los Angeles, Tress McNell looked over at Jay Cummins as she hung up the phone. “I’m going to get in *so* much trouble for that.”

THE FIRST GUARD SIGHED. “Alright, you can enter. I’ll need to escort you to the main entrance, so you can be fingerprinted and photographed for the log.”

“Uh, you don’t really have to do all that for a donut delivery, do you?”

“Regulations, miss. Backup regulations for when we have to break the strict orders.”

“But the cinnamon rolls will get cold!” Seeing that this got no response, the girl looked around dramatically to be sure they weren’t being observed, then continued in a low voice. “I’ve got band practice in less than an hour—couldn’t you see it in your hearts to just let me in? I mean, there’s an awful lot of donuts here, and I’m sure the Empress won’t eat all of them. Maybe I can let you two split one if you let me in.”

“One apiece!” said the second guard.

“Very well. The good ones are in the top box.”

The greedy guards reached for the box.

“*No, I think it’s the bottom,*” sang the voice of a Japanese girl in the girl’s ears.

“Oh wait, wrong box. The top one has all the plains.”

“Ew!”

The bottom box was opened.

“They’re beautiful!”

“Now, who wants chocolate, and who wants maple?”

“*I CAN’T BELIEVE THOSE TWO just sold out their employer for donuts,*” said the voice of Lain in Carolyn’s ear.

Carolyn had stepped into the cook's quarters and locked the door. "I told you they were idiots. Now hold on while I put this *thing* on." From the top box, Carolyn gingerly removed the pink frilly maid's uniform, like it was made of plutonium.

"YOU IDIOTS!"

The first guard at the servant's entrance was sitting on the ground, rubbing the jaw that had just been punched by Francine. The other guard had been less lucky, and had been knocked out.

Francine rubbed the remains of a chocolate old-fashioned off of her hand. "Come on," she said to Bud. "I know exactly where she's going."

"Hold on," Bud said, removing a piece of paper. "It doesn't matter what you know, your first step is to gather a force of ten guards, then . . ."

"Give me that!" Francine looked over the paper, titled "So You Couldn't Even Keep a *Rescue Ranger* Fan Out of Gogol." "Well, at least there are only five steps. Follow me, everybody. Everybody who's conscious, that is."

"ATTENTION, INTRUDER!" announced the voice of Francine blaring from speakers scattered throughout Gogol. "*We have the exits covered and are now searching room to room. Surrender now, or face the wrath of Nimmul.*" Francine switched off the microphone in the Control Room. "Is the script really necessary?"

"Yes," said Bud.

Francine sighed, and then pointed at the display before her. "Well, I don't know if I'm reading this correctly, but the guards are the only people in the hallways. The doors are all electronically locked, as are the double doors leading to the west wing of the second floor, where we both know she's heading. At least for now, nobody's in the master bedroom. Why can't we go right there and wait for her to show up?"

"Because that's Step Five, and we're still on Step Three."

Francine groaned.

CAROLYN WAS IN FACT STANDING in a hallway, but thanks to a programmer that thought that connecting the security system to the Wired would be a good idea, Francine was only seeing what Lain wanted her to see.

CAROLYN STOOD IN FRONT OF the door to the second-floor master bedroom, looking about her nervously. So far, her disguise had served to keep the guards from paying attention to her, but she wasn't sure how long her luck would hold out. She looked out the window at the end of the hallway. Loading the paddy wagon were Officers Lee and Murphy, a couple of beat cops. Carolyn used to hang out with them during the long nights when she wasn't sure if the Masked Marvel would be coming home or not. If she failed tonight, she'd have to explain herself to them, not to mention to all of the friends she'd be dooming to spend their lives on the Moon. "How much longer?" she whispered.

“This lock is particularly complex,” the voice of Lain said. *“In addition, the floor of the bedroom is pressure-sensitive, so I need to have that deactivated, and video loops prepared for the two video cameras so they won’t see you enter. All of this takes time.”*

Finally there was a click, and the automatic door opened itself.

“About time, Mike,” Carolyn muttered under her breath as she walked in.

The door suddenly swung back and lightly bopped Carolyn in the nose.

“Don’t call me Mike.”

CAROLYN RUSHED OVER TO THE cage containing the Rescue Rangers. “Thank goodness I found you guys! I was so worried.”

“Those are the Rescue Rangers?” Lain asked, using one of the room’s cameras to look at them. *“They look like any other group of mindless animals.”*

“That’s because they are bound by the laws of this universe. But I’m sure their true personalities are locked inside their brains.” She kneeled down and peered into their frightened eyes, as if she could summon them forth by her gaze alone. “If only I could free their minds, find some way so we could communicate.”

“I can not, I dare not, help you. There are consequences for every action, and what you ask would be the Reset a hundred times over. Besides, as interesting as it would be to see woodland creatures speak and perhaps even sing ‘The Best of Everything’, may I remind you that this is not required? You only need to get them to the Dimensional Switcher, regardless of their current mental state.”

Carolyn sighed. “True, but where’s the fun in that? Besides, as long as you control the mansion’s security and use it to act as my eyes and ears, why should I worry?”

“You need to worry that our enemies will do something clever.”

At that moment, all power to the mansion was cut.

“Clever? Maybe not. Inconvenient? Yeah, we just hit that.”

Seeing the unpowered door swinging shut, Carolyn picked up the cage and made a run for it, but it swung shut before she could get there, the lock clicking.

“Crud! Lain, have you got a Plan B or C? Or J? Heck I don’t care, just get us out of here!”

“Uh, most of my plans require Internet access. Or electricity. Yes, electricity is very good to me.”

“Any unpowered plans?”

“Well, you don’t happen to have a key or lockpick? Failing that, can you get the cage out the window?”

“Ahhh, window! Yes, we have a window! It’s too small for the cage, and I don’t think I can scramble down from the second floor anyway carrying it. We need a different plan, one that doesn’t end with Rangers going *splat*.”

“Well, if the Rangers were in their right minds, they could just ride in your pockets.”

“I’ll give it a try.” But as soon as she tried to open the cage, “Gadget” bit her, hard.

“Ow!” she cried, closing the door. “This had better not be about that ‘Chipper’ business!”

“Then I’m afraid my usefulness to you has ended. You should escape, then we can come up with a better plan.”

“No, I’ll take my chances with my fellow fans. You should go ahead and leave, before anybody figures out your part in this.”

“*Good luck, Carolyn. If I think of any way to keep you from a nasty fate, I will contact you.*”

“Thanks. Though somehow, that doesn’t feel very comforting.”

Lain’s voice in the earbuds was replaced with New Order singing “True Faith”. Carolyn ripped the buds out of her ears.

A FEW MINUTES LATER THE door burst open, revealing Francine with a key in her hand, surrounded by guards. “Step Five!” she proclaimed. Bud held up the piece of paper. “A-ha!” Francine obediently read. “Arrest him/her/them!”

The guards sprung forward and grabbed Carolyn, who put up no resistance.

Francine looked up from the page, to see the girl she had once baby-sat, who she sometimes saw as the daughter she would never have. “Why did it have to be you?” she asked in shock.

“Congratulations, Empress,” Carolyn addressed her coldly. “You have succeeded in capturing the nefarious QQ.”

Francine sighed deeply before resuming her expected role of interrogator. “If you’re QQ, then that leaves your fellow conspirator ConMouse. Where’s Laurel?”

“Laurel? Should I know a Laurel?”

“Don’t play dumb. She was a fan of the *Rescue Rangers*, she had the technical know-how, and she’s gone missing.”

“Maybe you arrested her already.”

“She hasn’t shown up in the reports.”

“Maybe she’s using another alias.”

“Perhaps. Well, boys . . .”

“Wait! My clothes are in the cook’s quarters.” She looked like being seen in public with a pink dress was a worse fate than lunar servitude.

“Get this woman her clothes. It would look bad if we appeared to arrest one of our own.”

“Thank you.”

Three of the guards escorted Carolyn out of the room. Francine walked over to the cage and looked inside, then sighed when she saw the animals in the same state that she had left them. “Bud?”

“Yes, your Excellency?”

“Get the car. We’re driving to Hartford.”

“You’re going to taunt the prisoners? I have a page for that.”

“I’m sure you do. Yes, we’ll be doing that, but first I need you to take me to the library. I have some arrangements to make.”

30. HARTFORD CITY JAIL BLUES

LEE AND MURPHY'S SILENCE ON the long trip across Connecticut was unbearable. When they finally arrived at the Hartford City Jail, Murphy opened the door and just stared at her in disappointment for a few seconds before finally asking, "Should we be expecting a breakout attempt by your father?"

Carolyn hung her head. "No heroics. I'm on my own."

WHEN CAROLYN WAS BOOKED INTO the Hartford City Jail, the entire building was reverberating from the sound of seventy-eight prisoners singing:

*Her hair is no-one-knows,
Her brain is over-size
She wears old greasy clothes,
She's got Gadget Hackwrench eyes!
She'll turn her naiveté on you,
You'll think her veins hold ice
She just don't understand,
She got Gadget Hackwrench eyes!*

Carolyn noticed that most of the police officers were wearing ear protection of one kind or another. "Mighty generous of you to let them sing song parodies like that," she told Sergeant Detweiler, her booking officer.

"Those Imperials brought it on themselves when they set up the monitoring equipment. It's supposed to broadcast to Gogol via the Wired, but the tech must have gotten a wire crossed, because all of our electronics have been on the blink ever since."

Carolyn looked around at the station, which still looked much the way it did in her childhood, although there were a few people she didn't recognize. Confirming Detweiler's story, everything was being done with pen and paper, and the computers were all turned off. In one corner, Detective Tenchure was explaining to the dispatch officer his theory of how the Emperor's missing Moon expert had actually been a Danaan spy disguised as a human, the truth covered up to protect Nimmul's reputation.

Her brief survey of the room also brought to her attention a mysterious man in a trench coat sitting in a dark corner. He appeared to be looking calmly at her. There was something oddly disconcerting about the man's appearance, like he was slightly out of phase with the rest of the universe.

She was not allowed to examine the man long before she was taken to the cellblock.

SEVENTY-EIGHT *RESCUE RANGER* FANS WERE the only occupants of four large cells. In the center of the hallway between them was a pair of television cameras and boom microphones, all obviously appropriated from station WHCT-46, which was hooked up to a boxy device with a long wire antenna that had been attached to the far wall with industrial-sized staples. The transmitter gave off a strong smell of ozone, and was apparently responsible for causing the television sets mounted from the ceilings of all four cells to simultaneously change channels at random intervals.

Instead of being intimidated by the smell, the television malfunctions and the loss of what little privacy they had left, the prisoners considered the existence of the equipment a very good omen. Although WHCT currently only broadcast home shopping and other paid programs, back in 1989 it was one of only eighteen stations in the country to broadcast every completed episode of *The Rescue Rangers*.

*She will drive you,
And arrive you
You'll be lucky you're still alive, You!
She's not porous, and this chorus
Has me using my thesaurus
She's gonna make some poor chipmunk die,
She's got Gadget Hackwrench eyes!*

THE CROWD, GATHERED IN FRONT of the cameras, erupted into cheers when they saw Carolyn join them, not knowing the significance of her presence here. Carolyn forced a smile and waved as she was let into one of the cells. The only look of shock and dismay came from Honker, who was sitting on the floor with a large sketchpad and pencil. His uncompleted sketch showed every Ranger character and fan avatar imaginable acting out a vast Broadway musical showstopper for the WHCT cameras.

Standing around Honker was his entire family.

“Honker!” cried Carolyn. “You never told me you’d be bringing them along!”

“They insisted,” said Honker sadly.

Honker’s brother Terence put his hand on Honker’s shoulder. “Yeah, first decent thing the shrimp’s ever done.”

“The poor dear looks cold,” commented Honker’s mother. “Let me knit you a sweater.” And pulling a pair of knitting needles and some yarn out of nowhere, began to do just that. By some strange law of opposites, this made Carolyn think of Madame Lafarge from *A Tale of Two Cities*.

Carolyn pulled Honker aside. “I’m so sorry . . .” she began.

He put a finger to her lip. “Not another word. Saving them was a long shot in any case. We need to regroup. But first . . .” Honker turned to address his fellow inmates in song. “*This is not the end / We don’t have to pretend / I’m one of many online friends / Of rodents who go find problems to mend / For I am . . .*”

Catching the cue, the crowd launched into “Ranger In Your Soul”, a song composed especially for the fandom by an unfortunate duo that were now spending time on the Moon. I think they called themselves Doctor Spock’s Backup Pair.

With the singing guaranteeing that their further conversation would not be monitored, Honker and Carolyn walked back through the crowd, receiving greetings on all sides.

“First of all,” said Honker, “there’s still your father and The Company. We may not have to do anything if they succeed.”

“I’d rather not take that chance, to be perfectly honest with you,” Carolyn replied.

“Well, if you have any ideas for escape, I’d love to hear them.”

“I’m working on it.”

THEY WERE APPROACHED BY A young man wearing a tailored suit. “Excuse me,” he said with an English accent, “I hope I’m not interrupting anything.”

“Depends.”

“Oh dear, I am interrupting. Sorry, I’ll just come back another time. It’s just that, you are MyMelody, aren’t you?”

“Try Carolyn, but what can we help you with?”

“Oh, you are her. I’m Tom, Tom Gray, and I’d just like to take a moment to *thank you* profusely for this entire experience. More fun than I’ve had in my entire life.”

“Carolyn, this is the Earl of Dorset. You remember, the fellow who kindly agreed to fund this entire venture? I’m sorry, no refunds.”

Tom looked at the young man in shock, before finally breaking out into laughter.

“Oh, you Americans and your dark humor!”

Carolyn meanwhile stood very still. The words “thank you” echoed around in her head for several seconds, until they finally found a match in a recent memory.

“Honker, you remember when I was telling you about the last time I contacted Tammy?”

Honker found himself trying to carry on two conversations at once. To Carolyn, he said, “that was the one that ended with a song for my pet bat, I believe.” To Tom he said, “Seriously, though, I didn’t expect you to actually show up in person. The funding was above and beyond the call of duty for a Ranger fan.”

“Oh it was getting frightfully boring being a lord,” explained Tom. “I’m hoping news of my arrest provokes a response from Parliament. Perhaps a declaration of independence.”

“Yes,” said Carolyn. “Somebody said ‘thank you’ at the end, right before the connection was broken. I never could figure out who it was. It was your Foxglove!”

“Wait, what?” said Honker in response to both of them.

Tom looked at Carolyn. “Go ahead.”

“Thanks. Yes, in the Rescue Rangers universe, your bat can talk.”

“But her mind came from this universe. Shouldn’t she be lacking the, um, capacity needed for that kind of thinking?”

Carolyn shrugged. “You’ve watched the show. Leaps of logic are commonplace there. Your Foxglove is in a cartoon universe, so she obeyed the laws of that universe. Just like the Rangers are here, and obey the laws of mundane reality. At least it appears that way.”

“Well, appearances can be deceptive,” volunteered the Earl of Dorset.

*Not to put too fine a point on it
We are the biggest fans on this planet
Keep a Rescue Ranger in your soul!*

“WILL CAROLYN MOWLARDEY PLEASE STEP forward?”

“That’s pronounced ‘Mallard’, by the way,” said Francine from the other side of the bars. Bud and his faithful folder were beside her. “Do you represent this group, Carolyn?”

“I’m never one to back down, so yeah.”

Tom stepped forward. “If you’re here to single out Miss Maughlarde for additional punishment, know that you’ll have to go through me, first.”

Francine smiled. “Very touching, Sir Knight. Don’t worry; I’m not here to dole out punishment. I came to satisfy my curiosity as to why you would throw away your freedom over such a ridiculous cause.”

“Oh, and Nimmul banning a cartoon isn’t ridiculous?” asked Honker.

“Nimmul could ban breathing on the surface of the Moon as well. Does that mean that somebody should go out there and prove him wrong?”

“If he can get away with banning one cartoon, he’ll move onto banning more and more until won’t be able to think without his say-so. Do you really want that?”

Francine shrugged. “That’s the chance you take when you put one man in charge of an entire planet.”

“Well, there’s your answer,” said Carolyn. “We followed our principles.”

“Ah, ‘principles’. I remember having those, once. Here, this is for you.” She handed Carolyn a Hartford Public Library copy of *Waldo & Magic, Inc.* “I’d appreciate it if you read it—it has a certain significance to me.”

Carolyn took the book and glanced at it. “Yes, I remember this book well. Here, Honker, a little light reading for you.”

Bud offered a page of taunts to Francine, who brushed it away. She was about to offer up the taunt she had been preparing on the drive up when she was interrupted by the voice of the shadowy man from earlier.

“May I have a minute of your time, Empress?”

Francine turned to face a man she had never met before, kneeling before her. A rolled up document was in one hand.

“Get up, get up!” she said, annoyed. “Who are you?”

“Just a simple citizen, your Excellency.”

“Sure you are.” Francine tried to study the man’s face, but found for some reason that trying to focus on it gave her a headache. “What is your business with me?”

“I have an anonymous petition to present to the ruler of Earth. Technically, I believe you have that role at present.”

“Yes, I am regent,” Francine said, taking the document from the man. “Let’s see what you want . . . you, you can’t be serious!”

“Oh, but I am, Empress. These prisoners are being grossly over-punished for a frivolous offense. I request the right to have Imperial Law 567423 referred to a public vote.”

“No citizen has the right to challenge Imperial law!”

“Actually, I have included documentation of my precedents,” the man said, pulling out one of the latter pages in the pile Francine was looking at. “See, *The State vs. Prince Richard*, 1948. Emperor Albert interrupted the trial by putting the terms of the treason law before a public vote. The public overturned the bloodline clause, and the prince was freed. This precedent was confirmed by Emperor Norton with the public trial of Anton Gorski.”

Francine glanced over at Bud, who was frantically digging through his file folder. “Is it possible that the Emperor’s ability to anticipate every situation has met its match?”

Bud sighed in defeat. “I’ve got nothing.”

Francine beamed. “Finally! Mister *Citizen*, I owe you a debt of gratitude, so I will do you a favor by expediting this matter. Believe me, you do *not* want the Emperor involved. I’ll tell you what: I’ll arrange for worldwide coverage of a one on one debate on the legality of Imperial Law 567423 tomorrow between noon and one, to be followed by public vote via the Wired and telephone during the following hour. Is that agreeable to you?”

The man bowed. “It is.”

“Good. I’m appointing myself as advocate in favor of the law. I look forward to meeting you on the field of rhetorical battle.”

“Not me, Empress.”

“Oh? Who do you appoint as your advocate?”

“Carolyn Maughlarde.”

Francine fixed the young woman with a piercing stare.

Carolyn didn’t blink. “What will be the specific terms of the debate?” she asked.

“First, is the television show *Rescue Rangers* treasonous in and of itself? And second, is fandom of *Rescue Rangers* a form of treason?”

“That is acceptable. I propose Galt Braunbight as moderator,” said Carolyn.

“Accepted. You do realize that even if you do manage to overturn this law, you are still guilty of trespassing?”

Carolyn nodded. “We respect the law, and fully expect to pay the fair penalty for our actions.”

“Principles again, huh? So be it. That book is due on the fifteenth, by the way.” And with that, Francine turned and walked out of the station, followed by Bud.

Carolyn looked long into the face of her rescuer. “Are you going to tell *me* your name?” she asked.

The man shook his head.

“Very well, I shall name you ‘Plato’. Thank you, Plato, for saving my life.”

The man smiled. “Then the debt has been repaid,” he said.

31. TOO MUCH THETA

AS USUAL WHEN YOU WERE hiding in an underground bunker and wanted to know what was going on in the world, you turned to the BBC. Here was the news at the top of the hour:

“The confrontation between Emperor Norton II and the renegade faction known as ‘The Company’ enters its second straight day, with the Emperor’s army of automatons in that rocket prevented from taking off by a constant missile barrage. Updates on the standoff will be reported when they occur.

“In related news, the alleged ringleader of the ‘Rescue Ranger Rebellion’, Carolyn Maughlarde, has challenged Empress Francine to a debate on the legality of the very law for which she is being held. The debate will be held tomorrow at . . . ” There was more, but Laurel tuned it out.

She was busy with the Dimensional Controller, the device that set the destination for both the Dimensional Viewer and the Dimensional Switcher. Nimmul had created personalized tracking devices for hunting down the Rescue Rangers’ counterparts based on the Viewer. The particular device used to hunt down Monterey Jack’s counterpart was never returned to the Emperor, and a reverse-engineered circuit diagram had appeared on the Wired a few days later. Laurel had a printout of this diagram and had heavily annotated it before she had come anywhere near the bunker. With its help, an electrical meter and colored tape, she was able to decipher operation of the Dimensional Controller in record time. Once this was complete, she started replacing the knobs of the device, in an order that made more sense to her than the one used by Nimmul. She then got out some resistors and made some modifications: the Theta control did not go far enough in the positive direction for her tastes, and the Omega control was too wonky and needed a finer grain.

“Hey Laurel, guess who I look like?”

Laurel looked up to see Lou, his hand on the spark generator. What little hair he had was sticking up in all directions.

“If only you had the brains to go with the Emperor Albert look . . . ” replied Laurel with a grin.

Lou chuckled and removed his hand to pick up a small cage with a guinea pig in it. “I decided to pick up Buzz while I was getting dinner. Of course, just because I named him ‘Buzz’ doesn’t mean that he’s the real Buzz’s counterpart. I mean, what are the odds?”

“Of course that’s Buzz. I am a firm believer that everything happens for a reason. It’s how I maintain my sanity at night.”

Laurel put the control back together. Like the original Dimensional Viewer, the control was made up of ten rotary dials. Instead of handlebars, there was a metallic

panel. There were catches on the side of the panel to allow a small lab cage to be slid into place.

She reached over and flipped a switch that connected the Controller to the Viewer. She zeroed all the controls, and then placed her hand on the panel. She was disappointed to see only a dark mess of lines. She reached over with her free hand to make an adjustment, watching how the display changed in response.

“Well, the viewer seems to work, in a fashion,” she told herself. “The question is: what’s wrong?” A second subject wouldn’t hurt. “Lou, you try placing your hand on that panel.”

Lou placed his hand where he was told and the screen showed a shot of the back of his head, about a foot back.

“Interesting,” she said. “It appears to be working for you but not for me, almost as if the scale . . . hold on, I got it.” With a few adjustments, she was able to see herself properly. She then used her notes to set the controls to the *Rescue Rangers* universe. She replaced her hand on the plate, to see Lahwhinie standing on a beach at night, her hands on her hips. Far out at sea, Shaka-Baka was trying to surf in near-total darkness. Laurel nodded in satisfaction.

Lou glanced back and forth between the display and Laurel. “Well, one of the great questions has finally been answered, or near enough. I’ve seen lots of fanart of human Gadgets, and nobody drew anything like you.”

Laurel shrugged and removed her hand from the panel. “You want a try?”

“No-no-no-no. Human’s good enough for me. Try Sparky instead.”

Laurel picked up a nearby cage with Sparky in it and slit it over the pad. The scene on the Viewer changed to show the cartoon Sparky talking to Buzz. She switched cages with Lou, and got the other end of the same conversation.

“See, what did I tell you?” Laurel handed the two cages to Lou and picked up one of the sandwiches he had brought from the store. “Why don’t you play with them for a bit? I’ve got a few things to work out here.”

“Oh, sure thing.”

When Laurel was sure Lou was no longer in sight of the Viewer, she reset the controls, then turned the Theta control to its new maximum setting and lightly brushed her finger across the plate. For that instant, her face was bathed in a deep red glow the color of blood.

It took a few moments before her heart resumed beating. “Too much Theta,” she gasped.

32. TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES

10 CPTV (PBS, Connecticut) The New Stoicism

“The Twentieth Century has taught us two important lessons.

“First, the universe is populated by a multitude of strange and wondrous species, many of whom are far superior to us in intellect and technological progress.

“Second, they all despise humanity and wish we were dead.

“How is the thinking person to respond to this?”

CLICK

39 TBS Movie: Raiders of the Lost Ark

“Get back to Cairo. Get us some transport to England: boat, plane, anything. Meet me at Omar’s. Be ready for me. I’m going after that truck.”

“How?”

“I don’t know, I’m making this up as I go.”

CLICK

20 WTXX (UPN, Waterbury) People’s Choice Movie of the Week

“We now return you to the movie voted Connecticut’s favorite for the fifth week running: Soylent Green.”

“You’ve got to tell them! SOYLENT GREEN IS . . .”

CLICK

19 WGN Magnum, P.I.

“As you may have noticed, I have fired the groundskeeper. Until I find a successor, Magnum, I’d like you to assume some of the responsibilities.”

“But Higgins, I don’t know the first thing about gardening!”

“I assure you, the kind of work I had in mind requires no intelligence whatsoever.”

“Like what?”

“Like distributing fifteen hundred pounds of recycled vegetation that was delivered this morning.”

“Recycled vegetation? What do you mean ‘recycled vegetation’? Recycled how?”

“Through a cow, of course.”

CLICK

77 CSPAN

Senate Subcommittee On the U.S. Auto Industry

“Chairman, the picture you paint of your company is indeed dire. What do you think needs to be done to save the auto industry?”

“Save it? There’s nothing that can be done to save it. All things must inevitably end. Sure the American auto industry had a good run, but it’s time for others to take over, as we sink into inevitable obsolescence.”

“. . . oh. I guess you’re dismissed, then.”

CLICK

82 HBO

Movie: Real Genius

“I never sleep, I don’t know why, I had a roommate I drove her nuts, I mean real nuts, they had to take her away in an ambulance and everything, she’s okay now, but they had to transfer her to another school, but I don’t know if that had anything to do with my fault, but listen, if you ever need someone to listen when you need to talk you just let me know, because I’m just a couple doors down from you guys and I never sleep, OK?”

CLICK

36: ESPN

SportsCenter

“Today’s Career-Ending Move of the Week is brought to you by the Life Insurance Industry. When your career inevitably ends in failure, isn’t it comforting to have a good life insurance plan?”

CLICK

41 TNN

Movie: “Crocodile” Dundee

“Mick, give him your wallet!”

“What for?”

“He’s got a knife!”

“That’s not a knife. This is a knife.”

CLICK

53 MTV
Total Request

*“Cause it’s a bitter sweet symphony, this life
Trying to make ends meet
You’re a slave to money then you die
I’ll take you down the only road I’ve ever been down
You know the one that takes you to the places
where all the veins meet yeah*

*No change, I can’t change
I can’t change, I can’t change
But I’m here in my mind
I am here in my mind
But I’m a million different people
from one day to the next
I can’t change my mind
No, no, no, no, no.”*

CLICK

27 Disney
Movie: The Rescuers

*“Oh, it’s that poor little young-un. She’s trying to run away again.”
“It’s Penny. Oh, how terrible. Hurry, we’ve got to find out where they’re taking her!”
“You need a boat. Evinrude’s got the fastest boat around here. Evinrude, wake up! Start up the engine, boy! Send Evinrude back as soon as you need help.”*

CLICK

70 CNN
Headline News

“ . . . there were no survivors. We now turn to Greg Evans with the latest update of ‘The Emperor Under Siege’.”

FINALLY HEARING SOMETHING THAT INTERESTED her, Carolyn turned to look at the television, hoping that she would hear something useful before the channel randomly changed again.

Underneath the image of the news anchor at his desk, the scrolling tickertape read
 “SERBIA SEALS KOSOVO’S BORDER WITH ALBANIA.”

“Yes, *this is Greg Evans, here in Cape Canaveral, Florida, where the siege enters its second day.*”

“LIAR” read the tickertape. “IF THE SIEGE WAS STILL GOING ON . . . ”

CLICK

05 WNYW (Fox, NYC)

Sam & Max

“Death from above!”

Oddly for a Saturday morning cartoon, *Sam & Max* had a news ticker identical to CNN’s. It read, “. . . WHERE IS THE SOUND OF THE ASSAULT?”

“Lain?” Carolyn asked the television. “Is that you?”

“PLEASE COME CLOSER TO THE MICROPHONE, I CAN’T HEAR YOU VERY WELL.”

Carolyn and Honker positioned themselves so they could watch the television and still be heard by the Emperor’s monitoring equipment, which Lain had managed to commandeer once again.

“Is the Emperor’s robot army defeated?” asked Carolyn.

CLICK

18 WHCT (Independent, Hartford)

Pinky & the Brain

“Well I think so, Brain, but if Jimmy cracks corn and no one cares, why does he keep doing it?”

“YES, BUT NIMNUL SURVIVED, SO YOU HAVE TWO HOURS BEFORE HE RETURNS TO CONNECTICUT.”

“How are you doing this?” asked Honker. “That’s an analog set.”

“A SIMPLE MATTER OF MODIFYING THE SIGNAL AT THE TRANSMITTER.”

CLICK

09 WWOR (UPN, NYC)

Extreme Dinosaurs

“These dinosaurs . . . are extreme.”

“IT WOULD TAKE A TIME LORD TO BE ABLE TO RECONSTRUCT THIS CONVERSATION.”

“Stop showing off,” said Carolyn. “Just out of curiosity, how was Nimnul defeated? How was my father involved?”

CLICK

86 TMC**Movie: Rustler's Rhapsody**

"Rex is coming! He's coming! And he's standing in the saddle!"

"Standing in the saddle?"

Yup, standing in the saddle.

"YOUR FATHER HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH IT. THE DAY WAS SAVED BY SOME JERK IN A MASK AND CAPE."

"The Masked Marvel!"

CLICK

03 WFSB (CBS, Hartford)**The "Weird AI" Show**

"This just in: 'ping pong' spelled backwards is 'gnop gnip'."

"THE SAME. HE TOOK DOWN THE ENTIRE ARMY WITH DOCTOR IRWIN'S SECRET WEAPON."

"Not the nuclear-powered robo-bees?"

"YES."

"Nuclear-powered robot bees?" asked Honker. "That sounds impossible, even for Dr. Irwin. Did any of her inventions work before?"

"Well, the KEEN worked, but not as she planned. The stuff she made based on other people's designs worked. Otherwise, nothing she invented worked . . . before the day she met Nimmul."

Honker looked down at the copy of *Waldo & Magic Inc.* in his hands. "You're not saying . . ."

CLICK

48 Sci-Fi**MST3K: Invasion of the Neptune Men**

"A tiny stick! No! Cancel the invasion!"

"Yes, of course! Why didn't I think of that before?"

"YOU BETTER NOT BE THINKING WHAT I THINK YOU'RE THINKING."

"Nimmul changed nothing! Magic is loose in the world!"

"THAT'S WHAT I WAS AFRAID YOU WERE THINKING—YOU'VE GOT THIS ALL WRONG."

"The world is pleuripotent, and reality is just a consensus opinion."

"THIS IS A VERY DANGEROUS ROAD YOU ARE HEADING DOWN. I URGE YOU TO THINK VERY CAREFULLY BEFORE . . ."

"CAROLYN MAUGHLARDE?" ASKED OFFICER LEE.

"Yes?"

“Your transport is waiting for you outside. There’s also a package waiting for you.”

“And it’s not even my birthday! Goodbye, folks!”

“Good luck!” said Tom.

“You know what, I think I’ll make my own luck.”

“YOU’RE PUTTING US ALL IN GRAVE DANGER! IF YOU ARE NOT VERY CAREFUL, YOU COULD BRING THE WHOLE WORLD DOWN AROUND YOU! DO NOT MAKE THE MISTAKES THAT I MADE! CAROLYN! CAROLYN!”

CLICK

48 Sci-Fi

V: The Series

“You know, I never lost in mortal combat.”

“Idiot. If you had, you’d be dead.”

CLICK

THERE WAS A STEEL CAGE on the mahogany table.

The cage was three feet across, two feet high, and two feet deep. It was made up of steel bars spaced a half-inch apart. The door of the cage was secured with an ancient brass smokehouse padlock, the keyhole covered with a sliding panel in the shape of a lightning bolt. The floor of the cage was covered with woodchip bedding, and a full glass water bottle was attached to an inside wall. Inhabiting the cage were two chipmunks, two mice, a small turtle and a pink bat. Hanging inside the cage from the back wall were five plastic doll hangars. The first held a little faux-leather jacket and a matching fedora with two slits cut in the top, the second held a little Hawaiian shirt, the third a not-so-small aqua pullover sweater, duffel coat and aviator’s cap, the fourth held an oddly-shaped red pullover sweater, and the last held a small lavender jumpsuit, belt and blue goggles. Sitting behind the table and looking at this clothing in some confusion was Galt Braunbight, a veteran newscaster who thought he had seen everything strange and unusual in the course of his career. On the opposite side of the cage was a television camera. Seeing that the camera was transmitting, Braunbight pushed the cage to one side.

“Ah, good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. What you just saw is the center of the controversy that brings the world today to Gogol Mansion, in picturesque northwestern Connecticut. Those were the Rescue Rangers. Please note that I am only allowed to say the words ‘Rescue Rangers’ today because I am discussing the law that forbids their utterance together. Under any other circumstances, saying those two words is considered a felony. And having any closer association with these Rescue Rangers is an act of treason against Emperor Norton II. The statute that instituted these rules, Imperial Law 567423, has been brought up for review by you, the people of Earth.

“This is a very unusual procedure, only used once before, when this hair of mine was still its natural color. Back then, the voting procedure was done with telephone and plain old mail. Those methods will still work, and the appropriate addresses and phone numbers should be scrolling at the bottom of your screen. The preferred method,

however, will be by way of the Wired, using the ‘567423 Review’ node. This method will verify your identity and employ a whole host of other anti-fraud measures that an old fogey like myself couldn’t begin to understand. That node also has the complete text of the law and statistics regarding how it has been implemented and how much has been spent to enforce it. By one of these three means, you will be asked to decide whether this law should continue to stand, or if it should be overturned and all individuals convicted of violating it should be pardoned.

“That brings us to the main purpose of this broadcast, to provide a debate between advocates arguing to maintain or to abolish this law. The debate has been sponsored, with limited commercial interruptions, by Coo-Coo Cola (‘Bottled in Pensacola’) and Coin/Clutch Jewelers (‘When You Simply Must Be Wearing the Largest Gem in the Room’). I, Galt Braunbight, will be the moderator of this discussion to present the different sides of the issue. Arguing in favor of the law, we have Francine Orlac Nulton, daughter of millionaire industrialist Peter Orlac, empress of the world, and one of the most intelligent and cultured women I have ever had the pleasure of meeting. Mrs. Nulton, it is an honor to meet you once again.”

“Why, thank you.”

“And may I also note that you have done an excellent job of maintaining and restoring this mansion? This place is absolutely spotless.”

“Oh, well thank you once again. I try to do my best to keep the forces of decay at bay in my home.”

“And that dress . . .”

“This? Oh, it’s nothing.”

“I forgot to ask: how has your quest to regain control of Orlac’s Machines gone?”

“As a matter of fact, the judgment came down this morning: I am now president of the company.”

“Congratulations! If I may ask, what are your plans?”

“Well, once I have the company reorganized to my satisfaction, I intend to replace the current product line with something worthy of the Orlac name. But enough about me. Surely you need to introduce my opponent in the debate.”

“Well, if *you* insist.”

“I do.”

“Very well. Arguing against the statute is Carolyn Maughlarde, high school graduate, in some parts of this country not even a legal adult.”

“I suppose I should resent that.”

“Ah-ah-ah! It’s not your turn to speak yet, young lady.”

Francine Nulton was indeed impeccably dressed and coiffed. Carolyn, on the other hand, despite her best efforts to the contrary, still looked like she had spent the last twenty-four hours in jail. The two women were standing behind podiums on a raised stage at one end of the conference room. Next to Carolyn’s podium was a head-sized cardboard box. Peter Orlac had included the conference room in his 1958 renovation of Gogol, but it had rarely seen any use. Peter Orlac had preferred his New York offices for announcements, while Harold Largess preferred more grandiose locations, like standing on the head of the Statue of Liberty. Above their heads was a large skylight, relic of an era when people actually had a reason to look up at the sky. All it showed currently were gray clouds and a steady torrent of rain falling vertically.

“Do *I* get a turn to speak?”

“The debate will be in two parts,” Braughnbright continued. “The Empress will begin by stating her position on the first topic for debate for three minutes, and then the challenger will be allowed to express her position for two minutes. This will be followed by a five-minute period where the two debaters will be allowed to question each other. It will be my job to make sure this part of the debate remains civil, and I may extend the time limit at my discretion. After that, the challenger will have three minutes to sum up, and the Empress will get two minutes to have her final word. After a brief intermission, the second topic for debate will follow, with the order of speaking reversed. Finally, if the debate has raised any additional topics worthy of discussion, those will be covered one at a time in the same format as before. With the rules established, let us begin.

“The first topic of debate is the *Rescue Rangers* television program. Imperial Law 567423 holds the contents of this program to be treasonous to the Emperor. Would Your Excellency care to explain why this is the case? You have three minutes.”

Francine nodded. “Galt, ladies and gentlemen of the world, I bid you welcome to Gogol, the home of Emperor Norton Nimmul. The deeds of Norton Nimmul do not need to be stated; they are known by every one of you. And his work for the world continues today. Even as we speak, the Emperor is risking his life to personally lead an expedition to recover the Moon from the band of miscreants who have seized it, a group that if not stopped will be in a position to indiscriminately lay waste any spot on Earth they should choose.

“Norton Nimmul’s job is to protect the world from any sort of extraordinary danger it should face, and, in addition, he considers it his obligation to use his genius to serve this world, to improve the quality of life of every person living upon it. In return for this responsibility, he is granted certain rights not given to most people on Earth. For example, he has a security force, paid for with public funds, to protect him from the deranged individuals that always tend to fixate on those more powerful and beloved than themselves.

“With Imperial Law 567423, the emperor has requested another privilege: the right to protection from slander. The emperor has made the details of his past public knowledge. The *Rescue Rangers* program, on the other hand, was made without the emperor’s participation, and without his consent. How, then, can it be trusted to truthfully portray the details of his life, especially as this show casts the emperor as one of the antagonists? The answer is that it cannot.

“In addition, the very existence of this program is suspicious. So long before Norton Nimmul’s arrival, how could anyone have known about his existence? The creator and head writer of the show, E. Thaddeus Rockwell, always claimed in interviews that the show was completely fictional. Now that the presence of Norton Nimmul has revealed this claim to be a lie, Mr. Rockwell is nowhere to be found. He has become a fugitive from the law.

“So where did Mr. Rockwell learn about Norton Nimmul? We can only speculate, but the emperor has a theory. He believes that Mr. Rockwell was contacted across the dimensions by the evil genius of the Rescue Rangers, Gadget Hackwrench. This Gadget must have invented a device that allowed her to communicate with individuals on parallel Earths, and she used this to propagate her lies about those individuals on her enemies list. Norton Nimmul was especially targeted, because of his genius, of which she was

understandably jealous. Is it any wonder, then, that on the *Rescue Rangers* show that resulted, this same Gadget is portrayed as a nearly-perfect character? While Norton Nimnul, on the other hand, is shown as grotesquely short and hunchbacked, a stereotypical mad scientist complete with lightning-equipped mountaintop laboratory?

“In short, *The Rescue Rangers* is a tissue of lies, deliberately designed to harm the reputation of Norton Nimnul, and hinder him from carrying out his work for humanity. For this reason, the show should be banned, and all recordings of it destroyed.”

Braunbight turned to Carolyn, picking up a stopwatch. “You may begin your rebuttal to the Empress and the seven hundred million people currently watching this broadcast . . . now.”

It took a moment for the young woman to find her voice, as the weight of all those people sunk in. “Ladies and gentlemen,” she finally began, “our world has been graced with *The Rescue Rangers*, which we thought was a fictional TV show. The critics of the time thought it was, the people who watched it thought it was, and yet here we stand in a world ruled by a character from that show. It was *not* fiction, it was news, and news is exempt from prosecution.

“This TV show was not staged, it was merely a person reaching out and somehow seeing the adventures of this group of animals, in another parallel universe. The show was not one that was built as a ‘tissue of lies’, rather it was merely as if someone recorded real life, and that is exactly what it was. The fact that it seemed to come out episodic was just a byproduct of the sorts of adventures that this group of animals were having. In that, the show is reality, the show is truth, the show is real. The events that happened within the show are reality, true and real, and the fact that they are not flattering to Nimnul is an unfortunate consequence of that reality and the events of another dimension. If he acted badly in that world, then that should be his problem, not ours for knowing what he did.”

“Time’s up.”

“I’d like to know in what universe that was two minutes,” Carolyn muttered.

Braunbight ignored that remark. “You now have five minutes to address each other.”

“Nice speech,” said Francine. “One problem though: your theory is just as speculative as the Emperor’s.”

“Ah, but I have proof.” And with this, Carolyn picked up the cardboard box at her feet and removed from it a red football helmet with wires and lights attached.

“Was that part of your Halloween costume last year?”

“Yes, it’s a blender and an inter-dimensional viewing apparatus, all in one! Nimnul himself said that he did not invent the Dimensional Viewer. It was created in the 1940’s of his world, and it was very easy for him to reproduce it when he arrived on this world. Therefore, it should be no surprise that it was independently created here, on this world. It’s called a KEEN, for Kaon-Emission Equivoyant Neuralyzer. Like the Dimensional Viewer, it shows you what your counterpart on another world is up to. E. Thaddeus Rockwell, contrary to his interviews, used it to create *The Rescue Rangers* show, and I managed to get my hands on it around the time of his disappearance.”

“Does it still work?”

“It works wonderfully, and I’d be happy to demonstrate its use. Hopefully that will convince you that the show was based in fact.”

“If the KEEN is what you say it is, then I myself will make a much better subject. My counterpart was the antagonist in an un-produced episode of the *Rescue Rangers*. I managed to find a copy of the script on the Wired, and it was quite prejudiced against me. I did not want to bring this up before, because the law was created to protect the Emperor, but I should point out that the *Rescue Rangers* had other antagonists on their show besides Norton Nimnul, any of whom might have counterparts with reason to not want to see this show aired.”

“I’ll certainly give you the chance to try this device out to view your counterpart. May I first ask her permission before I give you access to her mind? She’s currently sitting right next to my counterpart.” Carolyn put on the KEEN and flicked a switch, causing several lights to start flashing. “Hello, Tammy, are you receiving me?” As she said this, she turned a dial on the side of the helmet.

“*Receiving you clearly, Carolyn,*” said a voice which emerged from the helmet and which was caught by Carolyn’s podium microphone. The voice sounded similar to Carolyn’s, but different somehow, like it was coming out of a smaller voicebox. “*Winifred is with me. She’s on lunch break, so we have to make this quick. I’ll put her on the Viewer now.*”

Francine’s eyes narrowed as she realized that this whole scenario was planned in advance. “On second thought,” she said, “I’m not sure I want to place a strange device on my head. I hope you understand.”

“Well then, we are at an impasse. Without a demonstration, how can I prove my claim that the *Rescue Rangers* show is based on truth?”

“The answer is simple. If the KEEN is truly based on the same principle as the Dimensional Viewer, we can move the venue of the debate to the bunker where the emperor keeps that device, and I can safely contact Winifred from there.”

Carolyn reached up and turned down the volume on the KEEN, using this gesture to hide her momentary look of apprehension at the thought of Laurel being discovered.

Francine looked down at the podium and spotted a speck of dust. Noticing that the camera was now pointed at Carolyn, she got out a cloth and some wood cleaner and proceeded to scrub the speck into oblivion.

“Can we get all this television equipment down there?” Carolyn stalled. “I saw an interview with the Emperor soon after the switch, and it looked awfully small.” She stopped to hear something from Tammy before continuing. “That’s right, Tammy! The dampness down there will probably fog up the cameras. And the smell! It was converted from a bat cave, after all. Have you ever been down there, Your Excellency?”

Francine shuddered, and then started writing something on a scrap of paper. “You know, I wouldn’t want to delay the debate just to move to another location. We are already taking up the valuable time of the people of the Earth by having this discussion, so let’s not waste it. The Emperor originally constructed a working model of the device he used, before creating the machinery in the bunker. That model, and the Tesla coil that powers it, is still locked in a safe in the second guest bedroom. I’ll have somebody retrieve it.” One of Francine’s guards passed her on the way out of the room, receiving the piece of paper with the safe’s combination on it.

A FEW MINUTES LATER, THE Tesla coil was sitting in the center of the conference room, spitting sparks in every direction. The television producers were not very happy with the amount of noise it produced, and had to take care never to have the coil and anybody in the same shot, as the brightness of the sparks drowned everything else out. After cameras were repositioned, more-appropriate microphones were substituted, and Francine triple-checked the settings on the model Dimensional Viewer on her podium, the debate could continue. Francine turned the device around in her hands. Unlike the original, this Viewer had a speaker attached.

“Tammy? Tammy?” asked Carolyn, still wearing the helmet.

“Yes?” the voice of Tammy replied.

“Change of plans. We’ll be doing this one-way only. Winifred is not to use the Viewer. Just have her try to stay calm and keep her mind open.”

“Done,” Tammy replied after a pause.

“Go ahead,” Carolyn told Francine.

Francine lightly rested her hand on the Viewer’s handlebar. And saw the face of a red-furred cartoon character on the screen. It looked like no species she had ever encountered in the real world. She was seeing this character over the shoulder of a red-haired cartoon woman, who was sitting on the ground in the middle of a stereotypical mad scientist’s laboratory. *Of course*, Francine thought glumly. *Nimnul’s old laboratory, straight out of the cartoons—where else would you go to make me look like an idiot?* Thinking about turning her head caused the display to move accordingly, revealing a man and a woman in black trench coats, as well as a bird, a pink bat, two chipmunks, two mice and a fly. The last five characters were obviously the Rescue Rangers, even unclothed, while the bat was Foxglove. They were all looking at the red-haired woman when she suddenly spoke.

“I think that’s her,” she said, in a voice very similar to Francine’s. This woman was Winifred.

Francine saw now that Winifred’s head appeared to be semi-transparent. With an effort, she plunged inside it. The image on the screen continued to show the group in Nimnul’s lab, but now superimposed upon Francine’s vision was the landscape of Winifred’s mind, a pink void in which floated memories and stray thoughts (one of which was “Whoa. That was weird.”). Francine “grabbed” the most interesting memory and “spread it out” so she could “read” it.

THE SCENE WAS PITCH BLACK.

“Winifred Cadwallader,” *said the voice of a mouse.*

“Who said that?” *Winifred asked, quietly, remembering what the guards did to her the last time they thought she was talking to herself.*

“We are the agents of the Prisoner’s Aid Society. Our first duty is to help all of those poor souls who have been wrongly imprisoned.”

Winifred paused here. There was something that needed to be said, but she didn’t want to say it. “So you think I’ve been wrongly imprisoned?” she asked, finally.

No response.

Winifred sighed. "I haven't been wrongly imprisoned. I have sought to impose my will on other sentients without their consent."

"It is good to have admitted this," replied a second murine voice.

"You are now ready for our services."

"But you said . . ."

"The first duty of the PAS is to assist the wrongly imprisoned. The second duty is to rehabilitate Speakers who have been rightly imprisoned."

"The guards are coming with your dinner," the first voice said. "One of them has bet the other that they can provoke a temper tantrum out of you by calling you 'Freddie'. If you arrange for him to lose that bet, we will return in two hours."

"I will," vowed Winifred, having for the first time in years a good reason to behave.

"IINTERESTING . . ." SAID FRANCINE. The turn of an imaginary knob caused the vision of Winifred's mindscape to fade most of the way out of existence, returning the world of the conference room to the fore, a reminder that she had to watch what she said, as well as what Winifred said, as both were being picked up by the microphone on her podium. It also appeared that time had ground nearly to a halt while she was exploring, as the expressions of those around her looked identical to before. Francine turned the knob back to its original setting, returning focus to the inside of Winifred's head.

She grabbed another memory . . .

WINIFRED WAS WEARING A SHAPELESS lavender dress, a purple vest with white stars, and a headband. She was sitting astride a canister vacuum, which had decided to violate the law of gravity by floating a foot above the roof of a museum.

"Straggly scrub-brushes," she swore to herself. "What's taking those two so long?" She looked up to see Foxglove, hovering through more natural means. "Well, look who's shown up at last. It's about time!"

The bat landed on the end of the vacuum's hose attachment. "I . . . I brought you the list of ingredients, Winifred," she said, holding out a piece of typing paper on which was written a list of five items. The first two had been crossed off, leaving "Lightning Bug Bulbs", "A Chieftain's Hair" and "A Moon Rock".

Winifred grabbed the list. "Oh, some helper you are," she snapped. "I don't need this list anymore! Now get in there and help the others before I turn you into a Louisville Slugger!"

"Yes, of course, Winifred! Right away!" The bat took off and flew down over the edge of the building. Less than a minute later, she returned, with a slightly glowing rock clutched in her feet.

"Well, well, Foxglove!" she declared. "You succeeded! Maybe you'll make a decent witch's assistant after all!"

“Really? Do you really think so?”

“Once I complete my spell and become a real witch,” said Winifred, taking the rock, “no one will stop me!”

“Haaaay, look at that balloon!” interrupted the spider Lou, who had climbed up onto the canister vacuum with the snake Bud.

Winifred looked to see a strange contraption, a flying bagpipe attached to a hardhat. The vehicle was somehow propelled by the song being emitted from the pipes. A mouse in overalls was visible playing the song on the pipe, while a mouse and two chipmunks were riding in the hardhat.

“I’m not afraid of a bunch of rodents in a bagpipe!” exclaimed Winifred. She leaned forward on the vacuum, causing it to fly down to a fountain. She used the hose attachment to vacuum up some water and stones. She turned around and handed the moon rock to Bud, ordering him to “hold this until I tell you different!” Then she leaned back, which caused the vacuum to fly straight up towards the flying bagpipe.

“What are you going to do?” asked Foxglove.

Without answering, Winifred flicked a switch on the canister, reversing the suction and blasting the bagpipe with water and rocks, nearly causing it to crash.

“They didn’t do anything to you!” the bat protested, flying up into the face of Winifred. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because I enjoy it!” the would-be witch cackled.

FRANCINE NOW HAD THE EVIDENCE she was looking for, but one memory looked particularly interesting . . .

***I**T WAS THE BACK ROOM of the abandoned Laundromat, one second after midnight on All Hallows Eve. The windowless room was illuminated by flickering candlelight. Only the candles had just been melted by the blast of heat from one second earlier, so the flames were floating unsupported above the cracked concrete floor.*

Winifred shook her head and slowly got up. She reached to the back of her head to feel something wet. Just touching it made her head ring like a gong. That head felt curiously light, like something had been removed from it.

*“**WINIFRED CADWALLADER,**” a spectral voice intoned, and the whole room shook.*

It occurred to Winifred that the most important moments in her life always seemed to begin with someone saying her full name. More importantly, there was something different in this voice. In latter years Winifred trained herself until she could identify the species of anyone purely by their voice, but she never before and never again encountered someone with the same species as this voice. It wasn’t even really a voice,

in the sense that a voice is the vibration of a column of air altered by tongue, lips, nose and cheeks. There was nothing organic about this voice. It was as if the concrete floor was speaking to her, the four walls and the broken light fixtures shaping the sound. Winifred's world was speaking to her and yet at the same time, it seemed that Winifred was speaking to herself.

"IT HAS BEEN FIVE CENTURIES SINCE SOMEONE HAS SUMMONED ME WITH THAT SPELL."

"What have you done to me?!" Winifred demanded, surprising herself with her daring.

"I HAVE REMOVED THAT WHICH WAS HOLDING YOU BACK FROM ENJOYING WHAT YOU MOST DESIRE: TO INFLICT PUNISHMENT UPON YOUR ENEMIES, TO HUMBLE YOUR TORMENTORS, AND TO MAKE ALL WHO SEE YOU TREMBLE AT YOUR MIGHT. TO ACHIEVE THIS, YOU MUST BECOME A FULL WITCH. HERE IS WHAT YOU MUST DO . . ."

At that moment, the dream contracted down until nothing could be heard, and all that was visible was Winifred's right shoe. Everything else had apparently been wiped from Winifred's mind. A few seconds later the memory picked up again:

" . . . IF YOU FAIL, THEN I WILL EXTRACT AN ALTERNATE PRICE . . . OUT OF YOU. NOW, BEFORE I GO, LET ME GIVE YOU A TASTE OF THE POWER YOU WILL RECEIVE . . ."

THE MEMORY WAS SUDDENLY TORN away by a ghostly Winifred. "Stay out of there!" she cried, crumpling the memory into a tiny ball and stuffing it under a metaphorical mattress. "I spend every waking moment trying to repress that memory . . . and the other one . . . and you just drag it out! You've seen enough, haven't you?"

"Yes," said Francine, "I've seen enough."

FRANCINE REMOVED HER HAND FROM the Dimensional Viewer's handlebar and turned off the switch.

"I am willing to concede on the first point," she said.

33. SEARCHING FOR MEANING IN A MEANINGLESS WORLD

THE COMMERCIAL BEGAN WHEN A girl and a boy, both about ten years old, rushed into the kitchen of an idyllic suburban home after a long day of having fun, followed by their faithful dog. Waiting for them there was their dutiful mother.

“Mom!” the children cried in unison. “We’re thirsty.”

The mother turned from the refrigerator, holding a tray with a bottle and two filled glasses. “Well, I’ve got two glasses of Sun Fizz, coming right up!” The bottle was labeled “Sun Fizz” and depicted the drink’s mascot, a cartoon sun with doe eyes, a bow tie, and white hands and shoed feet.

The kids sat down at the kitchen table as the mother placed their drinks before them. “Sun Fizz! That’s our favorite!”

The six-inch tall Sun Fizz mascot leaps off of the bottle and onto the table. “That’s because there’s a delicious ray of sunshine in every drop!” he warbled.

The children screamed in terror!

“Come on!” urged the frightened mother, pulling them away from the table where this monstrosity of nature still stood.

“Mom!” the children cried to their protector.

Mr. Sun Fizz giggled and hopped down to the floor of the kitchen, causing the dog to flee out the back door. “I’m filled with Nature’s goodness!” he proclaimed cheerfully, then turned to the hallway to chase after the fleeing family, laughing playfully.

The family had nearly reached the safety of the parent’s bedroom.

“Hey, what’s with you people?” asked the tiny ball of incandescent gas. “I’ve got vitamins and minerals!” Yeah, and thermonuclear reactions.

In their panic, the children accidentally knocked over a vacuum cleaner in the hallway, which caused Mom to stumble.

The daughter looked back, and saw that the mascot had nearly reached the fallen adult. “MOM!!!” she screamed.

“Run!” urged the mother, the last words she would ever utter.

It is at this moment that the narrator of the commercial finally stepped in. “Trust your gut,” he intoned, “not some cartoon character.” The screen displayed the lesson of this little morality play: “Image is nothing. Taste is everything. Obey your thirst. Sprite.” The laugh of Mr. Sun Fizz is the last thing heard.

“WELCOME BACK,” SAID GALT BRAUNBIGHT, addressing the television audience. “We are ready to move on to the second topic on the debate over Imperial Law 567423: whether fans of the *Rescue Rangers* television program should be considered enemies of the state. Miss Maughlarde, you may begin with your argument against the statute. You have three minutes.”

Carolyn looked pointedly down at her watch, noting the time, then looking up at Braunbight, before she finally addressed the camera. She was still wearing the KEEN helmet. “People of the world,” she said, “Mr. Braunbight has urged you to consult the ‘567423 Review’ node of the Wired for more information about this law and how it has been enforced. I had an opportunity to look at this node during the commercial break, and I noticed that the names of all *Rescue Ranger* fans arrested under this law are listed. Since our anonymity has already been compromised, I urge you to use the search capabilities of the Wired to find out who we are. Some of the fans are children or young adults like myself, ‘in some parts of this country not even a legal adult’, as I believe someone said. But take a look at the older members of the fandom. Our fandom includes schoolteachers, software programmers, social and health care workers. You probably already know that one of us is a member of the British House of Peers. We are astronauts and journalists, farmers and singers, public defenders and copyright attorneys, and yes, sons and daughters. Before May 16th, we were all law-abiding members of the community. The only reason we are considered criminals now is because what was our hobby has been re-defined as treason. We were not fans of this show because of how Norton Nimmul was depicted. We were fans because we enjoyed the stories, empathized with the characters, and felt like we were part of the world of the show, a world whose attractions are all the stronger now that we know that the world is real.

“Mrs. Nulton over there is biting her tongue right now because I have neglected to mention the one apparent exception to this rule, the one person that appears to justify the entirety of Imperial Law 567423: Harold Largess, the man who tried to use the unconscious body of the Emperor to take over the world. Well, I’m here to tell you that that man is not, and never was, one of us. It’s true that after he was arrested, a videotape of *Rescue Rangers* episodes was found in his bedroom, but the very title of that tape reveals his opinion of the show.” Carolyn reached down into the cardboard box the KEEN was in and removed a printed screenshot and a pocket magnifying lens. “This is from the press conference where the existence of the tape was first revealed. As you can see, the tape was clearly labeled ‘Loathsome *Rescue Ranger* episodes, Tape 1’. I ask you, what kind of fan would treat the source of his devotion so poorly?”

“Let me see that!” demanded Francine, snatching the printout and lens and using the latter to examine the former closely. She sighed in defeat upon confirming that her brother-in-law had indeed been the victim of a clumsy plant by the Emperor, using one of the tapes she had herself prepared for him, labeled in her handwriting.

“Do you have anything else to add?” Braunbight asked Carolyn.

“No, I’m done,” said Carolyn with a grin.

“Mrs. Nulton, you have two minutes to defend the law.”

Francine paused for several seconds as she re-considered her strategy. Her thinking was interrupted by the sound of Dale scrambling up the walls of the cage. Smiling

deviously, she began. "I have no defense. As far as I'm concerned, this debate is settled, and the arguments to overturn the statute are completely convincing."

Braunbight blinked, uncomprehending. Carolyn grinned from ear to ear and stretched out her hand. "Thank you for being so magnanimous. It has been a pleasure . . ."

"HOWEVER," FRANCINE INTERRUPTED, STILL FACING the camera, "there is one matter I would like resolved . . ." Francine turned to face Carolyn. ". . . if you would be willing to explain it to me."

"Anytime," Carolyn said wearily, putting her hand down.

"Why are you *fans* of the *Rescue Rangers*? Liking the show is one thing, but you have devoted a substantial part of your lives to it, even before you knew it was based on a world that actually existed. For the child fans, I can understand. The show depicts a bright, optimistic worldview that is necessary to grow into a well-adjusted adult. But at some point, children must leave their fantasies behind, and learn to live in the real world. You told us of your occupations, so you appear to be mentally stable enough to hold regular jobs. And yet your free time is dominated by your obsession with a world that, even if it is real, has no bearing on this world at this time. You appear to be optimists, all of you, yet Optimism has not been a viable philosophy for the last sixty years. In that time, Earth has been invaded by aliens three times, has been struck by innumerable natural disasters, plagues, and one 'limited nuclear engagement'. The last iteration of Wired, the Internet, completely collapsed under the weight of endless computer hacking, nearly bringing down the whole of society as we know it. The population of the world in 1925 was two billion people. The population today is barely half of that number, and it is still steadily declining. At this rate there will be nobody left to greet the dawn of the Twenty-Second Century. The time when adults could waste their days in childish pursuits is gone forever."

"Isn't that even more of a reason for us to look at these optimistic points of view?" asked Carolyn. "Hope and dreams, caring and adventure, don't have to be forgotten just because things seem dim. If nothing else, we can at least fight for the right, like I did here, and in that way the *Rescue Rangers* may be thanked for showing me from an early age that fighting for what you believe in is the right thing. You say it can't change the world but isn't that what I've just done?"

"Yes, but you wouldn't have even needed to fight this fight if you hadn't already decided to write your little stories and paint your little pictures that the majority of humanity would never recognize and which you can't even use to become professional writers and artists! This path you are following is the path of self-deception. You will throw your life into it, until one day you wake up and realize the best years of your life are behind you, and you must forcibly readjust your perceptions to reality. I know this path well, for I have traveled it. The temptation of a fantasy world is so strong, the temptation to reduce the world to black and white. A world of absolute good and absolute evil, where your cause is just and you have the power to make everything better. The world of the *Rescue Rangers* may be black and white, but not this one. This world is gray; gray through and through. And in this world you cannot hate your enemies, no matter how much you wish to, because they are your father and your sister, and despite their wrongs they have also loved you, in their own way, and you cannot find it in your

heart to strike back at them, even if the power to strike back at them was anything more than lies written in old books.

“My years of self-deception were years when I was not myself, but a role from a fairy tale. I only discovered who I truly was when I abandoned the lies, and it was only when I abandoned the lies that life became worth living. You are so young, Carolyn. You have so much of your life ahead of you. Don’t make my mistakes. Accept the world for what it is, and *live* in it.”

“I didn’t know how personal this was for you,” said Carolyn. “I’m sorry, but I still choose to be a fan, despite your bad experience doing something you think was similar. I do accept this world, but the trick is that I accept it, and at the same time live in it in whatever way that makes me happy, and my way of ‘living it’ is to write the stories that no one notices or cares about, because it makes me happy, and in the end I think that is what’s more important than anything, making oneself pleased in the world of black, white, or gray.

“We are fans because we treasure what *The Rescue Rangers* taught us. The number one thing they taught us was hope. You seem to think that this world has no place for hope, but there is always a place for it, even now. *Especially* now. Humanity is still far from achieving its true potential. The truest source of hope is by seeing the hope of others. Our hope comes from a more optimistic world.

“And we have not wasted this hope. We have strived to live as our heroes, *those* heroes” (gesturing at the cage containing the Rescue Rangers) “have lived. And in doing so, we have brought hope to those we have encountered in our non-fannish lives. Even if the people we inspired never knew about the *Rescue Rangers*, the show has indirectly helped their lives.”

Carolyn reached up and switched off the KEEN helmet, then walked over to the Dimensional Viewer prototype and turned it on, causing the back of Tammy’s head to appear on the Viewer’s screen. “Let me tell you about these heroes,” Carolyn said. “Let me tell you about Tammy. She’s not a Rescue Ranger, but this makes it even clearer that it is their entire world that influences us. Tammy, let’s get a look at you.” Tammy reached out a hand and received a pocket mirror from Winifred. She held it up so the Viewer could see her face. “There’s no need to be embarrassed, Tammy. Tammy has known about the Rescue Rangers for most of her life, and has always tried to live up to the ideal they represent. She’s also a good friend, a fun sister and a dutiful daughter, an optimist despite the loss of her hero father at an early age. In short, she’s everything I wish to be, and I’m not sure if I would be here today before you if it wasn’t for her example to guide me through some dark times in my life.”

“You’re modeling your life after a mutant chipmunk,” Francine said.

“I am modeling my life after a red squirrel, *Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*, ‘hoarding squirrel of the Hudson Bay’, a species sadly missing from our own world.”

“Then you’re just making my point. The world of the *Rescue Rangers* is so different from our own that it can have no bearing on how we live our lives here.”

“Does it? Francine, you’ve said before that this world is not a positive place, things are bad, and problems arise. But at the same time there is hope, for so many the *Rescue Rangers* have provided that hope, and if they were actually in our world would it not be a better place? Not perfect by any means, but improved certainly. Our world could use all

the help it can get, and whether it be the fans, or the actual Rangers themselves, they can help provide hope for the future to bring color to this gray world.”

Francine pointed at the cage. “There are your Rescue Rangers, Carolyn. Where is their shining example now? Let the Rescue Rangers be heroes on their world, and animals on this one. Animals like all the rest on this planet, mindless creatures of instinct.”

“*Mindless creatures*? I think you’re fooling yourself. I think we all are fooling ourselves. I mean, look at the animals of our world and ask yourselves the question: Do animals think like human beings? Do they have souls? You might think you know the answers, but I know I don’t. I know that mated pairs of animals love each other, and that they sacrifice their happiness to guarantee that of their children, just like us. I know that some of them show altruism towards perfect strangers, just like some of us. Ask any pet owner, and they will tell you tales of animal behavior that go far beyond training or mimicry. Ask any police or fire rescue unit in the world that uses dogs trained to save lives in ways their instincts never provided for. I like to believe that animals are like us, because so often they show us the way. We humans have been feeling like victims for sixty years now, and we tell ourselves our golden age is behind us and will never return. But the mice and chipmunks are also victims, and just look at how much happiness they manage to find in their lives.

“Would it be so very wrong if the animals in that cage could think like us, could wield tools and talk? Can you, for one brief moment, close your eyes and entertain a world of hope, a world of talking animals, a world where the sun can finally shine?”

AND AT THAT MOMENT, THE clouds overhead broke, and the sun shone down upon northwestern Connecticut for the first time in sixty years. The cameras and the eyes of the people in the conference room were directed up through the skylight in wonder and awe, and the people of the world re-learned for the first time in sixty years that you’re not supposed to stare straight at the sun.

It was while everyone was recovering from temporary blindness that the silence was broken by the sound of an old brass smokehouse padlock being picked by the tail of a mouse and falling off of the cage to the surface of the table.

Bud, who had walked into the conference room during this spectacle, finally found his voice. “The Emperor has been spotted on the grounds,” he announced. “He’s headed for the bunker where the Dimensional Switcher is being kept.”

“Rescue Rangers, away!” cried a quintet of voices.

In the entire world, only Bud had sight enough to see the sources of those voices run past his feet and out the door.

“Nobody’s going to believe this,” he muttered.

34. END GAME

LAUREL LOOKED UP FROM NIMNUL'S notebook on hearing the distinct four-pulse pattern of static on the two-way radio. Putting down her pen and closing the book, she retreated into the shadows.

Above her, the door to the surface opened, and onto the platform floated Emperor Norton Nimmul, dressed all in black and sitting in his black hover-pod with silver weapon systems. Many of those silver hemispheres were fractured or shattered, and Nimmul's red hair was somewhat grayer than normal thanks to a heavy mixture of dust and debris. It took a few seconds for him to adjust to the lighting in the bunker, as there was this strange bright yellow orb floating in the sky behind him. Resting on a bracket on one edge of the hover-pod was a cardboard box filled with components, many of them obviously explosive. His attention was drawn to the brick wall at the end of the room, which looked like it was made of gravity-defying mercury.

"You'll never get away with this, Davros."

Nimmul, who had left the platform and had begun his descent, stopped the pod so it was hovering twenty feet above the ground. "It's about time that somebody caught the reference. Although I am disappointed that I had to go completely black before anyone recognized it. So I have a would-be hero to face, do I? Show yourself!"

Laurel stepped into view, watching as Nimmul continued to descend. "Oh, I'd say the resemblance to the *Doctor Who* villain was pretty obvious. I'm surprised you haven't started screaming 'Exterminate!' yet." While they were talking, she noticed the outer door quietly reopen to admit the Rescue Rangers into the bunker.

"It's more of a homage," said Nimmul. "More importantly, unlike the original, I know that sometimes the best reaction is to run. Now is one of those times. Now stand aside so I can leave this world. Surely you have no objection to that?" The emperor had piloted a diagonal course to the ground, putting the Dimensional Controller between himself and Miss Weir. After setting the controls, he removed a makeshift time bomb from the box he had brought, and attached it to the Switcher. He placed his hand on the scanner, but was annoyed to see that the screen remained black. "What have you done to the Viewer?"

"It's the scaling circuit. You shouldn't have used sub-standard equipment." Laurel began to slowly approach Nimmul, her eyes fixed on his goggles. "What I object to, Nimmul, is you avoiding your responsibility. It's quite an apparent character flaw you have. You fled your world to ours because . . ."

". . . because my world had no place for me, was unwilling to reward me as I deserved. As your television show has taught me, I was living in a world where the universe revolved around a team of vermin. So I came here, and it took a while, but I found that this world is not for me, either. So I leave your world saved from alien

annihilation, my victims unharmed. You ought to *thank* me for what I've done for you all, so why are you so disappointed?"

Nimnul was answered by the voice of David Kano. "We are disappointed because you squandered your potential. You have no idea how much we gave up to put you in this position, and what did you do once you got it? You planned to invade the Galaxy rather than take the perfect retirement! How could you not foresee that this course of action would doom the Earth even more thoroughly than the Danaans could ever dream? Does your arrogance have no bounds?"

"Who . . . how . . . ?"

Laurel held out an arm. This was the signal for Sparky to emerge from the safety of her hair.

"Gah!" Nimnul sputtered, pointing. "You must both belong to that race of shape-shifting aliens from the show!"

"We're not Fleeblebroxians," Sparky, or should I say David, replied. "I simply reproduced your Metamorphosizer. When I was injured on the Moon, it must have gone off before it was destroyed, trapping me in this form."

"You're lying!"

"Can you come up with a better explanation?"

". . . no." He then noticed how close the two of them had crept while he was pondering this. "I would appreciate it if you stepped back a foot or two."

"What if we don't want to?"

"You should know that I'm armed with six different doomsday devices . . ."

"You abhor killing!" exclaimed Laurel. "Why else would you abolish the death penalty as your first act after the war?"

". . . six different doomsday devices, *and* fifteen different ways to cause pain or unconsciousness." He flicked a switch on the hover-pod's control panel. "If you make one more move, they'll start firing. Now to get that scaler fixed . . ."

Laurel and David saw Foxglove landing on the back of the Dimensional Switcher.

"What alternate Earth will you flee to?" David asked in hopes of distracting Nimnul.

"The one where the Roman Empire never fell, or the one where men are ruled by apes?"

"You've been reading my notes, then. No, I'll return to my home dimension. I've learnt enough here to be able to take over that world even easier than I gained this one, and this time, there will be no rebellions. Even better, there will be no Rescue Rangers to stop me, because they will be stranded on this world . . . forever!"

Laurel snorted. "Why are you even bothering with explosives? The plans for that equipment are already posted on the Wired. We'll be able to rebuild in days."

"Even the Dimensional Switcher?" Nimnul grinned at Laurel's momentary scowl. "The Switcher is *my* invention, and there isn't a man on this planet who will ever be able to reproduce it!"

"You can't go back there, I'm warning you!" David exclaimed. "We have been told of the future of your world, and you will destroy it if you return. You will not mean to do this, but that is the inevitable result."

"Who told you this?"

"My counterpart, Sparky."

"I knew I never should have trusted that rat! He's going to the top of the enemies list when I return."

“See, that’s the sort of attitude that will destroy your world. Sparky knew that would happen before you messed up his memory. We only found out about the fate of your world should you return due to a moment of clarity he had when he saw me.”

“Destroy the world? Don’t be ridiculous! I’ll conquer the world, and bring it the peace and prosperity it always deserved. Why would I want to destroy the Earth? It’s where I keep all my stuff!”

“You don’t get it, do you Nimmul? You’re too self-absorbed to really try and help anyone if there’s nothing in it for you. You won’t take responsibility for your actions. You run away from them instead. It’s your selfish streak that threatens your world. No. You’re not going to escape this time. We’ll personally see to it.”

“Over my dead batteries! Eat amperes!”

CLICK-CLICK went the button on the control panel, but nothing happened.

“Uh . . .” Nimmul looked worried now and tried several other controls with the same results.

“Looking for this?” asked Foxglove, holding a crucial circuit board from the hover-pod.

“You . . . no, it can’t be! You’re not supposed to be able to talk!”

“She had a little help from her friends,” said Chip as he and Dale hopped down from the hover-pod.

Laurel resumed her approach to the hover-pod, stepping around the Dimensional Controller. Nimmul backed away from both the Rangers and Laurel, putting him next to the Switcher. He looked over at the timer on his bomb in time to see Gadget finish pulling apart the timer.

“The bomb’s deactivated, guys!”

“You!”

“Oh, hello, Nimmul! You know, you really should have asked us before bringing us here. I mean, it’s nice to see a new universe, but being stuck ‘half-there’ in your head for a week is rather awkward. You know what I mean?”

“Gah! I was so much better off when I couldn’t understand you!” He reached out and pulled Laurel close to him, not noticing her lack of resistance. She allowed David to leap to safety. “I’m going back home, and I’m taking a hostage! You will not use the Switcher to follow me, or I *will* hurt her!”

Laurel grinned wickedly. “A Switch? What a great idea!” Before Nimmul could react, she shoved the hover-pod into the barrier, causing both of them to fall unconscious.

Gadget and the Chipmunks ran for the barrier.

“STOP!” screamed David and Lou simultaneously from opposite ends of the bunker.

“What is it?” asked Chip.

“Allow me to fix the scaling circuit, and then you can see the sort of world where Laurel truly sent him,” explained David.

The Rescue Rangers converged at the Dimensional Viewer. Gadget stepped onto the metal plate. A few seconds later, an image finally appeared on the screen. The complexity of the visuals looked to be halfway between the worlds of Earth-1 and Earth-A, in a style resembling high-end computer graphics. The screen showed the Rescue Rangers on patrol in . . . well, it at least *looked* vaguely like a car, but with Gadget’s distinct touch to the design. The scene they were traveling through resembled a war zone. Debris and broken buildings could be seen in every direction.

Gadget gasped. “Perhaps it *is* our world, and something horrible happened while we were gone.”

“That’s not our world, Love,” Monty replied. “Those are the remains of a war decades old. Look how Nature is reclaiming everything. I think Laurel sent Nimnul there for punishment.”

“That is correct,” said David, turning off the Switcher. Alongside him were Lou, Bud, Francine, Dr. Helena Russell and Carolyn. Carolyn moved to take care of the two unconscious figures, while the others joined the Rangers. “Laurel called that place Earth-C,” David explained, “for ‘Catastrophe’. We agreed that Nimnul is to stay there for three days.”

35. RE-INTRODUCTIONS

“**U**GH,” SAID NIMNUL-C UPON AWAKENING. “Did Gadget just run us over again?”

Gadget’s fur bristled. “Hey, that only happened *one* time! Why do people keep bringing that up?”

Laurel-C rubbed her head, saying nothing but carefully looking around her.

Carolyn stepped forward, hand outstretched. “You would be visitors to our fair world, yes? I’m not sure if our Laurel had any way of informing you what she had in mind. My name’s Carolyn.” She had her KEEN helmet on and operational, so Tammy and her friends could see this historic moment.

Laurel-C offered her hand. “Lahwhinie.”

“Professor Nimmul, the one and only.” He took a minute to examine himself. “Good heavens, what’s happened to me?”

“You’re in the bodies of your counterparts on this Earth,” replied Carolyn.

“Am I . . . yes, I am human! Finally, I get the chance to tower over the lot of you pathetic mental midgets! Bow down before your master! Mwa-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Being in the body of Norris Nulton, Nimmul-C failed to tower over anybody.

Lahwhinie promptly hit him upside the head. “Knock it off!”

Nimmul-C collapsed. “That’s funny,” Lahwhinie remarked. “I didn’t hit him very hard.”

Dr. Russell rushed forward and removed Nimmul-C’s goggles, revealing a nasty unhealed wound to his left temple. She then lifted each eyelid to peer at his pupils. “As I suspected. Nimmul here is suffering from brain damage. He needs surgery as soon as possible.”

Lahwhinie looked extremely guilty at this revelation, and had to be assured that the damage was incurred months earlier.

“If that’s the case, shouldn’t your Nimmul have had it looked at sooner?”

“He was stubborn,” explained Francine.

“And hey, shouldn’t he be dead by now?”

“He was *very* stubborn.”

“Just how stubborn was this particular Nimmul?” asked Lahwhinie incredulously.

“Laurel considered him stubborn enough to send to your world,” Lou explained.

“She said if any place would break him, your world would be it. Um . . . no disrespect meant towards your home planet.”

Lahwhinie looked thoughtful for a moment. “Maybe. The shock of changing species might do it. I’ll admit my world is rather unpleasant, but there’s hope for the future, just one we probably won’t live to see.”

Francine nodded as she easily hefted Nimmul-C’s unconscious body upright. “I’d love to hear all about it. It’s two hours to Hartford from here unless . . . you don’t know how to fly a helicopter by any chance, do you?”

Lahwhinie shook her head.

Lahwhinie looked at the crowd around her once again, finally stopping to address Francine. "I don't think I know you on my world. Carolyn for some reason makes me think of the Rangers' medic, Tammy. She's a good shot with a crossbow."

"I am Francine Nulton. We are currently on my estate."

Lahwhinie shook her head. "The name doesn't ring any bells."

Francine shrugged. "My ego's not so big that I care which worlds include me or not."

"On at least one of those worlds, her name was Winifred," added Carolyn.

"Nope. Still drawing a blank. Depending on what my world's version of you does, Nimmul might know her."

"I'm a businesswoman," answered Francine.

"She was a witch," answered Carolyn.

"And you, miss, are a gossip. 'Failed witch' is much more appropriate, anyway."

"There's no real economy on my world, so 'businesswoman' doesn't help. What is a witch, anyway?"

"If you don't know, then you probably don't have one," said Carolyn. "Witches break the rules of physical reality on a regular basis."

Francine shrugged. "By that definition, Nimmul was this world's witch, not I."

This only served to confuse Lahwhinie. "You *can't* break the rules; you can only overpower one rule with another."

"That's the way we thought our world worked as well," said Carolyn.

By this time, Bud and Lou had secured Nimmul-C to the gurney that came with the ambulance. "Shall we be going?" Francine asked Lahwhinie.

"Yes. My world needs its Nimmul more than I'm allowed to tell either him or anyone else."

AS THE GURNEY WAS PULLED through the outside door of the bunker, Carolyn knelt down to talk to the Rescue Rangers. "So, I suppose you could go home now, if you wished."

"Well, I think we better wait those three days to find out what will happen to Nimmul," Chip said, staring at Carolyn a bit oddly.

"Yes, and that will give me an opportunity to study this world in some detail," added Gadget.

"I was hoping you'd say that," Carolyn said with a grin. "Bear Mountain is only a few miles from here. Would you be interested in a visit, Foxglove?"

"Oh, could we? Perhaps my family is there."

Chip, after studying her face for the last minute, suddenly dashed over to Carolyn and put his head right next to her eye. "Tammy, are you in there?"

Carolyn sat up. "Great, you made her faint. Are you happy now?"

Chip looked sheepish.

"When she wakes up, you ought to thank her. We would not have been able to save you without her detective work."

"How exactly did you save us?" asked Dale.

"Ah, Storytime! Well, once upon a time there was a TV show called *The Rescue Rangers* . . ."

“WE ARE LOST,” ANNOUNCED BUD from the passenger seat of the ambulance.

“We are *not* lost,” countered Lou, who was driving. “I know exactly where I’m going.”

“What are you two talking about?” asked Francine. “There’s only one freeway between northwestern Connecticut and Hartford. It’s impossible to get lost.”

“In case you didn’t notice, we’re not on the freeway.”

Since the back of the ambulance didn’t have any windows, Francine carefully made her way to the cab to get a look. “Where did you find this road?”

“It’s a shortcut, OK?” Lou replied.

“You and your shortcuts,” muttered Bud.

“I’m going to agree with the tall human . . . err, the tall *person*,” said Lahwhinie. “We are driving into the sun.”

“Well, it has been half-blinding me for the last twenty minutes, but other than that, what difference does the sun make?” Lou asked. “You know what would be a good invention? Something you could pull down in a car to cover up the sun.”

“Yeah!” Bud chimed in. “And also something you could put over your eyes so the sun doesn’t hurt so much.”

“Oh, I see what the young lady meant,” said Dr. Russell, after some thought on Lahwhinie’s remark. “The Earth rotates counter-clockwise, so therefore it would be in the western sky in the afternoon.”

Lahwhinie looked at all of them like they were insane. Francine had to explain to her about the perpetual cloud cover of the past sixty years.

Faced with this evidence, Lou pulled over and started consulting a road map.

“To figure out where we need to go, it would help to know where we are,” Bud said with a smirk.

“Don’t you need to check up on the patient?” asked Lou.

Lahwhinie groaned. “Why doesn’t somebody go out and ask for directions?”

“Because we’re in the middle of nowhere!”

Lahwhinie opened the back door of the ambulance and hopped out. A few seconds later, she could be heard asking, “Say, friend, do you happen to know the way to Hartford, Connecticut?”

“What do I look like, the AAA?” answered a small voice with a Brooklyn accent. “Forty-Four is two miles that way. You can’t miss it!”

Francine grinned inwardly at the fact that Lahwhinie’s faith in Lou’s directional ability was so poor that she wasn’t even sure what state they were in any more. Then she wondered whom she could have found to ask so quickly and looked out the open door. She saw Lahwhinie conversing with a strange creature standing on a tree branch, and the hair on the back of her neck stood straight up. She waited until the young woman was back in the ambulance before asking, “W . . . what was that?”

Lahwhinie pointed over her shoulder. “Who, George? Are you telling me you’ve never seen a squirrel before?”

“As a matter of fact, no, I never have.”

“This is a very odd world you have here, if you don’t mind me saying.”

36. HOMECOMING

Earth-A

OVER THE NEXT THREE DAYS . . .

. . . Professor Norton Nimmul-C underwent brain surgery. Afterwards, he appeared . . . somewhat saner than before. He was still Norton Nimmul, after all, so it was too much to hope for a complete cure.

. . . the Rescue Rangers were shown all the usual tourist attractions by Carolyn and Honker. They received a great deal of attention everywhere they went, and as a result the *Hello Kitty* web server was twice knocked offline as a result of too many people trying to join the RR fandom at once.

. . . Lahwhinie also became a tourist, although of the technological variety, tearing apart and rebuilding numerous useful devices that did not exist on her world, and committing their workings to memory.

. . . Gadget spent her nights experimenting with some of the same technology. In addition, she found and fixed the design flaw in the Dimensional Switcher that had caused the Rangers to lose their memories in the hours preceding their switch, and spent a good deal of time with a device worn on Lahwhinie's left wrist.

. . . the human interest sections of newspapers and Wired sites started filling up with odd stories of animal behavior.

. . . Francine locked herself in the Hartford Public Library and spent her time researching a wide variety of topics. One book in particular, *How Fiction Works*, was read cover-to-cover.

. . . Drew Maughlarde, Aldus Klordaine and Reynard D. Keigh spent their time behind closed doors with a couple replicas of the KEEN helmet. They were observed to be speaking with people who weren't there, and volumes of papers labeled TOP SECRET were produced and disseminated to the governments of nations around the world and, in the case of the Lunar Republic, off of it.

. . . hundreds of *Rescue Rangers* fans were returned to Earth.

. . . and Dr. Helena Russell returned to the First Lunar Hospital (as it was now named). A few days later she led an expedition to Clavius Crater, where she miraculously discovered the last human survivor of the battle, David Kano. In the story told to the press, after Emperor Norton left him for dead, Kano had stumbled from the scene with a damaged and leaking spacesuit and had managed to reach a forgotten supply depot before his air had run out. He had done so well in his enforced refuge, in fact, that instead of the expected rags, he was found wearing a stylish suit that completely covered his wrists.

FINALLY, THE BIG DAY ARRIVED.

Emperor Norton Nimnul left Earth-A in the middle of a fight. *Citizen* Norton Nimnul returned to Earth-A sitting in a chair in the bunker with about a dozen members of The Company pointing guns at his head. Nimnul stood up in shock then sat down in shock when he realized he could stand. He reached up and felt the scar on his head left by the brain surgery that had cured him.

Laurel, who had returned to her body at the same time as Nimnul, blinked a few times and looked around. “Do you really think he’s that much of a threat? I think he’s learnt his lesson.”

“Have you?” Assistant Director Klaudaine asked him.

Nimnul gulped and stared wide-eyed at the men with guns.

Maughlarde started, suddenly feeling guilty at seeing the look. “Stand down, men.”

“Considering what he did this afternoon, I’m surprised he was scared,” remarked Laurel.

“I was provoked,” explained Nimnul, sheepishly. “Now, my thanks to whichever brilliant neurosurgeon re-attached the nerves responsible for regaining the ability to walk, but . . .”

“Actually, we didn’t,” said Francine. “Dr. Russell fixed the brain damage that was making you increasingly erratic since the Battle of Clavius. That your paralysis was cured as a side-effect was a complete surprise.”

“Oh, this is brilliant!” exclaimed Laurel with a laugh. “He was never really paralyzed in the first place, he just induced a reverse placebo effect on himself! You must feel quite the fool now, Nimnul! Ha, ha, ha, ha!”

Nimnul tried to summon a good glare, but he failed and just sighed. “As I was saying, thanks for the fix, but now what’s going to happen to me?”

“We had a good deal of discussion of that,” said Assistant Director Klaudaine. “Some of us were perfectly willing to let the Rescue Rangers take him back to their world, but rational minds prevailed.”

“I should hope so!” exclaimed Laurel. “Prophecy or no prophecy, I don’t trust him not to revert to his usual imbecilic behavior if left alone on his original world.”

“Agreed. In addition, this planet is still vulnerable to alien attack, and Nimnul, you have been the best defender this planet has ever had. We will now do you the favor of swapping your two titles. You will now be Norton II, Emperor of the Moon and Protector of Earth, although the former title will be largely ceremonial. The astronomical observatory on the far side of the Moon has been expanded into your palace. Mr. Kano here will be our liaison.”

Nimnul’s mouth hung open, stunned, mostly at the fact that he would not be spending the rest of his life in prison, but also at seeing that David, who was busy entering the coordinates for Earth-1 into the Dimensional Control, had regained his humanity. Laurel, however, seemed to have guessed where this was headed. “I’d like to join David on the Moon, if you’ll have me.”

Klaudaine nodded his assent. “Professor, we will provide you with the means to explore and invent to your heart’s content between invasions. We also expect that you will be able to come up with a truly-useful alien detector.”

Nimnul's expression remained unchanged. Laurel's face took on a smirk. "Anybody home, Professor?" she asked, waving a hand in front of his face.

"Uh-huh," replied Nimnul slowly.

"What will happen to Norris Nulton?" asked Carolyn.

Agent Keigh, wearing his KEEN helmet, responded for the X-Files division of Earth-1's FBI. "Mr. Nulton will be settled on a South Seas island owned by my counterpart's government. It's one of the few places left on that world utterly devoid of technology. He was very insistent on this point. They will provide him in a state similar to Nimnul's, with art substituted for inventions."

"And what about me?" Francine asked, in a tone that suggested she knew the answer.

"Yes," Keigh said, "about that. We cannot force you, or your counterpart, to do anything, but Nulton has expressed his preference for having his wife accompany him 'into exile', as he calls it."

"We are both willing." Francine answered almost as soon as Moulder finished.

"Really?" asked Carolyn, incredulous. "You'd give up your fortune and your position as Empress, for life on a little island? And Winifred will legally be you—she can do anything she wants with your possessions and reputation!"

"We have settled the matter to our satisfaction," said Francine.

"But why?"

"You may not believe this, but I actually do love my husband. And between the two of us, this planet is about to become very uncomfortable."

"Uncomfortable?" asked Laurel. "It seems to me this world is better off now than it has ever been in human memory."

"Ah, that's the key word there: *human* memory. We humans have been exploiting the animals of this planet for thousands of years. I'm not sure if you noticed, but the 'gift of gab' the people of Earth so graciously bestowed on the Rescue Rangers didn't stop with them. For the first time, animals have the ability to demand the rights they deserve as sentient beings. Will the humans give it to them? Perhaps, and perhaps they need a persuader, someone with first-hand experience of working with animals both feral and sentient."

"Winifred Cadwallader?" asked Carolyn. She echoed Tammy's voice in her head by saying, "Good choice."

"Yes. She shall use my fortune to avert a possible 'War of the Species', while I get a vacation."

Chip, standing on a nearby table, looked up at Francine. "We should keep in touch," he said, cautiously. He still wasn't sure if he trusted her or not.

"I put myself in your hands, Hero," she replied in a tone half conciliatory and half challenging.

"The Switcher is ready," David announced.

Gadget bowed. "You first, Mrs. Nulton."

Francine smirked, reaching her hand out towards the pulsating wall of the Switcher. "Mrs. Nulton is so formal. Just call me . . ." And she fell unconscious.

Doctor Irwin stepped forward in the role of makeshift doctor to examine Winifred. As with Nimnul, the transaction took nearly an hour, as her senses slowly came "on-line" and adjusted to the different inputs from what she was used to. At the same time, Agent Scully on Earth-1 monitored Francine, who adjusted more quickly, just like Norris

Nulton. Francine and Gadget had jointly insisted that they wait the entire time; to make sure that Gadget's adjustments to the Dimensional Switcher were not harmful, and Francine and Winifred had both agreed to make the potentially dangerous first switch after the modifications. Finally, both patients were proclaimed to be in perfect health.

"How was the trip?" Carolyn asked.

"Odd." Winifred sat up and wiggled her fingers before her eyes.

Carolyn introduced her to everybody, and then she placed her hand on the Dimensional Viewer so everyone could see Francine lying patiently in the City Park, being attended by a newly released and very happy Norris Nulton and Agents Mulder and Scully. Afterwards, as everyone was busy making their farewell speeches to the Rescue Rangers, Winifred experimentally brought her hands close together and concentrated, and then grinned from ear to ear when a magical spark leapt from one outstretched finger to another.

Chip waved Agent Maughlarde down to his level and pointed at Nimnul talking with Laurel. "Don't hesitate to call us if he starts acting up again. Or *she*, for that matter."

"Hey, Chip?" asked Laurel calmly. "I think you need to work on your snap judgments. I have done more than enough to justify which side I'm on."

And then it was Carolyn and Honker's turn to say goodbye to the Rangers. "And don't forget to get some real life in between all the fan stuff," Dale solemnly told them.

"We won't forget," Carolyn replied, grinning.

"Do you think you can say it, one last time?" Honker asked.

"But of course!" exclaimed Monty. "I don't know of any better exit line."

"*Rescue Rangers, away!*" cried Chip, Dale, Gadget, Monty, Zipper and Foxglove, as they simultaneously slapped their hands against the barrier. As one, they fell limply to the ground.

The two teenagers reverently transferred their unconscious bodies to a large pillow, and everyone stood and waited for them to wake up.

THE WAITING WAS INTERRUPTED WHEN Bud burst in through the outer door of the bunker. "Bad news, folks—you better turn on the TV."

Lou picked up the remote and pressed the power button.

The live image on the screen depicted a burning downtown Savannah. From a glowing rectangular portal, ten feet high by one hundred feet wide, marched row after row of soldiers. They looked like men who had been subjected to the Rack, seven or eight feet long and impossibly thin. They were dressed very lightly for war, and were only armed with two-foot long wooden wands. Everything they pointed their wands at burst into flame, even if it was made entirely of metal or concrete. Meanwhile, a thick fog poured out at their feet, turning the pavement it touched into meadowlands.

Suddenly a man appeared out of nowhere in the middle of the street. He had the same bodily proportions as the soldiers, but was dressed in a wild parody of a navy admiral's dress uniform, colored in bright green. He removed his enormous hat to reveal a head of hair as pale and shining as thistledown, and approached the camera. Up close, he had pale fair skin, features that seemed just slightly askew, and slightly pointed ears that were mounted higher up on his head than they had a right to be. His eyes were cold and blue, and his dark eyebrows were long, dark, and ended with an upward flourish. "Ah, another

scrying device!” he announced, and proudly threw out his chest. “For those few mortals who didn’t hear me the first seven times, I hereby annex this realm to the Kingdom of Lost-Hope. We Faerie are your masters now! Resistance is utterly useless, although it is very, very amusing.”

The inhabitants of the bunker were stunned into silence . . . all but one. “I’ve got this one!” cried Winifred, emerging from a utility closet with a scrub-brush and an Olac canister vacuum cleaner. “You can have the next invasion, Norton, I promise!” The silence extended until she had flown, yes flown, out the bunker door.

Foxglove-A, nestled in Honker’s arms, roused herself enough to say, “She really shouldn’t meddle in magic. That always ends badly.”

Earth-1

TAMMY RAN OUT OF THE door of Rescue Ranger Headquarters and looked down at the humans. “Francine! Where are your magic books?”

Francine, sitting at the base of the tree with Norton’s hand in hers, looked at the translator device at her feet, then looked back up at the squirrel. “She’s started already, huh? I’m sorry, but I burnt mine. Maybe Winifred had some that we can get.”

Tammy shook her head. “The libraries locked them back in their ‘forbidden sections’, and then had the nerve to send late fee notices to the prison where she was being kept.”

“Wait, Winifred is a witch again on Earth-A?” asked Agent Scully. “I thought her earlier encounter with the Rangers ended with her powers being permanently neutralized.”

“That is correct,” said Francine. “But the effect was confined to *her* body, which is now mine. In *my* body, her powers are only limited by her willpower.”

Agent Mulder groaned. “You two knew this from the beginning!”

Francine summoned up her sweetest smile. “Should we switch back?”

Mulder sighed. “No. But we’re re-evaluating this after the current crisis on Earth-A.”

TAMMY TURNED AROUND AND RETURNED to the Rangers’ living room, where they were still recovering from their switch.

“Tammy,” said a bleary-eyed Chip. “All this running around is making our heads spin! Sit awhile and talk—we have so many questions.”

“I can’t. Carolyn’s waiting for my answer and besides, you’re all so out of it you won’t remember anything I say and I’ll just have to repeat it later. Now lie back and relax!”

“Doctor’s orders?” he asked, teasingly.

“You’d have to ask Herbie; I’m no doctor.”

TAMMY STRODE INTO THE WORKSHOP from the elevator and put her hand on the handle of the Dimensional Viewer, putting her back in mental rapport with her counterpart.

“Sorry, no magic books to be had,” she said out loud, largely for the benefit of Herbie.

CAROLYN SILENTLY MOUTHED SOMETHING ON the screen. “It’s OK,” Tammy relayed to the dove. “Before she left, Francine gave David a list of books in the public library that she believed to be accurate.”

“What’s going on between my counterpart and Foxglove-A?” Herbie asked, pointing at one corner of the screen.

“He’s asking her if she still wants to be his pet now that she has free will.”

“And?”

“She’s offering to pay him rent. She figures with a bat’s abilities, she can probably get herself a decent job.”

“I wonder how many similar conversations are going on right now all over Earth-A?”

“It gives you something to think about, doesn’t it? If a world as seemingly messed up as Earth-A can handle animal sentience so well, why should we continue hiding?”

“I’m sure your grandfather can give you a long list of very good reasons to ‘continue hiding’ when the sophomore class gets back from their trip. Do you think he will be very disappointed when Gadget tells him she’s abandoning her second paper?”

Tammy laughed. “No, I don’t think he’ll mind. Say, Carolyn, if you’re finished writing about me, how about if I return the favor sometime? I think I’ll call it *The Adventures of the Quiverwing Quack!* We can talk about it tomorrow, if you’re interested.”

“Sure, why not?” the voice of Carolyn in Tammy’s head replied. “Only, not tomorrow. My boyfriend and I would like a little time for ourselves.”

“Boyfriend?” Tammy asked, confused. On the screen of the DV, the view over Carolyn’s left shoulder happened to include the shimmering wall of the Switcher, which no one had remembered to turn off. In its reflective surface, she saw that Carolyn and Honker were holding hands. “Oh! Yes, of course. You can contact me whenever you’d like.”

Tammy took her hand off the DV’s handle, watching the image of the two of them slowly fade. Then she looked over at Herbie, who was pretending he hadn’t seen anything and had been working on a mathematical formula all this time.

“Hmm . . .”

*Every time I close my eyes . . . it’s you.
And I know now who I am.
Yeah, yeah, yeah.
And I know now*

*There’s a place I go when I’m alone,
Do anything I want, be anyone I wanna be.
But it is us I see
And I cannot believe I’m falling.*

*That’s where I’m going, where are you going?
Hold it close, won’t let this go.
Dream, catch me, yeah.*

*Dream, catch me when I fall,
Or else I won't come back at all.*

*You do so much.
But you don't know . . . it's true.
And I know now who I am.
Yeah, yeah, yeah.
And I know now*

*There's a place I go when I'm alone.
Do anything I want, be anyone I wanna be.
But it is us I see
And I cannot believe I'm falling.*

*That's where I'm going, where are you going?
Hold it close, won't let this go.
Dream, catch me, yeah.
Dream, catch me when I fall,
Or else I won't come back at all.*

*See you as a mountain,
A fountain of God.
See you as a descant soul
In the setting sun.
You as a sound just as silent as none.
I'm young.*

*There's a place I go when I'm alone.
Do anything I want, be anyone I wanna be.
But it is us I see
And I cannot believe I'm falling.*

*There's a place I go when I'm alone.
Do anything I want, be anyone I wanna be.
But it is us I see
And I cannot believe I'm falling.*

*That's where I'm going, where are you going?
Hold it close, won't let this go.
Dream, catch me, yeah.
Dream, catch me when I fall,
Or else I won't come back at all.*

—“Dream Catch Me”, Newton Faulkner

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Chip ‘n’ Dale Rescue Rangers and the characters of Chip, Dale, Gadget, Monterey Jack, Zipper, Professor Nimnul, Foxglove, Tammy and Bink and their mother, Freddie the Witch, Queenie, Sparky and Buzz, Lahwhinie and Shaka-Baka, Bud and Lou, Fat Cat, Detective Drake, Aldrin Klordaine, and anybody else I missed are property of Walt Disney Television Animation, and were created by Tad Stones and the writers for the series.

Key to References:

Prologue: A Dark and Stormy Night

Once upon a time, in a world not too different from ours, four rodents and a fly band together to fight the forces of darkness. For their detective agency, no case is too big, no case is too small. They are: The Rescue Rangers.

Introduction to *The Rescue Rangers* cartoon on Earth-A.

February 15

The year of Part 1 is 1994, although I didn’t see any reason to reveal that. Basically, it takes place four years after Tammy met the Rangers, and one year after my fanfic *The Knight and the Jester*. This sets the events of *Rescue Rangers* to 1990.

“Bonkaholics Anonymouse”, twelve-step program

Alcoholics Anonymous, plus the reference to the ubiquity of mice in RR

Weird part of *2001*

2001: A Space Odyssey (1968, MGM). György Ligeti composed *Atmospheres*, used for the monolith scenes in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Note that the dimensions of the stone, 9 by 4 by 1, is also a reference to *2001*.

“Francine, is that you?”

Part Two.

Part One: Tammy

Chapter 1: Homecoming

“All You Wanted” lyrics

Michelle Branch

Molly, Beth's name for Tammy's invisible friend

Molly Cunningham, *Talespin*—Note that Molly's middle name in the show was Elizabeth.

The sketch of Chip working on his casebook

Oblique reference to my Rescue Rangers fanfic *The Knight and the Jester*, which ends with a scene of Chip writing in his casebook. It's probable that Herbie drew the sketch.

Herb, Binkie, Tank and Herbie Tanglefoot

Herb, Binkie, Tank and Honker Muddlefoot, *Darkwing Duck* (1991, Walt Disney Television Animation)

Chapter 2: The Tanglefoots

"I'm X. What can I tell you about Foreverware today?"

"Forever Ware" episode of *Eerie, Indiana* (1991, Cosgrove/Meurer Productions / Hearst Entertainment / Unreality)

Gulliver's Island

Gilligan's Island (1964, CBS / Gladysys Productions / United Artists Television), which in *Darkwing Duck* is called *Pelican's Island*

A brand new car

The Price Is Right (1972, Fremantle Media North America / CBS / Mark Goodson Television)

F-104 Starfighter

Lockheed; used by the U.S. Air Force from 1958 - 1967 (Check Yeager's big crash in *The Right Stuff* was in a NF-104A variant; the bribery scandal associated with the sale of the F-104 to Germany in 1961 and other aircraft to other countries in following years, revealed 1976, nearly brought down Lockheed)

Chapter 3: Our Heroes

"The Great Dale-dini"

A reference to the advertising posters for magicians in the Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries, especially that for Harry Houdini

Chapter 4: Gadget Makes Children Cry

Richard (and Isabel) Chestnutt

Sir Richard (and Isabel) Burton. Richard Burton was an English explorer of Africa in the Nineteenth Century. Unlike most of his fellow explorers, he actually tried to understand the natives he encountered (of course, he was also the first non-believer to sneak into Mecca and see the Black Stone, which, since he didn't convert to Islam first, shows a certain disregard for others' belief systems). He was continually put down by the establishment because of his middle class birth. Isabel Arundell belonged to one of the most prominent families in England. She became Richard's biggest fan after reading his books, and before long the two of them had wed, to the

displeasure of her family (minus her father, another Richard Burton fan). At the end of his life, Richard wrote the best-known translation of *The Arabian Nights*. Isabel is mostly known for how much of her husband's unpublished work she burned after his death to protect his reputation from the truth. On the plus side, in his life she traveled with him wherever he went, making each stop into a little piece of England.

“Spumoni? Mascarpone?”

Oblique reference to Rat Capone, and an obvious shout-out to one of my favorite fanfiction authors.

“The Yankees can't win them all, kid”

The New York Yankees (1st place in the American League at 34 wins, 22 losses) were beaten at Toronto by the Blue Jays (10th place in the American League at 28 wins, 29 losses), 2 to 7, on Friday, June 10, 1994.

Pr. Julius Hoppernickel

Grandpa Waddlemeyer, *Darkwing Duck* (specifically “Darkly Dawns the Duck”); he didn't really have a character in that episode, so that is my invention.

String Theory

A theory of physics (controversial in 1994 but nearly universally accepted today) that holds that all phenomena in the universe can be accounted for by the vibration of one-dimensional strings embedded in ten-dimensional space; it is held by its supporters to be a “theory of everything”, while its detractors like to point out the fact that the theory is so complicated that it is impossible to prove or use in a practical setting

M-Space

String Theory term for ten-dimensional space.

“Special Theory” and “General Theory”

A reference to Albert Einstein's Special Theory and General Theory of Relativity (1905 and 1915)

John Nash

A Beautiful Mind (2001). Since the movie came out 7 years after this scene is set, the professor is referring to the actual events it is based on. The fact that Nash had just won his Nobel Prize justifies the facts being known to the scientific community.

Chapter 5: The Rescue Ranger Fan Club

“Cookie, cookie, cookie.”

“Pizza, pizza, pizza” (from a really obscure radio commercial).

Gulliver's Island, again

Rescue From Gilligan's Island (1978).

“I sense something”

Darth Vader, *Star Wars: A New Hope*.

Michael and Jane

The kids from *Mary Poppins*, but with the age difference reversed.

“I'm . . . Dale-dini”

Batman: The Animated Series (1992) was produced by Paul Dini. The phrase is from the 1989 movie.

“Hey Rocky! Watch me pull a rabbit out of my hat!”

Running joke in *Bullwinkle*.

Clue: Master Detective
Parker Brothers, 1988.

Chapter 6: New Member

Foxglove's opinion of armadillos

Home Is Where You Hang Upside-Down, by The Enduring Man-Child.

“ . . . a national park in northwestern Connecticut”

Mount Riga State Park.

Bear Mountain

An actual mountain in Mount Riga State Park. Also reminiscent of “A Night on Bare Mountain” by Modest Mussorgsky.

Chapter 7: Appendix A

Tank's song

“Enter Sandman” by Metallica, which just happens to be the theme song to *The Knight and the Jester*.

TV Guide

Owned by News America Corporation in 1994 (currently Gemstar); it's largely irrelevant today.

“Don't anybody move!”

Typical Barney Fife dialog from *The Andy Griffith Show*.

Professor Dottmeyer's lost beetle Bubbie

Actually, I made this up.

“Lost Tribe of the Huachi”

Oblique reference to the hwacha, an ancient Korean weapon featured on the “Alcohol Myths” episode of *Mythbusters*.

“What's this do?”

GIR, “War of the Planets” episode of *Invader Zim*.

Mulder and Scully

Main characters in *The X-Files* (20th Century Fox, 1991). They were linked with the Rescue Rangers in the fanfic *Home Is Where You Hang Upside Down*, by The Enduring Man-Child, and also appeared in *The Knight and the Jester*.

“Many Worlds Hypothesis”

Hugh Everett, 1957

Tunguska Comet

The most-likely cause of the 1908 explosion over eastern Siberia.

Copenhagen Interpretation

Niels Bohr and Werner Heisenberg, 1927

String Theory

Created by dozens of physicists from 1960's onward

Musical String Theory

Another oblique reference to *The Knight and the Jester*, which included an involved discussion of acoustics and using overtones to track a diamond.

“Earth-A” vs. “Earth-1”

The *Futurama* episode “The Farnsworth Parabox” (episode aired in 2003, so Bill Odenkirk must have ripped off Dale’s idea!)

“Borg Earth”

The Borg first appeared in the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode “Q Who?” (airdate May 8, 1989).

Chapter 8: Exit Light

“Exit Light”

Lyrics from “Enter Sandman”. Further lyrics will be used for the titles of Chapters 9 - 11.

“. . . because I can’t remember the phone number of what’s-his-name”, and Gadget’s translation device

“Home Is Where You Hang Upside-Down”, by Roy Neal Grissom (“what’s-his-name” is Fox Mulder from *The X-Files*).

Chapter 9: Enter Night

“the Bat Guy”

The Batman, DC Comics.

“Coo-Coo bottle”

Coo-Coo Cola, from the episode “The Case of the Cola Cult”.

“Citrus Delight” and “purple stuff”

1980’s commercial for Sunny Delight.

“OHD-0035”

ID code from a website titled “Secret Contents of a Certain Government Warehouse”.

The letters mean this is an (O)bservation device that operates by modifying p(H)ysical law and must be (D)irected to work (the 0035 means there are 34 other objects in the warehouse with the same description).

Chapter 10: Take My Hand

“Pavane”

I am thinking specifically of the one by Gabriel Fauré.

Cadwallader

Winifred’s last name from *Home Is Where You Hang Upside-Down*.

Guild of Calamitous Intent

A reference to Dr. Girlfriend from *The Venture Brothers* (2003, World Leaders / Astro Base Go! / Cartoon Network / Williams Street).

Dirk Suave

CDRR episode “Double ‘O Chipmunk”

“Two roads diverged in a yellow wood.”

“The Road Not Taken,” Robert Frost, 1916

Plymouth Suburban

Marque of Chrysler.

Part Two: Francine

Chapter 11: We're Off to Never-Never Land

“Empty Is” lyrics

Frank Sinatra, based on a poem by Rod McKuen, from the album *A Man Alone* (1969)

The countdown

This is counting down to June 15th at 12:00:03 AM, the moment the Rescue Rangers were swapped in Part One. If you're having trouble with the math, remember that the change from Standard Time to Daylight Savings Time occurs during the span being counted down. The year for Parts Two and Three is 1998.

Bud and Lou

Based on characters created by Bud Abbot and Lou Costello. In particular, their characters from *Buck Privates* (1945). Of course, the reason I'm using these characters is because Freddie's familiars in “Good Times, Bat Times” were named and based on the pair.

his arm snaked out to one side

An obligatory snake reference for Bud.

“you're like Little Miss Muffet: a spider would give you a heart attack”

An obligatory spider reference for Lou.

The movies discussed

Titanic (#1 in the box office on the weekend of February 13, 1998, for the ninth of what would be fifteen weeks in a row)

L.A. Confidential (#10)

Wag the Dog (#12)

The Wings of the Dove (#21)

Blues Brothers 2000 (#9)

As Good as it Gets (#5)

The Borrowers (#6)

Great Expectations (#8)

Cracker Jacks

Property of Frito Lay.

Family Circus

By Bill Keane; property of King Features Syndicate

Commander Cellini, Ultra Probe

Character and spaceship from the *Space: 1999* episode “Dragon's Domain”. In a 1997 flashback during that episode, Cellini fought off a space monster that didn't appear on instruments. On Earth-A, that becomes a whole race of aliens that don't show up on instruments. *Space: 1999* is a 1975 television series by Gerry and Sylvia Anderson.

Captain Koenig

John Koenig, the main character in *Space: 1999* (played by Martin Landau) was a captain during the flashback sequences in “Dragon's Domain”, and a close friend of Cellini's. In the series he was the commander of Moonbase Alpha.

“Give me two tens for a five.”

This skit is straight out of *Buck Privates*.

Francine Nulton

Earth-A's version of Freddie the Witch (hence "Frankie"). She's also influenced by the *Darkwing Duck* character of Ammonia Pine.

Vostaach Space Center

The link between the space center and *Space: 1999* comes from a timeline by Shane Johnson

Chapter 12: Disappointment

Walter Mitty Army Medical Sanitarium, Pritchard-Mitford, and *pocketa-pocketa-pocketa*

"The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" (1939), by James Thurber

Norris Nulton

Earth-A version of Nulton Nimnul. As you can see, the Earth-A counterparts are sometimes similar and sometimes quite different than their Earth-1 versions

Nuclear-powered cars

One of the features of the *Space: 1999* is the universal use of nuclear power. The waste was stored on the Moon, with catastrophic consequences.

Masked Marvel

Earth-A counterpart of Darkwing Duck. The "Masked Marvel" name is an alias used by Snoopy from *Peanuts* when he wanted to pose as a human, and also the name of one of my favorite compositions by composer Vince Guaraldi from *It Was a Short Summer, Charlie Brown*

Dinah and Harold Largess

Dinah, Francine's sister (thus forming the second member of the "Rat Pack" after "Frankie"), is a version of Ample Grime from *Darkwing Duck* (Ammonia Pine's hated sister). Harold Largess is based on Emilio Largo from the James Bond movie *Thunderball*. The *Darkwing Duck* character modeled on Largo is Steelbeak, and my version owes more to Steelbeak than to Largo. While I'm at it, he's also the counterpart of the *Rescue Rangers* character Ratskiwatski, from "Out of Scale".

Orlac's Machines

Inspired by Oreck, but also *The Hands of Orlac* (1924, remade as *Mad Love*, 1935, with Peter Lorre).

Alice

Earth-A counterpart of Allison Worthington, the bee fan from Chapter 7. I'm also sort of thinking of Goo from *Fosters' Home for Imaginary Friends* here, although she's a lot less hyper and three years older.

Herbert

Yet another version of Honker Muddlefoot from *Darkwing Duck*.

Coo-Coo Cola

From the *Rescue Rangers* episode "Case of the Cola Cult", but also the *Darkwing Duck* episode "Dirtysomething" and the 1946 Tex Avery cartoon "Screwy Squirrel".

Herbert's shirt art

"Light as a Mouse", by Candy Courtner, a work dating back to 1998 or perhaps earlier.

"The Spanish Inquisition"

This is a reference to an event in the history of the *Rescue Rangers* fandom: the Valentine's Day Massacre of February 14, 1998, aka Ranger War II.

Alice's shirt art

This specific fan art doesn't exist, but I'm imagining a variation on "Look at the Moon", by Matt Plotecher, which dates to 1997.

Analog

One of the major science fiction magazines, published by Dell; the editor at this time would have been Ben Bova. Per author George R.R. Martin, *Analog* had "the reputation of being hard-nosed, steel-clad, scientifically rigorous, and perhaps a bit puritanical."

Moonbase Alpha

Space: 1999.

Rockwell Studio

Cartoon studio from the *Darkwing Duck* episode "Twitching Channels", where Darkwing accidentally travels to the "Real World" and discovers that he is a fictional character. The pompous character of E. Thaddeus Rockwell is a self-parody by Tad Stones, producer of both *Darkwing Duck* and *Chip 'n' Dale Rescue Rangers*.

Ratcatcher

Darkwing Duck's motorcycle.

Rangermobile

The Rescue Rangers' skate-based means of land propulsion.

Herbert, Sr. and Elizabeth

Herb and Binkie Muddlefoot from *Darkwing Duck*

The Danaans

The alien menace, finally named. In the mythology of Ireland, the island was invaded several times before the Gaels arrived; the last two were the Fir Bolg and the Tuatha De Danann. The latter group were named after the Greek Danaans (the heroes of the Trojan War), and were considered somewhere between men and gods because of the magical artifacts they possessed.

Zenith television

Maker of many old televisions, and inventor of the remote control. Owned by the LG Group.

Chapter 13: Arrival

WOLD

The eastern sister-station to KOLD, "music for the old and the old at heart", a radio station from *Rugrats*.

Emperor Freewheel

Earth-A version of the *Ducktales* character Gyro Gearloose, inventor for Scrooge McDuck.

New Haven's local billionaire and Roboman

Earth-A versions of Scrooge McDuck and Gizmoduck from *Ducktales*.

Gogol

Nikolai Gogol (1809 - 52) was the author of "The Overcoat", a story of social status
Colt Park

An actual park in Hartford, CT.

Laurel Weir

Earth-A counterpart of Lahwhinie.

Industrial laundry

Winifred's base of operations in "Good Times, Bat Times".

Chapter 14: The Demonstration

A low ridge ten miles east of Hartford

Case Mountain, elevation 744 feet.

World Space Commission

The body responsible for administering Moonbase Alpha in *Space: 1999*.

The Company

Based on SHUSH from *Darkwing Duck*, and of course derived from the pet name CIA operatives gave their organization.

T.H.E.M.

Based on F.O.W.L. from *Darkwing Duck*.

Assistant Director of The Company ("The Bear", Aldus Klaudaine)

An amalgamation of Agent Gryzlikoff from *Darkwing Duck* and Aldrin Klordaine from *Rescue Rangers*.

Head Scientist of The Company ("The Thinker", Dr. Elena Irwin)

Amalgamation of Dr. Sarah Bellum from *Darkwing Duck* ("Heavy Mental") and Irwina Allen from *Rescue Rangers* ("Risky Beesness").

Titanium Gander

Iron Goose from *Rescue Rangers* ("Risky Beesness").

Agent of The Company ("The Hero", Drew Maughlarde, aka The Masked Marvel)

Earth-A counterpart of Drake Mallard, aka *Darkwing Duck*. He is also the Earth-A counterpart of Detective Drake from *Chip 'n' Dale Rescue Rangers*.

Carolyn Maughlarde

Earth-A counterpart of Gosalyn from *Darkwing Duck*, as well as Tammy from *Rescue Rangers*.

Norma Ray

Dr. Bellum's invention from "Heavy Mental", which increased the psychic powers of whoever used it ("just so long as they don't think!").

KEPN Helmet

Stands for "Kaon-Emission Paravoyant Neurolyzer". As the Maughlards discovered, it's more of an *equivoyant* neuralyzer.

Head of The Company ("The Philosopher", John G. Houker)

J. Gander Hooter from *Darkwing Duck*.

Small mountain

Birch Mountain

Commissioner Simmonds, Commander Gorski, Professor Bergman and David Kano

All characters from *Space: 1999*. Gorski was commander of Moonbase Alpha before Koenig, and lost his job as the result of a botched cover-up.

Handy Navi

A reference to *Serial Experiments: Lain*.

“defensive science”

In *Space: 1999*, Professor Bergman would invent a forcefield that would get stronger the more it was attacked.

Dr. Irwin and the bee

Obvious reference to “Risky Beesness”.

“Yes, Taurus Bulba”

Quote from the *Darkwing Duck* episode “Darkly Dawns the Duck”.

Chapter 15: The Judgement

Men’s size 10 tube sock

Reference to John Nowak’s *Under the Bridge*, where the “Nimnul Effect” from the episode “Catteries Not Included” is used to power a rodent-scale submarine.

“I’ve developed [a generator] for use on Moonbase Alpha”

This is the Bergman Generator, which powers the force fields in *Space: 1999*.

The metal bulldog

From the *Rescue Rangers* episode “Catteries Not Included”.

The Kensington Experiment, Professor Hodgesson and KIDS

All from *Serial Experiments: Lain*. My addition is to link this to the experiment that gave David Kano a neural link with computers (the *Space: 1999* episode “Guardians of Piri”).

Emperor Norton I

“Emperor of these United States and Protector of Mexico,” self-proclaimed. Lived from 1819 - 1880. His delusional claims were respected by the amused residents of San Francisco until his death.

Gorski’s brilliant idea

In *Space: 1999*, everyone has a small device called a commlock to communicate with each other and to open the doors and turn off the lights.

Robo-bee saboteurs

Another “Risky Beesness” reference.

“the Wired”

The name given to an advanced form of the Internet in *Serial Experiments: Lain*.

“September 14th Society”

A reference to September 13th, 1999, the date in *Space: 1999* when the Moon was accidentally blasted into deep space. It was implied in the series that the event was catastrophic for humanity back on Earth.

Greenstreet

Sydney Greenstreet, the name of the actor who played a character known as “The Fat Man” in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941). Obviously, Greenstreet is Fat Cat-A.

Percy

The name of Klordaine’s henchman from “To the Rescue”.

“A Fly in the Ointment”

Episode of *Chip ‘n’ Dale Rescue Rangers*.

The device on David’s wrist

The Metamorphosizer, from the *Rescue Rangers* episode “A Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing”

Chapter 16: Coronation

“Arise, Sir Loin of Beef!”

The Bugs Bunny cartoon “Rabbit Hood” (1949, Chuck Jones).

The history of Gogol

A hodge-podge of the following:

- The Mahicans (who had a village near Bear Mountain called Weataug) told stories of the giant death spirit Hobbomock, who was summoned in northwestern Massachusetts (see Sugarloaf Mountain) and was put into eternal slumber in southwestern Connecticut (see Sleeping Giant). It makes sense for him to have paused at Bear Mountain on the way between them.
- Winifred Benham and her 13-year old daughter, also named Winifred, were accused of witchcraft in 1697 and were found “not proven”. The trial was in Wallingford, near New Haven, and the Benham family relocated to New York, not northwest Connecticut.
- There is a great deal of nonsense told about the former township of Dudleyville. Almost every one of the stories ends with one or more persons dead and the survivors raving about animals and demons before dying themselves. None of these deaths, on close examination, turned out to be suspicious, and in some cases, the people in question didn’t even die until years later and far away from Dudleyville. The craze around Dudleyville grew so great after the release of *The Blair Witch Project* that the private owners of the ruins of Dudleyville declared the area strictly off-limits.
- The “no animals” story is also not true, as several (illegal) visitors to Dudleyville in recent years attest.
- The ironworks on Mount Riga did exist, and they are one of the reasons why Connecticut was known as the Arsenal of Democracy. They shut down in 1848 and the former colliers became known as the Raggies, a group segregated from their neighbors by their foreign origin and their own nature.

Nikolai Gogol

See the Gogol entry for Chapter 13.

“Sending all those prisoners up to the Moon”

My father.

“A series of tubes.”

Alaska Senator Ted Stevens’ defense of a net neutrality amendment to the Communications, Consumer’s Choice, and Broadband Deployment Act of 2006

Agent Reynard D. Keigh

Earth-A counterpart of Agent Fox Mulder.

Chapter 17: The Final Battle

“force field roller” and “Professor Bergman’s contribution”

In the *Space: 1999* episode “Black Sun”, Bergman invents a force field that protects the station against a black hole.

Clavius Crater

Besides being one of the most prominent craters on the Moon, Clavius Base was a setting used in the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

“My forces are boxed in at Theophilus Crater”

Another actual crater, and also a reference to how *Space: 1999* frequently dealt with mystical and religious subjects.

Eagle shuttle

The short-range craft used in *Space: 1999* and as beloved by fans as any of the cast members.

Comlock

The primary prop in *Space: 1999*, used to open doors, turn lights on and off, monitor people for medical and location purposes, and as a general-purpose remote control.

They were actually introduced prior to Commander Gorski’s time, as they are seen in use during the flashback sequences in the episode “Dragon’s Domain”.

Galt Braunbight

The Earth-A version of Walter Cronkite, who was half of the inspiration for TV news anchor Stan Blather on *Rescue Rangers* (the other half being Dan Rather).

Dr. Helena Russell

One of the two lead characters on *Space: 1999*, played by actress Barbara Bain; she was the chief medical officer for Moonbase Alpha. At the beginning of the series she had been brow-beaten by Gorski and Simmonds into covering up a series of mysterious deaths, so here I have her brow-beaten by Harold Largess into supporting his lies about Nimmul’s condition.

Chapter 18: Voices in the Darkness

All speaking characters in this chapter are based on real people. To best of my ability, I have attempted to portray everyone as I believe they are in real life. For some people (LaMarche and Paulsen) I have had the experience of seeing them in person at the San Diego Comic Con. Any mis-characterizations that remain are of course my fault.

The disembodied voice at the start of the chapter

Andrea Romano, voice director for *Pinky and the Brain*. Pupspals will probably kill me for everything I got inadvertently wrong about being a voice director, and for that, I humbly apologize.

Moe L. March

Maurice LaMarche.

Pinky and the Brain

Pinky and the Brain (1995-2001, Tom Ruegger, Universal Pictures). In Earth-A, fictional properties are identical to the real world (unless I made them up).

Jay Cummins

Jim Cummings

Orson Welles

Orson Welles

Rob Polson

Rob Paulsen

Pam Haydn

Pamela Hayden
Jeffery Burnet

Jeff Bennett

Gary Elway

Cary Elwes

Tress McNell

Tress MacNeille

Jane and Michael Banks

Earth-A versions of Michael and Jane Banks from Chapter 5.

Lassie's Rescue Rangers

An actual cartoon show from the 1970's.

Rockwell Studio

This is a reference to the *Darkwing Duck* episode "Twitching Channels", where Darkwing travels to the "real world", where a TV show based on his exploits is wildly popular. The creator of the show, J. Thaddeus Rockwell (a parody of *Darkwing Duck/Rescue Rangers* creator Tad Stones) got the idea for the show from using a mail-order helmet that allowed him to spy on the world of Darkwing. At the end of the episode, Darkwing returns to his own world and the helmet is damaged, causing it to re-tune to the world of the *Rescue Rangers*.

Mystery Mantis and the Clew Crew Review, Intergalactic Battle of the Network Stars, Three's a Crowd and Weeble Wobbles: The Animated Series

All made up shows, but considering the kinds of cartoons I grew up with in the 1970's and 80's, not entirely implausible.

Corey Button

Corey Burton

"all twenty-five of the scripts to the episodes that had never been completed"

If you add this to the 43 episodes that were aired, you get three more episodes than Disney ever aired. I wonder what they're about?

Navi

Another reference to *Serial Experiments: Lain*, this time to the desktop version of the "Handy Navi".

"A Hawaiian surfer character"

Hubba Bubba from "Gadget Goes Hawaiian".

"A witch character" and the quote that follows

Freddie herself, from "Good Times, Bat Times"

Chapter 19: Choosing Sides

OMSST

Omsk Summer Time zone

Space Dock Centauri

Space: 1999.

The Grimemaster

Ample Grime, *Darkwing Duck*

Alan Carter

Leading character in Season One of *Space: 1999*, where he was the designated hero. Played by Nick Tate, who in the 1990's became one of the leading voice-over artists for movie trailers.

“Training: it makes the job look easy”

Commander Roger Houston's line from the *Rescue Rangers* episode “Out to Launch”.

“Dean”

And thus is revealed the fact that Francine and Dinah Orlac were named by their parents after Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin.

“Shnookums or Buffy”

The latter was Ratso Ratskiwatski's daughter in “Out of Scale”.

Brown and Hash, Harold's goons

Counterparts of Spud and Fry from the *Rescue Rangers* episode “Short-Order Crooks”, who are in turn clones of Moose and Rocco, Ratso Ratskiwatski's goons in the episode “Out of Scale”.

“The Internet”

Standard excuse from *The Fairly Oddparents*.

Chapter 20: Where's Waldo?

▽

This represents Lunar Standard Time. By Hartford standards, it is May 16th at 12:18 AM.

Paul Morrow (acting commander of Moonbase Alpha)

In *Space: 1999*, Morrow is Commander Koenig's second.

“The Underwater Menace”

1967 serial from *Doctor Who*, starring Patrick Troughton as the Doctor. The scenes quoted here star Joseph Furst as Professor Zaroff and Noel Johnson as King Thous.

Seymour Travel

Throwaway reference to the villain from the *Rescue Rangers* episode “It's a Bird, It's Insane, It's Dale!”

The Librarian

Earth-A counterpart of the CDRR fancharacter Trackball, created by John Nowak. In particular, a piece of fanart by Morgan Kohl was used for the wheelchair.

Where's Waldo?

North American name for the *Where's Wally?* series, created in 1987 by Martin Handford.

“Waldo”

Short story by Robert A. Heinlein, actually written 1946, but first published in book form in 1950, accompanied by “Magic, Inc.”. The cover shown is from the 1986 reprint.

The Moon is a Harsh Mistress

1966 novel by Robert A. Heinlein.

A. WENTWORTH

Alice Wentworth, from Chapters 12 and 15.

Chapter 21 (Bad Moon Rising): no references

Chapter 22: Victory Speech

Fomorians and Firbolgs

Like the Danaans, these are names of mythical invaders of Ireland
“NIM!” “NUL!”

Do I even need to explain this one? Think Leni Reifenstahl.

Chapter 23: Substitution

“A super-weapon for destroying an entire planet with just one shot”

The Death Star from the *Star Wars* series.

Harvey the Wonder Hamster

Character created by Al Yankovic. Also an oblique reference to the television show
Flash the Wonder Dog on the *Rescue Rangers* episode “Flash, the Wonder Dog”.

Lou’s recipe for almond cookies

Lou doesn’t have one, but I do. They’re called “Kifflings”, and they are a Christmas
tradition in my home:

- 1 box Imperial margarine (2 cups, or 475 ml)
- ½ cup granulated sugar (120 ml)
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract (10 ml)
- 4 cups bleached all-purpose flour, sifted (950 ml)
- 1 ½ cup almonds (355 ml), chopped to ¼ inch size (5 mm)
- Plenty of powdered sugar

Preheat oven to 400 F (205 C). Cream butter and granulated sugar in a bowl, then
add vanilla, flour and finally almonds. Roll dough into 1 ½ inch (4 cm) balls and
place on a baking sheet. Cook for 15 minutes. Roll balls in powdered sugar while
still hot. Makes 10 dozen.

Note: Kifflings are Norwegian in origin. They are supposed to be crescent-shaped,
made from tubes the size and shape of your little finger, but I find those to be too dry
for my tastes, as well as far too much work.

Book of Asteroth and Substitiary Locomotion

Bedknobs and Broomsticks (1971, Robert Stevenson, Disney).

The Chipendale chair

An oblique reference to my fanfic *The Last Case of Detective Drake*.

“The Giants win the Pennant!”

Reference to “the shot heard ‘round the world”, the game-winning play in the
National League pennant baseball game between the New York Giants and the
Brooklyn Dodgers on October 3, 1951 (before Francine was born). The pitcher was
Ralph Braca of the Dodgers, and the hitter was Bobby Thompson of the Giants. The
Russ Hodges radio broadcast was quoted for the famous line above, but nobody
actually said the lines I used in that order.

Nimnul Security Agency

Uses the same acronym as the National Security Agency.
It's a Small World
Famous ride at Disneyland (and the other Disney theme parks).

Part Three

Chapter 24: Graduation

The web browser

NetPositive was the official web browser of BeOS, noted for phrasing its errors in the form of haiku. Here's one of its 404 messages:

*With searching comes loss
And the presence of absence:
The site is not found.*

BeOS was a potential rival to Mac OS and Windows that was discontinued in 1997. The look and feel of the Copland operating system used in *Serial Experiments: Lain* is partially derived from BeOS. Since I could not determine which browser was used in that series, I decided to go with NetPositive.

Memex

The Memex was a theoretical information retrieval system proposed by Vannevar Bush in a 1945 article entitled "As We May Think". The device included many features that were later incorporated in the Internet, such as hypertext links. Bush and his invention are name-checked in *Serial Experiments: Lain*.

The Adventures of Pochacco & Keroppi

The Hello Kitty world of characters is copyright Sanrio. *Hello Kitty's Furry Tale Theater* was a co-production of Sanrio, DiC Enterprises and MGM/UA Television. It aired on the CBS network in America in 1987. The Sanrio characters of Pochacco, Keroppi, Sweet Coron, Badtz-Maru and Kuromi were not in the cartoon series.

MourningDove

Herbie's species, as well as a recognition of all the *Rescue Ranger* fandom had lost.

QQ and ConMouse

Mentioned in Chapter 15. "QQ" stands for Quiverwing Quack, Gosalyn's secret identity in *Darkwing Duck*.

"I've been curious about how the world worked . . . the key to contentment is to always try whatever makes you uncomfortable."

Compare to Chapter 5.

Ending from "Academy Days"

Compare to Chapter 6.

"Have you ever seen the lain?"

A message that starts randomly appearing on the Wired in Layer 07 of *Serial Experiments: Lain*.

"I take care of the place when MyMelody is away."

A reference to *The Hands of Manos* (and the MST3K treatment of it).

Mimmy Kitty

Hello Kitty's near-identical sister. Amnesia1983 is of course referring to Lahwhiney. "Not twenty minutes ago, 'she' dropped out of the sky in a helicopter and stole my pet bat!"

For those with short attention spans (or reading the story out of order), this refers to events in Chapter 23.

Inverness, Florida

Note that Inverness, Scotland was the location of the Battle of Culloden (1746), where the dreams of the Jacobites died.

"Where Will the Little Green Man Be Next?" and Ragle Gumm

References to *Time Out of Joint*, by Philip K. Dick (1959). This is a reference to a false reality (which is what Carolyn believes her world to be) and ends with the revelation of a war between Earth and a revolting Moon that resembles *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*.

The KEEN helmet

First referenced in Chapter 14. The portion of the helmet's history that involves E. Thaddeus Rockwell comes from the "Twitching Channels" episode of *Darkwing Duck*.

Chapter 25: Cross-Over

Carolyn's fall

Alice by Jan Svankmajer (1988), the "lift scene"

"Said Alice"

All dialog in *Alice* was spoken in Alice's voice, and would always be followed by a close-up of her mouth narrating which character just spoke. It got rather annoying after awhile.

Tammy's entrance

Walt Disney's *Alice in Wonderland* (1951).

The Moon is a Harsh Mistress

Robert A. Heinlein, 1966. Mike is the name of a sentient computer that consults the main character about the nature of jokes.

Carolyn's story

Largely taken from the plot of the *Darkwing Duck* pilot episode, "Darkly Dawns the Duck". Terrance Barra is the Earth-A counterpart of Taurus Bulba.

Chapter 26: Norris Nulton

Prisoner's Aid Society

From the *Rescuers* series of books by Margery Sharp.

"Even Nimnul had gone straight for awhile"

Rescue Rangers episode "Rest Home Rangers"

Fantasyland

Just to be safe, I will credit Disneyland with this one.

Ernesto and Bernie

A twisted version of Bert and Ernie from *Sesame Street*, with their roles reversed

Doctor Mitford-Pritchard

Earth-1 version of Doctor Pritchard-Mitford (Chapter 12)

“She turned you into a newt!”

Monty Python and the Holy Grail

Bob Ross

Host of *The Joy of Painting* (1983, PBS). Ross frequently referred to the “happy little clouds” he painted.

“I am Norton J. Nimnul, scientist. I own a ray gun and a lab.”

Parody of “I am Elmer J. Fudd, millionaire. I own a mansion and a yacht,” from the Warner Brothers cartoon “Hare Brush” (1955).

Super Toast

Invader Zim, episodes “The Nightmare Begins” and “Future Dib”

The Szalinski Process

From the *Honey, I Shrunk the series*.

Chip and Dale’s opinion on being mistaken for squirrels

Rescue Rangers episode “Out of Scale”. This is also a callback to *The Knight and the Jester*.

Dana Scully and Fox Mulder

The X-Files (20th Century Fox, 1991). A running joke in the series is that the pair’s rental cars are always white or silver Ford Tauruses. That and the constant cell phone use. The “spokesperson” reference is to actress Gillian Anderson’s cancer-awareness commercials.

Mister Whizzer

Parody of *Watch Mister Wizard/Mister Wizard’s World* (NBC, 1951; Nickelodeon, 1983) from the CDRR episode “Flash, the Wonder Dog”.

The black box

This is the animal translation device from *Home Is Where You Hang Upside-Down*. It is described only as a modified bat detector small enough for Foxglove to wear it. Search for “Build a Simple Bat Detector” on Google to see one built in a black plastic hobby box of the right dimensions. The exact dimensions (9 by 4 by 1) are once again a reference to *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Banana baby food

See “Helping Orphans Survive”, an article for the online *BATS Magazine*, where young insectivorous bats are fed a diet of fortified milk, veal and banana baby food, and vitamin paste, until they are capable of eating mealworms.

“The Irish Washerwoman”, “She’ll Be Coming ‘Round the Mountain”

Traditional Irish and American folksongs, respectively.

“The Inner Light”

Name of an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987, Paramount Television).

Chapter 27: The Fandom United

Anna Comnena

Byzantine princess and scholar. Believed to be the first Western female historian. Lived 1083 - 1153. [Ban Zhou, 46 - 116, has a better claim as first female historian, Western or Eastern]

Quiverwing Quack, Gosalyn

As noted, alias and character from *Darkwing Duck*.

Quackerwitz

The fanon last name of the *Darkwing Duck* character Quackerjack, as established by writer Sparky. Note that the idea that the *Darkwing Duck* fandom is controlled by anybody is false, at least on this world.

Tuxedo Sam and Monkichi

Characters from *Hello Kitty*. The “Adventures of Pochacco & Keroppi” website implies that Tuxedo Sam corresponds to Monty, while Monkichi corresponds to Detective Donald Drake.

Wexler

Annoying archeologist character from the *Rescue Rangers* episode “Throw Mummy From the Train”.

Fearless Leader

Rocky and Bullwinkle

Lain

Serial Experiments: Lain. Lain refers obliquely to the Reset she performs at the end of the series, fixing the problems of the world at the cost of nobody remembering her anymore. Note that Carolyn instantly trusts Lain as soon as she says something; a common event in the series.

Chapter 28: There Ain't No Such Thing As A Free Lunch

The dream

This evokes the *Space: 1999* episode “Breakaway”, where explosions at the Nuclear Waste Disposal areas on September 13, 1999, launch the Moon into deep space. The detail about the exposure of Atlantis is a reference to the *Doctor Who* serial “The Underwater Menace” (see Chapter 16), where draining the Earth’s oceans was the mad plan of Professor Zaroff.

The photograph

An evocation of the painting *Liberty Leading the People* by Eugène Delacroix, only with more clothes. Alice Wentworth appeared earlier in chapters 12, 15 and 19. The flag’s description is taken word for word from *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*.

“TANSTAAFL” stands for “There Ain’t No Such Thing As A Free Lunch”, the motto of Libertarianism in the book. “J&M B.” are “Jane and Michael . . . Banks” (Chapter 17). The Pulitzer Prize is administered by Columbia University.

Nimnul’s pupils

Different pupil size is an actual indicator of brain damage. In addition, I’m using this to push his character into becoming a counterpart of the *Darkwing Duck* character Megavolt.

Chapter 29: The Rescuers

“I Think We’re Alone Now”

1987 song by Tiffany.

Officers Lee and Murphy

Counterparts of Kirby and Muldoon, the names derived as follows: Jack Kirby was a famous comic book artist, his best-known writer was Stan Lee. The name of the game warden in *Jurassic Park* was Robert Muldoon (his last words were “Clever girl . . .”). In the movie, he rescued Lex and Tim Murphy.

“the Reset”

Refers to the end of *Serial Experiments: Lain*, where Lain is forced to rewrite everyone’s memories to remove herself from existence.

“The Best of Everything”

Song from the *Rescue Rangers* episode “To the Rescue: Part 1.”

“True Faith” by New Order

Commonly known as “Morning Sun”, released 1987, a song about loss of faith.

Chapter 30: Hartford City Jail Blues

“Gadget Hackwrench Eyes”

Parody of “Bette Davis Eyes” (1974) by Kim Carnes, by The Enduring Man-Child (1998). This is slightly anachronistic, as the parody was first published about five months after the scene in question in real life.

Sergeant Detweiler

Counterpart of Sgt. Spinelli from *Rescue Rangers*. If you’re familiar with the show *Recess*, you’ll get the connection.

Detective Tenchure

Counterpart of my conspiracy-obsessed character Detective Chenture from *The Last Case of Detective Drake*.

WHCT

Paxton Communications was the owner of the station in 1998. Today it’s owned by Entravision Communications Corporation and as its current call sign, WUVN, shows, it is a Univision station.

“Ranger In Your Soul”

Extremely-anachronistic parody of “Birdhouse In Your Soul” (1990), by They Might Be Giants, by Mayhem (2007), but on Earth-A, I suppose “Birdhouse” is the parody. “Dr. Spock’s Backup Band” is a lyric from the group’s self-titled song.

A Tale of Two Cities

Charles Dickens, 1859.

Emperor Albert

Albert Einstein. In Earth-A’s history, he led the human resistance to the Fomorian invasion and was the first Emperor of Earth.

Chapter 31 (Too Much Theta): no references

Chapter 32: Truth or Consequences

Television channels

These are all actual television channels available to cable television viewers in Hartford, CT in 1998. At that time, Chris-Craft owned WWOR; Connecticut Public Broadcasting, Inc. owned CPTV; Counterpoint Communications owned WTXG; Fox

Television owned WNYW; an 80/20 partnership between General Electric and Seagram owned Sci-Fi; the Meredith Corporation owned WFSB; the National Cable Satellite Corporation owned CSPAN; Time Warner owned CNN, HBO and TBS; the Tribute Company owned WGN; an 80/20 partnership between the Walt Disney Company and the Hearst Corporation owned ESPN; the Walt Disney Company owned the Disney Channel; and Viacom owned MTV, TMC and TNN. Today, Sci-Fi is unfortunately called SyFy.

Television programs

The New Stoicism, *People's Choice Movie of the Week* and *Senate Subcommittee On the U.S. Auto Industry* are invented shows; although they are typical of the stations I put them on. The quotes from *SportsCenter*, *Headline News* and *Extreme Dinosaurs* are also invented. The other programs all actually aired in June of 1998, albeit not all at the same time, and all included the quotes listed. Movie credits: *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981, Steven Spielberg, Paramount Pictures), *Soylent Green* (1973, Richard Fleischer, MGM), *Real Genius* (1985, Martha Coolidge, Columbia TriStar), "Crocodile" Dundee (1986, Peter Faiman, Paramount Pictures), *The Rescuers* (1977, John Lounsbery and Wolfgang Reitherman and Art Stevens, Walt Disney Productions), and *Rustler's Rhapsody* (1985, Hugh Wilson, Paramount Pictures). Television series credits: *Magnum, P.I.* (1980-1988, Donald A. Bellisario and Glen A. Larson, Universal Studios), *SportsCenter* (1979-present, Bill Rasmussen, Walt Disney Corporation/Hearst Corporation), *Total Request* (1997-1998, Carson Daily, Viacom), *Headline News* (1982-present, Ted Kavenau and Paul Amos, Time Warner), *Sam & Max* [or, to use the full name, *Sam & Max: Freelance Police!!!*] (1997-1998, Steve Purcell, Nelvana Limited), *Pinky and the Brain* [see Chapter 18], *Extreme Dinosaurs* [yes, this was a real show] (1997, Mattel, DIC Entertainment), *The "Weird Al" Show* (1997, Al Yankovic, Dick Clark Productions), *Mystery Science Theater 3000* (1988-1999, Joel Hodgson, Best Brains Productions), and *V: The Series* (1984-1985, Kenneth Johnson, Warner Brothers Television). The song featured on *Total Request* was "Bitter Sweet Symphony" (1998, The Verve, *Urban Hymns*). The movie featured on *MST3K* was originally titled *Uchu Kaisoku-Ken* (1961, Koji Ota, Toei Company, dubbed by Walter Manley Enterprises).

"Why???" [the question asked by at least one reader slogging through this section]

The even-numbered clips show the characters that inspired the creation of each Rescue Ranger: Indiana Jones (Chip), Magnum P.I. (Dale), Jordan from *Real Genius* (Gadget), "Crocodile" Dundee (Monty) and Evinrude from *The Rescuers* (Zipper). The odd-numbered clips contrast this with the hopelessness felt by the adult world in Earth-A.

Coo-Coo Cola ("Bottled in Pensacola")

A reference to the *Rescue Rangers* episode "The Case of the Cola Cult". Curiously, Coo-Coo Cola is also referenced in *Darkwing Duck* and the 1944 *Screwy Squirrel* cartoon "Happy Go Nutty".

Coin/Clutch Jewelers

A reference to Madame/Lady Clutchcoin, a standard rich character in several *Rescue Rangers* episodes, always with a different character design. The version in "Gorilla My Dreams" wore a diamond as big as she was and at least twice her weight.

"Straggly scrub-brushes . . ."

Lengthy quote from “Good Times, Bat Times”.

Chapter 33: Searching for Meaning in a Meaningless World

Sprite commercial for “Sun Fizz”

Actual commercial airing in 1998 (directed by Spike Jonze for Lowe & Partners/SMS). And if you're asking “why” again, consider this a warning of what you could get if you let cartoon characters run around in the Real World.

“Limited nuclear engagement”

In the back story to *Space: 1999*, there was a brief thermonuclear war in 1987 caused by North Korean terrorists. This is used as the reason why humanity was united in the series. Also, the world’s nuclear weapons were dismantled and the waste stored, first in Antarctica and later on the Moon.

Chapter 34: End Game

Davros

Prominent villain in the series *Doctor Who*, first appearance *Genesis of the Daleks* (1975).

The world where the Roman Empire never fell

I was specifically thinking of *Aquila* by S. P. Somtow—Somtow also wrote “The Carpetsnaggers” episode of *Rescue Rangers*.

The world where men are ruled by apes

Planet of the Apes (1968, 20th Century Fox).

Earth: “It’s where I keep all my stuff!”

“The Tick vs. The Tick” episode of *The Tick* (1994, Sunbow Entertainment).

“Over my dead batteries! Eat amperes!”

Direct quote of Megavolt from *Darkwing Duck*.

“We agreed that Nimnul is to stay there for three days.”

The events of those three days are covered in “The Switch”, a fanfic by Roxor.

Chapter 35 (Re-Introductions): no references

Chapter 36: Homecoming

How Fiction Works

Title of two actual books written by Oakley Hall and James Wood, but those were written in 2001 and 2008, so Francine must have been reading something else.

The Faerie and their leader

Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell by Susanna Clarke (Bloomsbury, 2004).

“Dream Catch Me” lyrics

Newton Faulkner

???

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ILLEGAL INTERACTION DETECTED BETWEEN UNIVERSES Y435.456.5646/935489 AND
J14.763.479.53567/456355

UNIVERSE Y435.456.5646/935489 HAS BEEN CORRUPTED IN THE VICINITY OF
GALACTIC CLUSTER 4,764,934, GALAXY 23, SOLAR SYSTEM 73,481,564,344,
PLANET 3 (LOCAL NAME: EARTH)

WOULD YOU LIKE TO (A)BORT, (R)E-SPAWN OR (Q)UARANTINE THIS UNIVERSE? Q

INSTALLING QUARANTINE . . . . .
. . . COMPLETE

C:\> ACTIVATE AGENT -U Y435.456.5646/935489

AGENT FOR UNIVERSE Y435.456.5646/935489 HAS BEEN ACTIVATED
```


Appendix A. The Adventures of Pocacho & Keroppi Website

HELLO KITTY : MM'S ADVENTURES OF POCHACCO & KEROPPI : ABOUT


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About MM's Adventures of Pochacco & Keroppi



"Once upon a miaow . . ."

Does anybody remember *Hello Kitty's Furry Tale Theater*? It was a cartoon from the '80's where Hello Kitty and friends got their own theater and started acting out their versions of fairy tales and well-known stories.

I think it was a great idea for a series, but what would happen if, instead of a new story every episode, they acted out an epic that lasted an entire season? That's what *The Adventures of Pochacco & Keroppi* is all about.

Once upon a miaow, Pochacco and Keroppi, best friends, found themselves the only two who could save their monkey friend Monkichi and his dog Grinder from being framed for theft by the dastardly monkey Chi Chai Monchan, the cat Fangora, and the mad inventor Badtz-Maru. In the course of this adventure, Pochacco and Keroppi make three steadfast friends, and after saving Monkichi and Grinder and exposing Chi Chai Monchan's schemes, they decided to remain together as the Daring Do-Gooders, a group dedicated to solving the cases the monkey police are unable to handle.

Here are the main characters and the roles they play:

Character	Role	Character	Role
Pochacco	Pochacco plays the leader of the Daring Do-Gooders, bold and fearless, although he has a habit of thinking too much.	Fangora	Fangora plays the Daring Do-Gooder's principal nemesis, a crime lord with a taste for the finer things in life.
Keroppi	Keroppi plays the free-spirited adventurer with a wacky sense of humor. He tends to leap before he looks.		NOTE: If you don't recognize Fangora from other Sanrio products, that's because she only existed on the <i>Furry Tale Theater</i> TV show.
Tuxedo Sam	Tuxedo Sam plays the raucous, backslapping musclepenguin of the Daring Do-Gooders, a gung-ho guy not fond of subtle tactics and strategies. He's seen the world and is full of stories; he also has a weakness for cheese.	Badtz-Maru	Badtz-Maru plays a villainous but screwy scientist that invents all kinds of crazy things to get rich. The Daring Do-Gooders constantly thwart his plans, but he never seems to figure this out.

Have you ever seen the lain?

Character	Role	Character	Role
Sweet Caron	Sweet Coron plays Tuxedo Sam's best friend, the most enthusiastic member of the Daring Do-Gooders. Coron communicates via buzzing and pantomime.	My Melody	My Melody plays a teenage girl who fell in love with Pochacco when he saved her from the clutches of Fangora. As a result, My Melody developed a huge crush on Pochacco.
Hello Kitty	Hello Kitty plays a likable chatterbox with the biggest intellect and warmest heart of all the Daring Do-Gooders. She's an inventor who can make practically anything out of practically nothing.	Kuromi	Kuromi was a misguided assistant to the witch Catnip. She switched to the side of the good guys after falling in love with Keroppi.

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