

600 - Characters, Locales, etc.
of
Crazy George Takes a Holiday
The Fourth ~~Book~~ Study Guide
in the
Dragon Bound
a.k.a Dra@g©n B©und a.k.a
a.k.a **The D-B©und Adventuring Series** a.k.a

starring
Ruby FireHaven
and so on and so forth
as conceived, written, and enchanted by
Celli
the
Happy Go Lucky Celaphopod

© The Dragon ©
© Dragon Bound Publishing ©
© Celli the Happy Go Lucky Celaphopod ©
and in the Earthen Vortex

© © © **Brett Paufler** © © ©

Commemorative Internet Edition

Released to the wild October 15th, 2014

Happy Birthday to the LeeZards

All Rights Reserved

all rights that can be reserved have been reserved by the copyright holder(s)

You Waive All Rights

by downloading, reading, transmitting, saving, talking about, thinking about, refusing to think about or in any way interacting with and/or failing to interacting with this work you agree forthwith and henceforth and backwhen and thenceforth to forfeit any and all rights that can be forfeited by any and all means whether now known or to be discovered in some dismal post-apocalyptic future

Imported from the Realms 2©©9

(give or take)

Editing, Translated to the English, and in general Debugged & Deburred

by

Brett Paufler

Brett@Paufler.net

Licensing Programs Available

please make me rich

www.Paufler.net

Crazy George Takes a Holiday
Character Summaries & Locations Descriptions
Copyright Brett Paufler, 4-5-09

600 - Character Summaries & Locale Descriptions

It might make more sense to do the plot summary next, but I don't feel like it. So, if you've had enough of reading lists or you think you know it all, feel free to skip ahead. But just to let you know, you'd be missing a lot.

And I'm not just saying that because I like the sound of my own quill scratching on papyrus.

Format

I'm not looking to make this long and drawn out. My intent is to simply make this information accessible as possible. I mean, if I wanted to be boring and long winded, I could also do a sixteen volume hyper-intensive travel series on the greater Kiss'wick area as Fritz Heinmillerstien once felt the need to do -- and we're not talking about those little pamphlets here, but big, huge, honking volumes with pictures, biographies, interviews, maps, behind the scenes commentaries, and everything. They're definitive. And, they're exhausting -- and I mean that in every possible way imaginable.

Flat out, I'm not going to do that. Rather -- and this should come as no surprise -- I'm going to cut to the opposite extreme, and keep it as short and sweet as possible and adhere to the following format:

Name (and/or names): if you don't know what this part is all about, I have no need to be the one to dissipate your bliss.

Description: just the important stuff -- like Fritz could stand to lose a few pounds, Morgana is a babe in that special timeless beauty and/or older woman sort of way that she has, and Crazy George wears a knee brace. Didn't know that last bit, did you?

Action (and/or trivia): basically, why the heck I'm listing the entry in the first place. For instance, I already mentioned the meat pies, so no need to do that again. Instead, I'll just point out I spent 3-0-5 on a pair of earrings for Nellie. Oh, and that 3-0-5, loosely translates as gold, silver, copper (or 0/5 if we're only talking about the cheap side of things). Of course, that's a simplification. There have been whole books written on the Five Kingdom's ludicrously complex currency system. Let me put it this way, originally there were the Five Kingdoms comprised of a bunch of duchies each, and each one of these entities had their own set of coins. Well, when they merged together as a single country, instead of adopting a standardized coinage like rational folks might, they decided to keep every last one of the -- firk-ding-blast -- old coins. You could try to figure it out, but why bother? I think, the best policy is to simply drop a handful of coins on the counter and let the shop-keeps do the rest. I hear tell, they're amazingly honest. But once again, if they weren't, I'd never know.

Key Quote: something that was overheard, said about, or said by the entry in question. For example if Grt was in this story, his entry might go, "Grt, hungees," or, "Grt, helpees," because those are his two trademarked phrases. But since Grt isn't actually in the story, neither he nor his phrases need be mentioned again.

And truthfully, that's about twice as long as I want to spend on each item. But then, I guess you know how it goes. Once I get talking, sometimes I just can't stop.

Characters, Locales, Items, Concepts, and Whatever Else Strikes My Fancy

Celli the Happy Go Lucky Celaphopod

Damn, but he's good looking. Tall, lanky, bipedal: one could

almost say he's the model on which the Greek Gods were originally based. Or if you like your descriptions less flowery or abstract, he's got a humanesque body with three blue squid like appendages (don't be calling them tentacles) hanging from each side of his skull.

He the one who is writing the blessed novel. Or at least, he is the one who is writing the notes to the study guide, which is probably work enough for one Celaphopod.

"If it's my agent, tell him I'm almost done."

"Surf's up. Cow-a-bung-a, dude."

Possessed by the muse,
In my throne by the gyl,
I close my eyes,
And let the spirits,
Guide me.

P.S. Celli also fancies himself a poet... even if no one else does.

Crazy George, George, and even just CG these days

A bathrobe wearing, spiked coffee drinking, non-conformist wizard who IS NOT TO BE TRUSTED!!! Like most conmen, his favorite spell is Disguise. So you know, everything about him is a total lie.

Whenever we were in a store (yes, I shop on my vacations), well, if CG saw a "tester" of anything -- perfume, hand lotion, a pen, or whatever (it didn't matter what) -- he'd take it.

Some of the more memorable things he said during the trip include:

"Since we met, my bowels haven't been the same."

"If I cleaned my glasses, I'd have to face facts and realize it was the entire world that looked like @#\$%."

"An answering machine? Why? If you get a message you have to do something. This way I can honestly say I never got the

message.”

“If somebody screws you once, they’re just practicing.”

“Crying? Why would I cry? I’ve just got one of those blasted Fingerlings stuck in my eye!”

Lane (And just a word to the wise, if you ever learn the rest of her name, you just might want to keep it to yourself.)

Lane is a four armed demon from the Courts of Chaos. I hear tell she’s a lady, but you’d never know if from the way she acts. That said, she’s a total babe, and could do modeling work for book covers if she were so inclined.

When not engaging in a bit of sport (i.e. what others might call gratuitous violence), she can be quite witty. For example, after a while she got sick and tired of searching for “the bell,” so she bought a magical tea bell at a souvenir shop. And now whenever she rings it, George comes a running -- just like the whipped dog that he is.

Her favorite lines include:

“You’re an idiot.”

“Argh!”

“This is the last time I’m going to be in one of your stupid stories.”

Rover (or kitty if you don’t value you appendages and/or you have a fetish for claw and bite marks)

He looks like a...

Well, the less said about this the better.

Oddly, Rover actually reminds me of Francis the Enigma. Francis was a Goblin who thought he was an Elf. He earned a place for himself in the High Court of the Lost Woods and everything. Rumor is he died challenging an enemy Goblin commander to a duel. And well, you know how Goblins are. Once poor Francis got into range, a squad of Goblin archers filled him with arrows. Still though, for a Goblin, he was quite the Elf.

Rover is more or less the same, only different.

“Good doggers.”

“He no cats, meester.”

“Why’d you’d say he’d da cats?”

“GRRRRRR!!!!!”

“Help! For the love of Gra’gl, get him off me!”

Nellie, Nadia, Jack... maybe Nihli, and who knows who else by now?

Nellie is a Pixie. And as is the way of these things, I didn’t realize what a beautiful little Pixie she was until just recently. And bad... Oh my word, but the things she does. Bad does not cover it all.

Nellie doesn’t have an official role in the story. Rather, she acted as my... um, ahem... personal assistant throughout the journey -- food tester, souvenir consultant, personal masseuse, etc..

“Are you alright? You know, you really shouldn’t call Rover a cat anymore.”

“GRRRRRR!!!!!”

“Oh, for the love of Gra’gl. Ahhh!!!”

The Cobalts (a.k.a the Charlies)

“We’d do da Rober bit again?”

“Sshh! Waits for it.”

The Charlies are Cobalts: short green lizard-men-ish creatures, knee high to waist tall depending upon who they’re standing next to: helpful, in an unhelpful sort of way: good natured, but vindictive...

“He’d said we’d da vindicter.”

“So’d, we’d do da Rober bit now?”

“Sshh! Waits for it.”

Yeah. OK. OK. I see where this is headed, guys.

Let’s see...

The Cobalts piloted the boat, cooked diner, and kept watch, but more importantly, they also walked the DOG, played catch with the DOG, befriended the DOG, and bathed the DOG. Other

than that, they're your basic, run of the mill, supporting character (x12) who always seem to muck things up.

"Firstee it da vindicator."

"No it da muckiters."

"Maybees we just biter him ourselves?"

"Dat good idears."

"You wantee to bitee da meester wit us Rober?"

"GRRRR!!!!!"

"Oh, for crying out loud. OUCH! OUCH!"

The Five Kingdoms, (what you want me to crack open a textbook and find out what each of the kingdoms was originally named? I don't think so.)

Everything in the Kingdoms is the same as it is in the Realms... only different. You remember when you were a kid and there was that rumor floating around that if you got on the swing-set in the park, went real high, flipped over the top, and looped all the way around again, you'd turn yourself inside out and your guts would spill out onto the ground? No? Well, maybe you didn't grow up on the wrong side of the tracks with a bunch of psychopathic Depth Fiends, like I did. Let me tell you, that seemed like a real possibility in my neighborhood. Anyhow, Lang'don and the rest of the Five Kingdoms are sort of like that. Like someone sat down on a swing and instead of looping around, they flipped the whole world upside down and made it stand on its head over and over and over again. The bottom line is, everything is familiar, but nothing is the same.

Want more specifics? Yeah well, it's good to want things. But, that's probably the wrong attitude to take, so... um, let's see. It really is sort of hard to put your finger on the differences without seeming petty, because taken one by one the differences are so small. But it's like, everything is different, and it adds up quickly. The houses are either these super-quaint cuddly little gingerbread cottages or these monstrous oversized castles -- like they don't realize that there could be a size in-between. Oh, and everything is

for sale, let, or hire. Everything! OK. What else? “Thanks,” means no, as in, “Thanks all the same.” “Please,” means yes. “Red sauce,” means catsup. “Yellows sauce,” means mustard, While, “browns sauce...” well, who knows what brown sauce is. I once asked how many different types of sauces they had -- you know, expecting a list of black, white, green, purple, and whatever. But instead of listing them all out, they brought out a basket instead. A basket! Filled to the brim with every sort of sauce, condiment, chutney, and relish you can imagine. Unbelievable! I guess it was easier than listing them all. Of course, I’m like a Dwarf in that way, because I do like my food “wet,” so I was in hog heaven. OK, so what else? I guess the last thing I’ll mention -- seeing as how we’re on food and all -- is that there’s no reason to try and eat lunch at 11:59. Lunch is at noon, my friends. Period. End of story. Come early and they’re not open. Come late and you go hungry. You won’t have any problem figuring out when it’s noon, though. And there’s no need to bother with those ubiquitous sundials, either. Just wait until the streets become very-very crowded -- very-very quickly. That’s when it’s lunchtime, and it’s a big to-do.

“Where you lot from, then?”

“Bit of a holiday, is it?”

“What type of sauce will you folks be needing, then?”

“Have you tried the Marmalite?”

Dwarves, the Industrious Ones, Cavers

Force feed Dwarfs a few vegetables when they’re young, and the little pipsqueaks grow amazingly tall... well, for Dwarves, anyway. Besides that, the thing I noticed most about the predominantly beardless Dwarves in the Kingdoms was their obvious clan loyalty. They all wore markings -- jerseys, hats, earrings, and pins, while some also dyed their hair or wore tattoos. Now in most of your realms, you don’t usually see a Dwarf with a tattoo, but I could not believe how many tattooed Dwarfs I saw in the Kingdoms. Oddly, they were all quite simple... and mostly on

the back of the neck, so it'd be right in the open for all to see. I'll be honest, it was a lot like being in an inner city slum infested by Orcs and everywhere you looked, there was another gang color. Only with the Dwarves it wasn't gangs (or Houses, as it is with the Elves), and it wasn't about who controlled the street corner, some stupid gold mine, or an ancient division of tribes, either. It was about sports. And I didn't find this out till after we'd gone through the Pinker'ton Tunnel.

Since we were stopping for the night on the other side, we thought we'd just walk around, cause you know, we're tourists and we wanted to see where we were -- i.e. where we'd transported ourselves to. Anyhow, it started to rain. Yeah, that's what they called it, but it wasn't rain. Ice was falling from the sky, so we'd obviously made a wrong turn. "Hail," the Dwarf standing next to tried to reassure us, but you just know he was just pronouncing it wrong, because it was more like Hell for a tropical creature like myself than anything else. Anyway, we ran for cover, wound up in the stables, and there we were -- the lot of us -- our crew -- with these two Dwarfs. Well, the one is normal looking: beard, pick and shovel. He'd obviously just gotten off work. Heck, for all I know the gear was for show and he was an accountant. But the other guy. He was like six feet tall... and big. Huge! So ice is falling from the sky, I'm shivering to death, and this crossbred Dwarven monstrosity is standing there in his shorts. And not just any shorts, we're talking screaming loud colors (and I'm not going to give him away and name the color), but it was solid from head to toe. He was clearly insane, but he didn't have the gold bug. His sickness was a thing called "Rug-B." And don't even ask me to explain. I think the rules are a dozen Dwarves from neighboring towns meet at dawn on a field of green where one of the teams has placed a huge barrel full of Dwarven Ale in the center. And when I say huge, I mean huge. You'd need a dozen guys just to roll it to the middle of the field. And perhaps unsurprisingly, the object of the game is to get that barrel of ale back to the center of one's own town, however possible. As far as I know, those are pretty much

the rules. No weapons. No closed fists. No flying kicks. But pretty much everything else goes. Needless to say, it's considered poor sportsmanship not to stop and have a drink or two during the match. And well, seeing as how an empty barrel is easier to carry than a full barrel the first couple of hours are usually spent with both sides trying to out drink the other. Anyhow, long story short, or certainly not as long as it could have been, this Dwarf in the stable at the edge of the Pinker'ton Tunnel had the numbers 17-2 tattooed across his face. It's sort of hard not to ask a guy about something like that, and he was more than happy to explain. His team had won the year before, and getting the tattoo seemed like the proper way to commemorate the occasion. Oddly, that tattoo across the face thing isn't the dead give-away to the Dwarf's identity as you might expect it to be -- especially in the back country. I can't tell you how many times I saw similar markings, and Dwarves squaring off against one another, yelling at the top of their lungs:

“PINKER'TON!”

“MERRY'TON!”

“Why? Why? You ask, ‘Why?’ Have you ever tasted that swill they call ale in Merry'ton? If they took the barrel home, we'd be drinking their piss-water next week, and we can't have that now, can we?”

Elves, Tree Huggers, The Beautiful People

I like Elves. My girlfriend is an Elf, and I get along famously with Stef'fan... her cousin? We seem to have a lot in common. But that doesn't mean me (notice how I come first) and your typical Elf get along. It might have something to do with Celaphopods being nicknamed Gaul-Gauls in some of your further outlying vortexes, and Elf's being -- on the whole -- stuck up egomaniacs.

But I was supposed to be describing how Elves look in that section. So let me just say, scrumpt-didly-icious sums it up nicely. Even Stef'fan has his points. Though, their haircuts are often

whacked.... and I mean that in the most derogatory manner possible.

Anyway, while in the Kingdoms, about half the Elves we saw were in town busy drinking. Man! But they can drink. I mean, I can see the Elves playing Rug-B with the Dwarves and the Elves just polishing off that whole barrel of ale -- whiskey, whatever -- lickety-split, and then just shrugging, and saying, "So? You lot going to take it home and fill it up for next week?"

And the other half were mostly just tied up and anchored to the side of the canal. I guess, they had to move their boats, barges, and derelict steamers about once a month to avoid a ticket, but other than that they stayed put. We'd pass maybe two or three an hour and wave and say good day as we drifted by:

"Borrow a stick, mate?"

"Got a light?"

"That Dwarf tell you were the next Rug-B match was going to be, then? They're scared of us, you know. Won't let Elves play in their league, but we don't let that stop us.

The Vixen of an Elf is my girlfriend.

How does she look? Two words: hubba-hubba.

Usually she's just prancing around the beach in a low cut string bikini asking, "Why are all the guys staring at me?"

Other than that, I'm going to keep this kind of short. because she said, and I quote:

"If you ever put me in one of your stupid stories, I'll gut you like a pig."

And I don't think she was bluffing.

Stef'fan, Stephan, Stef

He might be the Vixen's cousin or something, but when either of them try to explain the exact details, they get so long winded, I'm not willing to listen to it all the way through till the end. Anyhow, like most Elves that I know, he's got a real attitude problem, which probably explains why I like hanging out with

him. The girls tell me he's a real heartthrob. But whatever.

Stef'fan lives in the Sandwich Isles -- in a condo, no less. What kind of Elf lives in a skyscraper, I ask you? Granted, the thing is done up like a tropical jungle, and what not. And he even had a K'fr vine growing out of his window and hanging over the balcony for a while... you know, until the Isles were annexed into the Realms. Then all the K'fr we delivered to him disappeared. Sucker! But there's no need to feel too sorry for him. So what if we ripped him on the K'fr? He got to be go-between for the Dragon's Egg. And you can bet he managed to make a copper or two off of that transaction.

"I'm not a half-breed!"

"What kind of Elf is educated at Ox'ford, I ask you? What kind of Elf is that?"

"A smart one."

"Now stop stalling and hand over that Egg!"

Humans: ho, hum, how boring.

Two arms, two legs, and a heartbeat: what more do you need to know? Some of them even claim to have souls.

Personally, unless they're crazy wizards or consorts to a dragon, I try to limit my exposure to the Sons of Man. But even so, I'll be the first to admit that the Daughters of Eve are not without their allure.

Like the Realms, the Kingdoms are progressive, so they'll let pretty much anyone in: Orcs, Goblins, Humans, whatever. They don't even require them to have special visas. So like, if I was a hordling and I was thinking about relocating, I'd seriously think about moving to the Five Kingdoms -- much nicer than the Seven Realms, and I hear you get free healthcare.

"Oh, here's something you don't see everyday -- an En'glush to En'glush dictionary."

"Alright then, what's next?"

"You think the prices are cheap? Not after you take into account the exchange factor and double everything."

Not that these quotes have anything to do with Humans specifically, but what do you want. I mean, just because Humans talk, doesn't mean I want to listen to them anymore than I want to listen to a gibbering Elf.

Sterling Watford, or Lord Sterling if you're into that honorific, title, sort of thing.

You know, Sterling looked like a nice, regal, elegant human. He helped us, which is to say Lane, work the locks -- the Watford Locks, ironically. He must have done that a lot, because wearing his hat and raincoat, he looked just like a lock keeper. He wasn't, of course. He was just out for a stroll checking the grounds, and seeing as how it was raining and all, he had chosen the appropriate gear... or if you like, costume. I say that, because the guy was big on changing his clothes. You know how some guys are...

He invited us to his castle for tea, tea turned to supper, supper turned to, "Why don't you spend the night," and the next thing you know an entire week had passed. I think he had a thing for Lane. I just hope it wasn't for me. Now, that would have been awkward, but it would explain why he gave me the creeps. Anyhow, towards the end he just sort of got squirrely -- you know, shifty -- so it was clearly time to leave. Oh, and I don't know how important this is, but I should mention it all the same. Sterling is junior to Crazy George in some mysterious secret wizards society or something and so he might have said things like:

"More tea, exalted brother?"

"Too much like hard work, that one."

"I'm lucky enough to be able to do whatever I want."

The lucky bastard. No, that's not quite right. What do you call someone who sires a bastard, anyway? A cad, I think that fits ole Sterling to a tee.

Oh, and a word to the wise, no matter how much you've had to drink, a Lord is never a bloke, chum, or a mate -- never, not no how, not no way.

And although it might make sense to go over Watford's house Sterling Manor at this point (and don't ask me why it's not named Watford Manor), I think I'm going to save the buildings for later and instead concentrate on Morgana next and give her a good going over, if you catch my drift.

Morgana Feldstone, Mistress Morgana, Hot Stuff... if a bit cold at heart in the end.

Morgana is your typical over the hill, been around the block one too many times, incredibly good looking Goth chick. She is a stunner. As in, fail your saving throw and you're paralyzed, turned to stone, and dazed for 4d6 turns as she regales you with stories of her past conquests, the number of weeks her books have been on the best seller list, and the extent of her sexual appetite. The girl is perverse. Needless to say, I failed my check against being a loyal boyfriend numerous times. But then, seeing as how I brought Nadia along with me as my bunkmate, you may have already figured that one out.

Of course, rather than delving into my... exploits, you're probably more interested in a description of the type of creature Morgana is. But, telling you outright wouldn't be any fun. So instead, let's go over what she is most decidedly not. She's not a mummy, demon, lycanthrope, devil, werebat, vampire, medusa, biker chick (I don't know why I threw that one in), raver, reaver, raider, serial killer, ghost, or revenant. She was human at one time -- or so, she claims -- but after a thousand years (or even once you're into your second century), I don't know if calling yourself a Human makes much sense anymore. If that's not clear enough, let me spell it out for you. Get it? S-P-E-L-L it out. Ah, come on. That was a great pun, but in case you missed it. She's a Witch. Say it with a smile, pardner, because she runs that there town of Kiss'wick with an iron hand disguised as a velvet kiss.

She likes to say things like:

"Don't witches travel in covens? What happened to the rest of 'em?"

“Fetch me my carriage and twelve, that’s a good lad Humphrey.”

“It’s quite vexing, really.”

And, of course, “I’m all astonishment.”

Fey’an are Creatures of the Wood

Including everything from Unicorns to Sprites, it’s a pretty useless classification. I mean, if you’re not a hordling and you like going for walks in the forest, then congratulations, you can consider yourself a Fey’an if you like. To be fair, in some contexts it signifies a specific type of mostly Elvin Fairy; but unfortunately, this isn’t one of those contexts. So even if you’re a Dwarf, all you really have to do is put down your shovel, pick up a walking stick, and go for a ramble in the woods every now and before you know it you’ll be a card carrying member of the Fey’an Society... or the Fey’an League, or whatever they’re calling themselves these days.

Being such a broad group, even without the Fingerlings the Fey’ans would be the largest group of sentients in the Kingdoms. They control more seats in the House of Fey than anyone else. Though once again, being so inclusive and freewheeling, they pretty much stand for nothing and wield no real power or authority -- i.e. you won’t see very many Fey’an creatures wearing red in CGTaH.

As Sterling has been heard to say, “As you can see, the Fingerlings are in profusion this time of year.”

Fingerlings -- i.e. Buttercup Fairies

Two out of three? Seven out of eight? Or is it, nine out of ten citizens in the Kingdoms are Fingerlings. Fingerlings outnumber, outweigh, out eat, out play, and out... um, everything the rest of the Kingdom combined. They are literally too numerous to comprehend. Technically, if it’s Fey’an and it fits in your hand -- or at least, mine -- it’s a Fingerling. And although they can resemble anything from frogs to chipmunks, most of them look like your typical run of the mill Fairy. Shrink Nadia down to

the size of your thumb and she'd make the perfect Fingerling poster child. Shrink me down and I would kick your Gra'gl loving ass. But before that, I would pa-ar-arty! Creatures who only live for a month or so aren't exactly known for their restraint, judgment, or moral values.

So anyhow, these little "buggers" lived everywhere: in flower pots, discarded shoes, downspouts, windowsills, mailboxes, and trashcans. Oh, and those guys in the trashcans were classic. "Hey. Hey! HEY! What are you doing? Get that crap out of here. You can't leave that here. Come back! Pick it up!" And he was like really mad, and a crowd was forming, so I just took my half eaten sandwich back, and then he finally noticed what it was, and he was all, "Hey. Hey! HEY! Put it back! Thief! You can't take that! It's mine!" There's no pleasing some... Fingerlings. But, the guys living in the ashtray outside the Am'blin Inn were the best of all. They were so wasted.

"Ay! Wat yu looking at?"

"Don't put your gum there. We got to live here, ya know."

"Um. Reckon, I could get a wee bit of that before it's all gone?"

TRAVELER'S ADVISORY NOT ALL FEY'AN ARE FRIENDLY

Here's the thing. There are two reasons why the Fingerlings get to live pretty much wherever they want. The first is, they tend to make wherever they live real nice, cozy, and pleasing to look at (i.e. they make good neighbors). And the second is, there's nothing you, or I, or anyone could do to stop them.

That second part is the important point to keep in mind. Magical prowess and size are not related. Those pretty fence-top-gardens, the lovely moss growing down the side of drainpipes, the "spider webs" hanging from chandeliers, and all those other pretty-pretty patterns, which look so intricate, intriguing, hypnotic, and beguiling... well, sometimes they are.

Lane -- and she's no chump, you know; she's from the Courts

of Chaos, so she's seen her share of trance inducing patterns before -- anyhow, Lane was looking at one of those fence top gardens -- real nice things by the side of the road -- and as she was standing there, the Fingerlings charmed her. Charmed! Lane! Beguiled! Stole her mind and transported her away! There's probably a technical name for what they did -- kidnapping comes rapidly to mind -- but they don't seem to consider this a crime in the Kingdoms.

Anyhow, Lane was staring at a swarm of Bee Ladies who were tending their gardens and the next thing she knew she was in the Fairy Queen's Garden, which is cool -- for like a day trip, if you go on a tour with a group and know when and how you're going to leave -- but if you just sort of show up unannounced, well, they just sort of assume that you're there for the count. They have no intention of ever letting you go -- like ever -- or even letting you remember who you are or that you may have had a life somewhere else. So really, when I say the next thing Lane knew she was in the Fairy Queen's Garden, what would have been more accurate for to say was the next thing she knew we were there waking her up from where she'd fallen asleep at Luigi's feet.

"Yawn. What? Where am I?"

So, we explained it to her. She was obviously a bit upset.

"Where? What? Why? Why would they do that?"

"Fertilizer. You fall asleep. You never wake up..."

"The worms crawl in. The worms crawl out. The worms play pinochle up your snout," Crazy George may have added as he recited a childhood rhyme that it seems every wizard of my acquaintance knows by heart.

"Luigi! How could you?"

Luigi -- a man's man and a woman's tree.

Luigi will tell you that he's Italian, but I think the accent is just an affectation. He's got copper bark. And it really is copper. You know those sheets of copper leaf they sell in craft stores around the Realms? That stuff comes from these mutant birch

trees. Usually the trees aren't sentient, but Luigi is... um, how shall we say... special.

Now, I like Luigi. I mean, I really can't find fault with a guy for using the spells and powers that happen to be at his disposal -- in his arsenal, if you will -- in order to get a girl like Lane to throw herself at his feet -- or in Luigi's case, at his roots. And yeah, there's that whole thing about the worms and the fertilizer, but Lane would have gotten to spend the rest of eternity in the Fairy Queen's Garden dreaming merrily away. So I'm thinking, in a situation like that you've got to take the good with the bad.

The point is, I had a story to write, so I would have been happy to leave Lane where she was. But Crazy George -- the love struck fool -- along with Nadia, Charlie, and Rover (which unless I'm forgetting someone means the rest of the crew) sort of insisted we rescue Lane. So, what are you going to do? Besides, I always wanted to see the Fairy Queen's Garden. And I'm not even trying to be salacious with that one... it just sort of comes naturally.

As Luigi might say:

"Hey baby, let's make some moss together."

"The copper, bronze colored bark? I spend a lot of time in the sun... baby. How about you come back here where no one will see and we can make some moss together?"

"Tree don't talk where you're from? Well, don't that beat all. Why don't you sit right down and tell me about it... while we make some moss together."

The Fairy Queen's Garden

Describe it? Right. Maybe I'll just describe Luigi again. He's got this flaky copper bark, right? And then this patch of hanging moss for a beard, and a face that sort of appears and disappears at the first fork in his branches. OK. So that's like one guy, one plant, one item -- multiply that by a zillion-million in every direction and you get some idea of the wondrous extent Fairy Queen's Garden. The place is so rich with enchantment, it's like looking into a fractured crystal ball or a hall of mirrors, but I

suppose I can describe some of it.

You got the sundial at the center, and you might want to remember that one, because it is sort of important. If you ever get stuck in the Fairy Queen's Garden that's your escape. All you have to do to get out is point the arrow in the "right" direction. In theory, this is the direction from whence you came, but as with everything of this nature, going with the pun is "right way" to go. Of course, setting the arrow is the easy part. Once you've got the arrow pointing in the (literally) right direction, then all you have to do is set the dials to the time you originally entered the Garden, and Poof! You pop out the way you came in. Of course, it's got like a thousand dials; it's got to be the most complicated sun dial I've ever seen, and it's probably not even calibrated to our solar system, so it's not like you're ever going to set it correctly, but what do you want?

If you're stuck and the sundial sounds too complicated, there's always the moss topped obelisks. Of course, if you go that route, after you walk out of the Gardens, you wind up in the Feldstone Forest, which -- despite the name -- is really no walk in the woods.

Perhaps with all this concentration on the exits, I'm jumping the gun. I mean, maybe that whole worm food, fertilizer thing doesn't concern you so much. And if that's the case, I should tell you about another -- typical -- inhabitant of the Garden: the Cyclo-Mean. Oh and believe me, a name like that should say it all. The Cyclo-Mean is a short shrub, sort of pleasing to look at with brilliant red flowers... and razor sharp teeth at the end of each and every branch. Let's just say, he's not the type of plant to let you decompose slowly. He likes his fertilizer fresh, if you know what I mean, which if you don't, means while it's still kicking and screaming.

I guess what I'm saying is, by the time the tour's over, you'll want out. And oddly, if you don't fall prey to his charms, Luigi will be happy to act as your guide and show you any one of the thousands of other exits.

“Now, be careful ladies, on the right is a Cyclo-Mean. He’s a mean spirited brute...”

“Ouch! What the?”

“Sorry, my bad, Celli. Your left. My right.”

Speaking of bad directions, and bum deals, let’s talk about Leprechauns for a moment, or as I like to call them, Cons.

They tend to be short, hunchbacked looking, Gnomish creatures, sort of like small leather-skinned money grubbers. Of course, no one has a nose for gold like a Leprechaun. I mean, with a little training they can literally tell you the purity of gold, silver, copper, or iron -- sight unseen -- by sniffing into a bag, tasting a bit of ore, or whatever. Obviously with powers of perception like these at their disposal, the Kingdom uses Leprechauns -- almost exclusively -- for border patrols, security checkpoints, and the like. Which is to say, the Leprechauns run the military, are responsible for the development of the Kingdoms heavy munitions, and as a result, pretty much run the show.

Fritz Heinmillerstien is a Leprechaun, as is the nemesis in Morgana’s short story, Dream Vacation. This is how Morgana gets rid of her sisters, you know. She takes on a new initiate, trains them, and things are fine for the first hundred years or so, but then they usually want to spread their wings, start hankering for a little elbow room, and/or have a desire to exert a little of that stuff called freewill. I guess, they should have read the fine print before they signed on. Anyhow, Morgana likes to trap these discarded scraps of sentient waste in her stories. That’s probably why she’s writes so much and why Dream Vacation, Moot Hall, and The Circling Circle of Circling Circles are so similar. Why muck about and change a perfectly good spell if it already works? Anyhow, sort of like what we’re doing with CGTaH, whenever anyone reads one of Morgana’s stories, the afflicted, which is to say, the traitorous witch in question, is pulled down that much deeper into the enchantment as the binds of the dweomer encircled about them one more time. You’d have to be sort of impressed by the cleverness of

it all if it wasn't so downright naughty.

Anyhow, we were talking about Leprechaun's. Don't trust them. And don't sign anything they hand you. And for Gra'gl's sake if Fritz offers to be your tour guide, turn him down. He's got an abominably bad track record.

"One crazy fool and his pot of gold, and the rest of us are marked for life."

"You got to admit, though. That was some pretty good pot."

"Eh, get out of here before I brain ye wit me cudgel."

Oh yeah, and then there was that pipsqueak Leprechaun hawking free newspapers at the foot of Moot Hall telling me I couldn't have one because, I didn't look like a reader.

No, I'm a writer -- that's why I don't look like a reader. Anyhow, the papers were supposed to be free. And here, this little upstart tyke -- we'll call him Pip as in, Pip Squeak -- was refusing to give me a paper, all because he didn't like the way I looked.

Still burns me up.

You know, pacifism or not, I'm going to find a way to get even with that little sucker.

I just don't know exactly how, not yet...

Maybe I'll just leave it at this. I have been tossing around the idea of opening up the book to a reader contest. You know, write a chapter and win big money -- a copper a word just like the pros -- or something like that. Of course, we might not do that for CGTaH proper, because we do sort of have a contract going with Morgana and Harry already, so perhaps we'll just plan on putting out an anthology of side quests -- just like all these big series do once they're past their prime and have "Jumped the Snark."

Anyway, if we decide to do that, the preliminary -- non-binding and subject to change -- rules will be set forth in the appendix. I just love those appendixes. And let me just say, if this little upstart of a Con -- a.k.a. Pip Squeak -- were to get his just desserts in some reader submitted story (but no more than that, I'm not the vindictive sort), well, if that were to happen, and the spell

or enchantment was clever, solid, and strong, then that would be exactly the sort of thing we would be looking for in any contest which we might hold -- or at least, you know, it's exactly what I would be looking for in any contest.

"Just let it go. You can't even read Gae'lic."

"That's not the point. It's the principal of the thing."

"What principle? That you're vindictive? Or is it that you're insane?"

"Maybe I wanted the paper so I could line my bird cage. Did you ever think of that?"

"You don't have a bird."

"Yeah, because if I did, its cage would be dirty, no thanks to that Con."

"Shsh! Don't call him that. You're making a scene."

"Maybe I should just find a way of blaming this whole thing on Crazy George."

"What? Who? Me? No thanks. I've already got a paper. Oh, and I was just checking the scores. You'll be happy to note, Pinker'ton is off to a good start this year, well on its way towards another winning season."

"PINKER'TON!"

"PINKER'TON!"

"PINKER'TON!"

As you may recall, this whole story (CGTaH) was going to be about a boat ride down a canal, so what do you say we actually get on with that part of the story?

We started our journey in Market Harborough.

This town has both a market and a harbor, hence the fantastically imaginative name. Oddly, nearly every town we went to had a church -- more properly a cathedral gauging by their size -- and a bar (a.k.a. a bell), but I don't recall a single town touting itself as Church Bell. I guess that wasn't unique enough, but a market and a harbor -- now you're onto something.

We may -- or we may not -- have bought some K'fr in Market Harborough. OK. We did -- or at least, I did. And by some, of course, I mean a whole honking boatload of the stuff. Hey, it was cheap. Crazy George loaded up on those stupid collectables of his: broken toys, mostly. While Nadia and Lane bought a bunch of girlie items: jewelry, clothes, and flowers. Though in Lane's case, I think the "flowers" in question, were K'fr clippings.

"Come on, let's go market."

K'fr pronounced kerf, because sometimes that ' thingy means reverse the letters and insert an "i" that sounds like an "e." Hey, don't look at me. I don't make the rules. Anyhow, if you've been pronouncing it wrong all these years, that may just explain why no one has been willing to sell you any.

The K'fr plant itself is like this totally out of control vine -- a weed really -- that is so intrusive, aggressive, and adaptable that most horticulturist now agree that one-single interconnected organism grows throughout the vast majority of all known vortexes. This can be problematic if the vine happens to have taken root where you -- at one time -- may have grown row crops. But if you're into that whole jungle, rainforest, back to nature living thing as so many Elves and Fey'an seem to be, K'fr is a godsend... or should that be, Gra'gl-send?

K'fr is typically identified by its purple flowers and thorns, and the effect its presence has on one's mind. Some folks say they can identify the leaves, but I don't believe them. Bottom line, identifying a young plant -- a seedling, cutting, clipping, or offshoot -- can be difficult, but the mature plant is a breeze: purple flowers the size of a house -- a cottage, castle, or whatever -- and thorns big enough to be used as spears by the largest of Titans. I heard tell someone tried to make a bridge out of those thorns once, and they worked great... until the joists sprouted leaves, the whole thing came back to life, and started charging a toll of its own -- in a soul snatching, figuratively speaking sort of way.

Which is just another way of saying, eating, smoking, breathing, ingesting, or smelling the flowers tends to hijack your brain and consume your soul, which in the long term tends to be a bit of a bummer, but in the short term can be quite fun. Add to all this the fact that you can stand still and literally watch the plant grow (though that might be one of those mind bending effects we were just talking about) and that some really nasty (like really super-nasty) creatures tend to live in a symbiotic relationship with the vine (those hyper-poisonous K'fr spiders come to mind) and one might wonder why K'fr wasn't systematically destroyed long ago. The answer to that, of course, is simple enough. K'fr is a key component in just about every magical potion, powder, or salve that I know of. And then there's the fact that if you know what you are about, you can walk into a hedge of K'fr, turn around, walk right back out, and find yourself all the way on the other side of creation. Elevators, escalators, and moving walkways are handy, but they've got nothing on the K'fr Highway. You want to become very-very rich, very-very quickly? Bring K'fr to a new port of call... just like we did in The K'fr Road: To Ve'kahn and Back Again. The vine knows which side its bread is buttered on and will remember the favor, granting you and your concern a monopoly on the route you forged.

Or as Crazy George once said, "Blown off course? You want to know how we got blown off course? If you so much as look at a K'fr flower sideways it tweaks your brain. And we've got a boatload of the stuff. And you want to know how we got blown off course?"

"Yeah."

"Just look at your crew, buddy boy." Meaning the Charlies.

"Oh, dis smellers nice."

"Ise wearies dis one in'd my's ear."

"Lookers. I'd makers da necklacer."

"Dis be gooders choppered ups in der saladers."

"Okey dokeys. Ise makers da purpley lemonsade?"

"Oh. Oh! OH! Yeah-yeah. I guess, I see your point,

George.”

“Yeah. I thought you might.”

The Seven Realms Ban on K’fr and Weapons

Realizing her rule would last longer and she would be more popular if those around her didn’t die, Ruby’s first act as Consort to the Dragon was to outlaw weapons throughout the Seven Realms. Her second act was to outlaw K’fr. Of course, as is the nature of these things, Ruby didn’t actually realize she had made two new laws until much later. And if you don’t know what I’m talking about, maybe you should pick up a copy of The Dragon Bound Quartet -- available wherever better books are sold (i.e. you might want to try Betty’s Better Books in downtown Rigor Pass if nowhere else comes to mind).

Now bear with me, because the laws themselves can be hard to explain. Well actually, they’re easy to explain. It’s the understanding that’s difficult. What the bans did was cause K’fr and Weapons to cease to exist while they were in the Realms, but by no means did either of the bans cause the things they banned to cease to exist. Which means, if you carry a holstered gun into the Realms, you’ll never be able to find, clean, or discharge the weapon while you are in the Realms. But as long as you didn’t muck about with the weapon (and lose it) during your visit, the moment you leave the Realms it will be right back where you left it slapping comfortably against your hip. Or, if the K’fr vine you’re transversing goes through the Realms, just as long as you don’t try to exit directly into the Realms, you’ll be fine and can pass on by without worry. There are subtleties that go beyond these basic explanations, but that’s what college and an advanced degree in Magical Engineering is for.

“AK-47, you say?”

“An AK-47/5889x, sir. The latest model with twin mounted rocket launchers and the auxiliary beam weapon.”

“But there’s nothing in the box?”

“Once you leave the Realms, sir.”

“Yeah? How do I know you didn’t slip one of those toy models in there, the ones with the rubber bayonets?”

“I’m a Leprechaun, sir.”

“I think that was exactly my point, sonny.”

The Mystic Waters

Some things you can’t describe.

Some things you can’t explain.

Of course, maybe I should just admit that the you in question in the above stanza is me... or is it I? No, it’s me... I think. Is that right? Maybe it’s supposed to be methinks?

Oddly -- and perhaps unbelievably -- at one point my goal in life had actually been to know it all, but I gave that quest up at Anterior Armored Anthropoids. I read that confounded heading in the encyclopedia and that was it. I looked up, saw the sun was out, and decided I had better things to do with my life than reading about... Ant Heads. And, I never looked back. Anyway, in the language in which I was conducting my studies, the Mystic Waters comes much later in the game, well after Anterior Armored Anthropoid, so I must plead ignorance as to any knowledge of the Waters. For those who insist such a claim is a cop out, I give you the following explanation as proof of my ignorance.

There is this water cycle thing, right? It rains. The water flows into rivers, lakes, and oceans. And from there, it evaporates, forms clouds, and rains again. OK. That’s the first part. The second part is that this water is the same water that is flowing through your veins -- assuming you have blood, of course. Anyway, you put these two ideas together and Presto! Whamo! Chango! It should be obvious that everything is interconnected and interrelated. Like I said, it should be obvious, so going into such an obvious thing as that in any greater detail would simply be redundant.

Anyhow, once you’re all copasetic with the forgoing, utilizing the Waters as a medium of travel is a piece of cake. You simply close your eyes, meditate until you feel like you are in

contact with the Water, and then open your eyes... while remaining immersed in the Water. Then, since the water is everywhere, all you really have to do is kick your feet a little, maybe tread water for a minute, and float over to where you want to be. Then you open your eyes for real, and you're wherever you imagined you'd be. Simple, right? Well, when you figure out how to do it, tell me. Oh, and if you can explain it all in a humorous way, you're sure to win the contest... or at least, to get a thank you note from me if we don't end up having a contest.

“You really don't know anything about the Waters, do you?”

“Like, duh? What have I been saying? I mean, if I could make the journey on my own, why would I cut you -- or else anybody for that matter -- in on the deal?”

“Does George know how to travel through the Waters?”

“Eh, who knows? But he had a boat, and I'm pretty sure that's a requirement...”

Of course after working so hard, writing a blurb a day for what seems like an eternity, I decided to take a week off here... because somebody has to do it. Lead by example, that's my motto. Anyway, if you sense a little hiccup in the narrative, story notes, or whatever hereabouts, now you know why. And if nothing seems amiss, by Gra'gl's honor, but I am a great writer. Sometimes, I even impress myself... which seeing how cocky and arrogant I am, is a lot harder to do than it might at first appear. Thus, a clear indication of what a stupendous writer I truly am!!!

The Feathered Plume is what Crazy George calls his boat, and despite our repeated entreaties -- or at least, my repeated entreaties -- he refused to rename his vessel The High Tide, Spliff, K'fr Runner, Mystic Express, or any one of a thousand other clever names I came up with on the way.

The Feathered Plume is, of course, enchanted. It's like way bigger on the inside than it is on the outside, and it can change its appearance -- or at least, Crazy George being a wizard and all, has

no problem changing the boat about to fit his current needs. This is sort of important, because in the canals the maximum size of a boat is something like 50' long by 7' wide. I forgot my tape measure at home, and I don't like to read while I'm on vacation, so I pretty much ignored the signs along the way, which is another reason why we might have gotten lost a time or two... but nah, now that I think about it, probably not. Anyway, even if one were to read the signs, I'm sure all they'd say is that the biggest boat you can get through the canal is determined by the size of the smallest lock. I mean, if the smallest lock is 50'x7', well then, that's how big of a boat that can get through then, isn't it? Oh, yeah. And, don't count on more than 3' of draft (the boat's depth in the water). And those bridges and tunnels will take off your head if you don't duck (best to call it 6' of headroom), so you've got maybe 10' total from top to bottom... assuming you're sort of bad at math like I am and are willing to make up the slack with magic.

Anyway, the outside of the boat was this long boring, more or less square tube with bales of this and bundles of that strapped to the side. Lots of folks -- the Elves especially -- like to paint their barges (and/or longboats) all pretty-like with flowers and garlands and such, but George was more partial to the war refugee, Goblin trader look. He carried this theme to the inside as well -- or so I must assume, seeing as how you had to wade through a waist deep pile of crap just to get in the door. Nothing valuable of course; we're talking 8-track tapes here, broken slot machines stacked like driftwood, records piled all the way to ceiling, and the books -- oh my Gra'gl, the books. Anyhow, once you got past the crap, the boat had everything you could want out of caravan, space ship, or... a fully stocked nuclear submarine. We're talking spacious bathrooms filled to the brim with rubber duckies, multicolored alien sponges, and collector series bath mats. Palatial sized bedrooms... ours came with a slot car race track conveniently set up on the bed, and you'll be happy to note I beat Nadia 2 out of 3. And then, there was the kitchenette. Once again, it had everything a well stocked commercial kitchen should have. It even had a

homemade brick oven. Who has a pizza oven on a boat, you ask? Crazy George does, that's who. And all of this doesn't even go into the library, the sitting room, the game room, and the hot tub he installed on the foredeck, which I must say was very nice, an altogether pleasant place to relax as we went through the tunnels.

Bottom line, George was lucky they charge tolls based on how much water a boat displaces (draft x footprint), rather than what's actually inside. I don't think any of us could have afforded the tolls if they were based on the value of throughput.

And not that the toll on bananas was excessive, but George had some weird superstition notion about having them on the boat.

"Get those bananas off my boat!"

"What?"

"They're bad luck. Everybody knows that. You never bring bananas onto a boat."

"What about banana boats?"

"Don't get smart with me. Just drop 'em... leave 'em on the shore for some other sucker to pick up."

"Fine. Whatever."

...

"Oh'd, lookers."

"Da banana-ramas fallers offs."

"We loaders dem back on."

"No'd, dey just faller's offs agains."

"Oh'd, I'd knows."

"We putters dem unders da tarpers here'd."

"Now'd dey be safers."

"Okey-dokeys."

"We's readies, Georgies."

"We's pushers off?"

The Canal, The Still Waters, Death Incarnate

If I was going to write a travel brochure, I'd go on about the crisp clean morning air, the sheep grazing on the hills, and the fog rolling through the valleys. But if I was drinking a beer in a bar --

or an ale in a bell, as the case may be -- I'd probably go on about the stench in the air and the filth in the water.

Let's start from scratch. A canal boat is 7' wide. And for a canal to work properly, boats have to be able to maneuver past each other as they go by in opposite directions. So, the canals are made a minimum of 15' wide. That's 14' for the two boats passing each other and a whole whopping extra foot -- just in case.

Now, that's not really important and also probably a bit more technical than you wanted, but I'm not going to stop there. You see, taken as a whole, a canal is in actuality little more than a stagnant swimming pool 15' wide by 5' deep by hundreds of thousands of miles long. As a general rule swimming pools don't have a current. And as a general rule, neither do canals. OK, I mean, if you wanted to get picky about it, there's a slight current, but it's so triflingly small that you'd never notice. The bottom line is, they only let as much water flow through the canal as is needed to work the locks; and let me tell you, that's not much -- only a couple of thousand cubic feet at a shot. So in the end, the canals are full of Still Water: as in, filthy, stagnant, disgustingly dead water that has no life to it.

I'm only glad we didn't go down the canal during mosquito season. The little suckers would have carried us away.

Well...

Um look, I don't want to get too graphic about it, but you know how some swamps get...

Eh, never mind.

"Oh'd, look."

"Der one of'd does underwateries sheepies, agains."

"Dey sure holders der breath da longies time."

"He lookers like he's a'sleepers."

"Why he'd a'sleepers in da water?"

"Hey'd, sheepers! Waker's ups. Et da afternoons, alreadyes."

To be fair, these sightings tended to be thicker around Sterling's place than anywhere else, so maybe rather than helping out at the locks and hitting on all female tourists who were passing

by, the old bloke should have been doing a little more clean up... or keeping a better eye on his livestock. Or then again, maybe all those vicious rumors -- I've been spreading -- about him being some sort of undead monstrosity -- i.e. a vampire -- have some merit to them, after all. Though, I don't really know what his ghoulish, bloodsucking ways have to do with the sheep we saw. Anyhow, as to the canal itself, let's just put it this way: despite the heat, I never once felt like going for a swim... and being an aquatic creature at heart, that's saying something.

Bridges

Every quarter of a mile -- just like clockwork -- there would be a bridge that crossed the canal. And not some dinky little thing either, we're talking masonry, stonework, and brick. Big hulking things, built to last through the centuries. Personally, I think it had something to do with the legal right of ways the original builder's had to overcome before they could build the canal. You know, they couldn't put this water trap of death through the middle of some farmer's field without first providing him (or her) some sort of way of getting across the canal and reaching his (or her) fields on the other side, so around every few bends, there's bridge.

To work the bridges, you just stand up as you pass underneath and tap a few stones with your fingers -- like pressing out a code on a keypad or dialing a phone -- and the bridge zaps you to wherever it is that you want to go. Of course, it's subtle. We're talking minor little shifts in reality here, and if you make a wrong turn, you can usually make it up within a few bends. But that's sort of easier said than done, because when you're on the correct path, the stones are sort of worn down and it's obvious which ones to press. But that's not the case if you've gotten yourself lost. It's sort of the difference between walking through a forest on a well worn path and forging your own way through dense underbrush. The first is definitely easier than the second, and you really don't have to think about where you're going when you do it.

“What are you doing? I already touched the bricks for this bridge!”

“Well, I’ll just undo the sequence...”

“Stop! It doesn’t work that way! Are you trying to get us lost?”

Bridge 437

All the bridges had numbers on them. The first was number 1, the second 2, and so on. Of course, since each town numbered their own bridges, we passed by a lot of number 1s and not so many number 437s.

Which is just another way of saying that by the time we’d passed Bridges 101, 102, and so on, we already sort of knew that we were lost and had taken a wrong turn somewhere -- i.e. Crazy George had taken a wrong turn somewhere -- because instead of being like 3, or 4, or 5 bridges away from the nearest town, we were, well, 437 bridges away.

And, this bridge 437 was a piece of crap, totally in ruins. I mean just to give you an idea, as we came closer, a few more bricks got tired of defying gravity and decided to take the plunge and dropped into the canal. And then, there was the Giant sleeping nearby. Of course I don’t actually know if he was a formal Giant or not, but he was large and he certainly wasn’t keen on hygiene. And as he saw us approaching, he sort of rolled from where he had been taking a nap and splashed into the water. Now, there’s a thing I should tell you about these bridges. They’re not wide. In the old days, they used donkeys, horses, and yes, even Cobalts to pull the barges and boats along, so under each bridge they have a tow-path and this sort of cuts the canal down to a single lane. Every bridge is like this. Whoever comes first, goes through; and whoever is second, just has to wait their turn.

Well, the Giant was there first, and not wishing to provoke the brute, we waited. Then, we waited some more. And then, not coming up with a better idea in the meantime, we waited a little longer. Finally, this Leprechaun showed up, and it was clear he

considered this his bridge. But even he wouldn't stand on the decrepit thing, so from the shore, standing in muck, he started dickering and asking for a toll. Now as a general sort of rule, I'm not keen on giving money away, and this reeked of highway robbery; but we were lost, there really wasn't anywhere to turn around, and well... he was just being weird in the things he asked for. But talk about a nose, the things this Leprechaun could smell about our cargo.

“Two packs of collector cards -- unopened -- for every red line you're hauling.”

“You're out of your mind!”

“A lunch pail for every hundred records on board?”

“How about -- just out of the kindness of our hearts -- we toss a couple of bags of mortar your way so you can repair that... that thing that used to be a bridge.”

“Ah, don't be knocking ole 437. She's been good to me. Let's see...”

And that's when the Giant chipped in with, “Bananas.”

“Eh, bananas then. Even weight, a pound of K'fr for every banana you're hauling.”

George agreed instantly, thinking he was getting the better end of the deal -- you know, since he knew there weren't any bananas on board. But the Leprechaun and his nose soon set him straight on that score.

So a pound of K'fr for every banana we're hauling? Hmm? Let's see? Bananas or K'fr? Reasoning that if we got rid of the bananas, we wouldn't owe the Leprechaun a single leaf of K'fr, we threw those bananas overboard before you could say, “Sayonara Rumpelstiltskin. So sorry, we have to pass under your bridge for free,” three times real fast.

Doldrums

In retrospect, it probably wasn't such a wise idea dickering over a few pounds of K'fr and trying to get the better of a Leprechaun, you know, seeing as how we were 437-odd bridges

away from civilization. If we had given him a good deal, maybe he would have steered us in the right direction. As it was, the moment we were on the other side of his bridge, the canal all but disappeared. We were in a swamp, pure and simple. But that's why it's good to bring a crew of Cobalts along. Before long, we had the lot of them working like old time stevedores, pulling us through the muck. It took us a week to clear the slime, but finally we got out of the boggy mess just at the merge below the Watford Locks.

I caught up on my sleep during this time and it makes for a good story bit, so it really wasn't time wasted. Besides, this is more or less where I came up with the gag about Crazy George scratching off a few lottery tickets until he "won" the Cobalts.

"Eh? No hard feelings at all. A deal's a deal. You be on your ways then. There's a turn around a mile up if you change your minds. Now there you go, lads."

Locks

A lock traps water, hence the name. Most folks think you need locks to navigate swift moving water or rapids, but you don't. One way or another, you can drive, pull, drag, or carry a boat up, down, or through pretty much any obstacle you care to name. The real reason everyone uses locks is for water conservation. You see, when you're using a lock as a portal to shunt different loads of cargo into different dimensions, if you allowed the water to run free, it would flow into each and every one of these dimensions simultaneously. So even if you started with a reserve of water the size of an ocean, with it pouring into so many dimensions all at once you'd run out water in no time flat. So you use locks to conserve the water and only let a set amount flow through with each load. And believe it or not, this way the water more or less evens out in the end (one vortex doesn't end up with more water than the next), because when the boats come back, a return load of water comes with them.

From there, the locks we encountered looked more or less

like mundane ones. They are essentially gigantic stone walled pits with monstrously large wooden gates at either end. The gates are always set up to swing open upstream, so if something goes wrong or some idjit operates the locks incorrectly, the worst that will happen is the gates will automatically close of their own accord. This is due to water pressure and so on. Terribly boring stuff. Just trust me, there's no way you'd swing one of those gates open (or keep it open) if the water wasn't equalized and at the same level on both sides of the gate. Once the water is level though, the gates are so perfectly balanced all you have to do is lean against them and they swing open like a dream.

Having opened the gate, you maneuver your boat into the shaft, close the gates back up, and then open the sluice boxes on the opposite side of the lock from where you entered. This will either let water in or drain water out depending upon the water on the other side of the far gate is higher or lower than the water in the lock. This is because when you open the sluice boxes, all you're really doing is opening small doors (just big enough to suck a man through) that lets the water flow in or out of the lock as appropriate. It probably sounds more complicated than it is. I mean, it really is amazingly easy, and the winches are even marked for you, so you know which ones to open first:

“Red before white and you'll be alright.”

“White before red and you'll wish your were dead.”

See, nothing to worry about -- nothing at all.

And then, there was usually a warden or two about to make sure they tolls got collected and everything ran smoothly.

Fox'ton Locks

A-hem. Me-me-me-meee...

“Foxton workers sing this song. Doo-dah! Doo-dah!

Foxton Locks be five fur'longs long. Oh, the doo-dah day!

Oh, I came to town on a derelict barge. Doo-dah! Doo-dah!

Seven years by, still paying the charge. Oh, the doo-dah day!

The Water she runs all night

The Locks we work all day
I like to think I'll be free someday.
But we all know there ain't no way.
All the doo-dah night
And all the doo-dah day
Foxton workers sing this song
You can here them from miles away"

At a set of locks as big as the Fox'ton Locks, you pay the toll, clear and simple, no two ways about it. They charged us more because we were carrying K'fr, but then we got to cut through to the front of the line without waiting, so things evened out. This is a tradition that goes back to the beginning of the canals. You see, they knew the whole Kingdom would fall apart if the K'fr didn't get to where it was needed when it was needed, so they gave K'fr a special tariff rate, and if you're willing to pay the fee (or they make you pay the fee), you can go straight through to the front of the line. In peak season this can cut out an entire day -- or more -- of time waiting in line. And if you ask me, it's somebody else's money well spent. Of course, if you're not in a hurry, they got a pub -- one of them bells -- right at the foot of the locks. So really, what's the rush? Sit down, have a drink, and take your time with the others singing and waiting.

A consortium of Fingerlings -- Frogmen types mostly -- run the Fox'ton locks. Who knows how many millions of them there are. I mean, this is a huge set of locks. We went through a staircase 18 locks high: that's 12 locks, take a break in a waiting pool (and/or wading pool), and then do 6 more. It's a long run, and at each lock in the staircase you're shifting a dimension (or two). So really, we were thankful we just paid the one tariff. Don't ask me how the Frogmen work it out amongst themselves, but evidently they do. It cost us 18 gold in all (1-0-0 per lock, all in advance), and we probably got taken, but the only one who seemed to care was George -- the penny pincher. Anyway while he paid the toll and piloted the craft, the rest of us got out and walked up the hill. Don't ask me how that works with the dimensional shift

thing and all, but it's the same at every lock. Somebody has to stand by the side and work the winches, so it's not like you're all in the boat, but we never lost a single member of our crew due to that technicality. Besides, there are always tie ups on either end of a lock (up and down river) in case you have to wait and you can regroup there; or if you're fast, you can just jump back onboard while the boat is leaving the lock... if others are about to close the gate for you or waiting in line to go next.

All in all, the day we spent at Fox'ton Locks was one of the most beautiful and sunny ones we had on the entire trip -- worth every copper, if you ask me. And for the most part, we spent it shooting the breeze with our fellow travelers and listening to the gossip of the Kibbers -- as some of the larger Frogmen tend to call themselves.

"I'll get that for you, sir."

"Please, allow me."

"A drink while you're waiting, sir."

"Don't mind if I do."

"And if you'd be so kind, sir. If anyone asks down the line, let them know Mary Lou is feeling much better."

"Mary Lou?"

"If anyone asks, sir, she's feeling better."

Watford Locks

So, the Foxton Locks has it's own song -- a song that is sung far and wide across the dimensions and which just so happens to be sort of upbeat and catchy. The Watford Locks aren't quite so cheerful. This little poem sprang to mind while we rode the boat down and the locks were emptied of water.

Dripping... moss,

Splashing... water.

Fountains!

At improbably angles:

We are lowered by the water,

Let down!

Into our moss lined crypt,

Our watery grave.

In comparison, “Foxton workers sing this song. Doo-dah! Doo-dah!” does seem a bit happier, wouldn’t you agree?

Lane was busy working the locks by herself, while me and Nadia were hiding under an umbrella trying not to get pelted by hail -- I think I mentioned the horrid stuff, ice cubes falling from the sky. Anyhow, Lane was working the locks and Sterling Watford gave her a helping hand, because with only four of her own, I guess he figured she needed two more.

“Oh, you think I’m the lock keeper. No. No. Just out for a stroll and while I was watching you at work, I could just feel my Great Aunt’s hand gently on the back of my neck ‘Tut-Tutting’ as she told me to ‘Help the Lady.’”

“What do I do? I am in the enviable position of being able to do [with my days] whatever I desire.”

Sterling Manor

It sort of looks like a castle, but it’s not. It wasn’t built with defense in mind, and it was constructed long after the great Age of Chivalry was over. So really, it’s more like a country manor or estate with thousands upon thousands of acres of adjoining gardens, woods, and pastures. Oh, it’s a big place to be sure, but if you walk for an hour or two in any direction you’ll come to its limit.

The mansion itself is done up quite nicely, sort of how I would do it if I could figure out a way to make writing pay 359,000g per word. Every room in the place has an expensive hand knotted tapestry (being used as a carpet, no less!) tossed over genuine hardwood floors (imported from the farthest reaches). And the decorations! Let’s just say, the family has been amassing a fortune in trinkets and doodads for some time now. But of all the wonders in the house, two thing in particular stuck out. The first were the fireplaces. They had one in every room, and quite a few of them were being used as fireplaces were meant to be used --

keeping the place warm -- but the others, were masterpieces of artistic magic. They had like this bouquet of transcendent flowers in one, leaves spiraling majestically about in a small twister in another, one filled with goldfish (I suppose their nod to pastiche), and others done as snake pits, ghostly spirit charms, and singing ancestral memorials. I suppose, if I went with the theme of ole Watford being some sort of horrific vampire, I could make these last sound scary (like disembodied head or something), but they were actually quite nice and not ghastly or unpleasant at all. It might be best to think of them as marble busts of famous people imbued with a bit of personality and you get the right idea -- only you know, they were twirling columns of smoke trapped in a fireplace instead. Anyhow, I liked them. I spent many a rainy day shooting the breeze with Great Uncle Jonas Watford. Now, there's a card.

Of course, I mentioned that there were two things that captured my attention and the other item -- which I will admit I would have simply stolen when first I saw it if I was the thieving type -- was a small little palm sized tome called A Half Hour With a Few Great Authors. Sadly, it did not include any of my works, and so was incomplete, but I attribute this to it having been written several centuries before I was born. How little they knew of what was to become of the world of literature way back then.

And I know I should go into the grounds of Sterling Manor a bit more, but I guess I'll shall leave that for tomorrow and the next section.

“Miserable weather.”

“What? Who's there?”

“The name is Jonas.”

“Who?”

“Jonas Watford. Down here in the fireplace, chopped off my head and set me in here to burn for all eternity...”

“No, not really? Really?”

“No, not really, but it makes a good story. Read me some of that book you got there. Flip to the section on Rus's'skin if you

don't mind."

Yogesh

Yogesh was a Rasta'far and a legacy from the days of empire. He sort of looked like a drugged out hippy camel that preferred walking about on his hind legs, you know, whenever he could manage it.

He claimed to hail from the land of Magh'reb. You know Magh'reb: the land past sunset that lies under the Atlas Mountains and which can be found beyond the Sands of Time. Needless to say, Yogesh had a serious K'fr habit going, so we got along just fine.

Yogesh was employed as Sterling's warden, gardener, groundskeeper, or something like that. I would say he worked for Sterling, but that would simply be a lie. I met him for the first time whilst I was sitting in this slate chair -- a wonderful moss covered thing -- and it seems by some coincidence that he had the same location in mind. So, we ended up racing each other for the chair over the course of the next few days, but since he habitually slept till noon, I usually won. Anyhow, since it "beats working," he showed me around the grounds and acted as my personal tour guide. Instinctively sensing my hatred of Hobblings, the first thing he showed me, of course, was one of their hovels. Granted, they had chosen a nice location that featured a fine "prospect," which is Lang'donese for view, but the real scoop on the Hobblings was that the Watford clan had been trying to evict the smelly little squatters since time immemorial. Good luck with that, it's like trying to clean the stink out of a... Hobbling hovel, I guess. Now after those scary brutes, I wouldn't have thought it would be possible that the next life form -- and I use the term loosely -- we encountered could be more repulsive, but it was. Some folks like to use the word aberration in regards to constructs, and in this particular case I would have to agree. They called it Cope on account of that's what he did: cope the trees, thinning them out in a rotating cycle once every eight years, harvesting whatever branches and new growth

he could for firewood, thatch, and so on. He -- of course, for efficiency's sake -- was made of this same material, which is to say he was sort of a cross between the Tin Man and the Scare Crow, lacking both a heart and a brain, and a soul to boot. And believe it or not, even with this golem running about they still had a problem with poachers. Some people just don't know when to be scared.

"The sign says, Danger - Please do not pass this point. You would think folks would understand the danger, or at least comprehend that it would be rude to go any further."

Other things Yogesh was heard to say, include:

"Wisdom is the ability to separate the useful from the useless."

"You're wasting your time: a still picture can never capture the heart of flowing water."

And, "So, you guys got a boatload of K'fr? Can you, you know..."

"Can we get you a good deal?"

"I was thinking more like a great deal. You notice anything lying about you'd like to take home as a souvenir..."

"Why don't I just give you a present. Call it a tip for being such a good guide."

"Yeah. OK. Whatever."

I admit it, I lusted after that book, but not bad enough to steal it -- no matter what Sterling may claim.

Sterling Watford, the cad, the pompous arrogant fool.

Tall, good looking, polite, well mannered, and heir to an incredible fortune: he's basically everything I hate in a guy. Even Nadia swooned whenever he came near. And Lane, she was helpless. After dealing with Crazy George, who sort of has a few rough spots and unpolished edges about him, she was all primed to fall madly in love with the next guy who so much as said please or thank you. When Sterling started holding doors open for her and treating her like a lady, Lane lost all sense of perspective.

So things went well for a week as Sterling treated us all like

royalty, but then Lane refused to wed the bastard -- something about her not wanted to spend the rest of eternity locked up in a tower from dusk till dawn never to see the moon or stars again -- and from there things sort of went to Hell in hand basket.

Of course, the other theory (maintained by many in the surrounding val, fen, and gyl -- whatever in the name of Chaos any of those are) is that Sterling just doesn't like the idea of sharing his holdings with anyone. Normally a bloke could simply put up a No Trespassing sign and call it a day, but its written right into the papers of conveyance that the house and grounds remain open to all comers throughout perpetuity... or until the end of time, whichever comes first. So not at liberty to change the situation by any other means, Sterling has resorted to what he does best: dirty tricks. Such as, slipping me a silver (or so much more) to report that at night he turns into a multi-tentacled monstrosity that marauds the surrounding countryside. Of course, that's just one theory. Other theories hold that I agreed to portray him as -- or at least, hint about how he might be -- a charming womanizing Vampire who turns sort of psychotic whenever his advances are spurned. Rumor has it -- or at least, the rumor I'm spreading has it -- that he's none too particular about who he couples with: be it man, woman, or horrid little Hobbling. I shudder to even think about that last one. Next you'll be telling me Sterling has a fetish for animated bundles of sticks -- the little faggot, or in Sterling's case the great big rich and handsome, faggot lover. And hey, even I'll admit Sterling was a looker. Anyway, all of this innuendo sort of presumes that Sterling made a present to me of a certain little black book -- for unnamed services to be rendered. But like I say, it's only a theory.

“If that's your idea of romance, I'm out of here.”

“Darling, my love: it's just a formality.”

“Don't try to sweet talk me. Let go of me.”

That's warning number one. It doesn't really matter what he said next.

“Let go of me!”

That's warning number two. Once again, no one was listening to him, and he should have, perhaps, been paying better attention to Lane's body language.

"Let! Go! Of! Me!"

That's thrice, buddy.

"Oomph!"

Thud! That's gotta hurt.

- - -

"Come on, let's go."

"What happened? Where's Watford?"

"We had a slight disagreement regarding the terms of his proposal."

"I told you he'd want you to sign a prenuptial. I hope you set him straight."

"Oh, I did more than set him straight: I laid him out. Let's get out of here before he wakes up."

"Right, time to leave it is. Just let me forget to take this little book out of my pocket," I think we probably, maybe, might have, more or less worked out a deal, "and the we can be on our way."

Tunnels: The Tunnel of Love, Death, and Bittersweet Chocolate!!!

I believe some Wonk -- Willie, Wilfred, Wilhelm, or something like that -- once said in a singsong sort of voice, "There's no earthly way of knowing, which direction we are going. Not a speck of light is showing, so the danger must be growing."

So Wonka -- and what is that, the singular of Wanker?

OK. I admit it, I'm trying to lighten the mood. Maybe you know the theatrical production I'm alluding to -- dreadful, simply dreadful -- and perhaps you recall the exact moment where the afore-quoted dialogue occurs. If you do, you might also know what theater critics across the Realms have nicknamed that particular segment of theatrical drama. They call that scene The Tunnel of Death! It's not a misnomer. More than one career has been killed by that scene. The thing is cursed. Anyhow, once you

go through a tunnel on the Lang'don Canal system, you'll suddenly know what inspired the scene in Wonka's "masterpiece." The water turns black like ink -- or if you prefer, black like chocolate -- and after a quarter of a mile, unless you've brought your own, there is no light. And it's not like I measured any of the tunnels, but the distances are posted at the entrance before you go in and they are astronomical: .8 miles, 1.2 miles, 2.7 miles... 2.7 miles! That's a long-long time in a tunnel as you descend into the depths -- the bowels, as it were -- of the Earth.

On a less dramatic note, the tunnels themselves are simple 15' diameter bores. No more. No less. And they didn't spend any extra money on the décor. You think Bridge 437 looked like crap, strike a match and take a gander at the walls of the Pinker'ton Tunnel around the halfway mark. What you'll see is a haphazard array of slime-covered bricks that somehow continues to defy gravity after all these centuries. You'll see all this, that is, if the screaming nasties who chose to live in these tunnels don't take offense to you're lighting a match.

"Ah! My eyes! What are you trying to do, blind me!"

"Oh, lighting a pipe, are ye? Pass it this way when you're done if you don't mind."

Pinker'ton Tunnel

I like Mermaids. I have a sort of weakness for them. Mermen are OK, too. But you know, not in the same way. Anyway, we shared the K'fr. What were we going to do? There must have been a hundred of them. Of course, we hadn't actually been riding in the dark. It's just more dramatic to tell the story that way. In truth, we had a few candles and lanterns going. And then to top it off, Crazy George had gone sort of ballistic with the illumination spells, because as he explained, "I don't like the dark, OK? Deal with it."

The point is, we could see the barricades a ways off, and we could see the Mermaids and Mermen lounging about, sharpening their tridents, and trying to look all ferocious. It wasn't all that

effective. They were pink from head to... um, tail fin, I guess: pink hair, pink scales, pink lips. I like a girl with frosted pink lips -- even if I know it's done with enchantments and makeup -- but a guy with pink eyebrows and sporting Day-Glo fingernails doesn't exactly strike the fear of Gra'gl into my heart. Anyway, as they explained it, going pink helped with the tourist trade.

"Oh, wait a second. What are you doing with that camera? We charge for pictures. Now your friend seemed happy to share, and I'm down with that. Share and share alike, that's what I say. So only a quarter bale and you can knock yourself out with the camera. I'll even take a few pictures of you with the girls if you like."

"That's insane!" Click. Click. Click. "Three pictures, what're you going to do about it? A quarter bale, that's ridiculous!"

"Well you see, the thing is, it's not so much the pictures themselves, but that you get to take them while you're traveling through and then again when you're on the other side of that particular slice of heaven that we like to call our home."

We paid the quarter bale... and I got the pictures to prove it.

That more or less covers the bridges, locks, and tunnels, but there are two other methods of travel we utilized during our journey (perhaps unwisely), so it may make some sense to review those as well.

Secret Doors & Phantom Windows

The Five Kingdoms is an old place and Lang'don is even older. Every building and every scrap of land here used to be something different before, and then again, something else before that. Ghosts are everywhere, but they don't just take the usual forms. You'll see an auto shop, that used to be a boat-wrights shop, that used to be a grain elevator, that used to be an orphanage, and so on down the line. Well, when they converted the building from one to the other, they might have filled in a door or a window,

had to support the walls by driving pins through the entire thing, or reconfigure the interior. Sometimes these changes are made properly. Sometimes corners are cut and what you are left with is a doorway that's half there and half not.

Being a wizard, Crazy George could work these portals like no tomorrow, which most sane folks would take as a warning, right? And then there was Lane, raised in the Courts of Chaos: it was like being back home. Well, long story short, children will play, and they would jump through these doors whenever they got the chance. It may seem like harmless fun, but just because we were taking a holiday, doesn't mean causative reality was taking the day off. You go looping through a town, ducking into the past, popping into the future, stepping through a portal here, and bypassing reality there: well, you do all that and reality gets all wound up and pretty soon her panties are in a bind. It's all primed for disaster. So after all that, when you finally get back on board your boat, it should come as no surprise that just as you pass under the first bridge, everything goes spinning. It's exactly like you've been winding a top up all day and suddenly you've decided to let 'er rip. Trust me, it'll send you reeling.

"Tag! You're it!"

"Ha. Now, you're it,."

"I'm not playing."

"You're still it."

"Come on, it'll be fun."

"Fine, you're it."

"What? OK. Tag, you're it again."

"No tag backs."

"What? Whatever. Hey, they're gone. Did you see which way they went?"

"Oh, the one was headed for trouble and the other had mischief in mind."

"Hmmm, trouble or mischief? Now that's a hard choice. Care to help me decide?"

"Now, that would be my pleasure."

Masonry Doors

They say membership is “free,” but I wouldn’t count on it. It’s a “private” sort of club.

So, do you live in a bustling metropolis? Want to start your own bar or nightclub, but the price of rent getting you down? Here’s what you do: buy a building, fix it up real nice, seal up the back entrance, turn it into a portal, and then sell the newly spruced up building to some sucker. Oh, and you might want to add a few lines to the deed concerning entitlements and easements rights while you’re at it, or better yet, consult a solicitor. But that’s the basic blueprint. Doesn’t sound like much of a business plan, you say? Well, fair enough. But you do remember that new portal you just got through putting in along with the easement and rights of passage? Well, every few weeks, months, or years, from now until -- well, you’ll know when -- you put out a few fliers advertising your bar, hotel, or whatever. And although you’ll only get a few customers every week, they’ll all be shunted back to that day, week, month, or year when you actually owned the building. Presto! Chango! Instant real estate. And talk about a party! You should have been there! That was some night! And for the right price, you can still become part of the action. Heck, buy two tickets, go twice, buy yourself a drink and laugh at your own jokes. Everybody else is doing it.

This is the sort of thing George’s secret society does all the time. I’d tell you more, but they never let me in through the door.

“No guests!”

“What do you mean? You let her in?”

“Read my lips, squid boy. No guests.”

I guess there’s more to Lane than meets the eye.

Walking The Pattern: of puzzles and puddles

Labyrinths are the most common type of patterns.

Nowadays, you see them as raised hedges a lot, but originally they were just lines traced in the sand. You enter one end, walk to the

other, and through some basic low level enchantments you find that you've been transported halfway across town, to another vortex, or whatever. The limitations in this are obvious. You got one starting point and one ending point. If you're using this as your last chance escape route for when the fortress falls, you're in deep kimchi if you've been betrayed and your enemies are waiting for you on the other side.

Fortunately, it doesn't take that much extra effort to build an open ended pattern. They're harder to work, but the uninitiated can always follow a map or list of instructions and get to one or two predetermined locations. And for those who know how to work these gates, the possibilities are endless.

Now, I'm not going to pretend to be a pro, but I can stand on the first rock in a pattern, sense which rock needs stepping on next, and proceed slowly and cautiously towards my goal. Lane on the other hand, is a sight to behold. She just knows patterns. You could say, it's right up her alley... Get it? Lane/Alley. Fine, don't laugh. The point is, Lane can dance a pattern -- spinning and twirling -- and she can take a simple portal designed to connect a merchant's shop to his warehouse and use it to jump nearly anywhere. Like the phantom doors, she just winds it up tight.

"I wish I could dance like that."

"You're not the only one. Ow! Ouch! I'm just saying, if you could work a gate like that, we could travel anywhere, just you and me."

"Uh, huh."

"And if that was you dancing, I'd be staring at you right now instead of Lane, wouldn't I?"

"Yeah... I wish I could dance like that."

Puddles in the Rain

Pretty much every town square has some sort of pattern etched into the flagstones of the plaza. How do you think merchants come and go? And then there's The Pattern located in the old Water's Abbey (now the Fritz Heinmillerstien Estates)

rumored to be one of the most potent man-made gates about. When the Abbey fell, the monks just stepped into that sucker at random, trusting to the will of Gra'gl (maybe not the wisest of things to do), and got flung to the farthest reaches of the universe. Many scholars attribute this moment to the ensuing groundswell renaissance of the faith. Anyhow, history lesson aside, the oddest pattern we found during the trip was on the top of a rise out in the countryside in the middle of nowhere.

We were just taking a hike, checking out a hill, and the path stopped near this small “waterfall” -- a little bit of rapids really, nothing impressive, just water running over some tree roots -- but where the path ended there were these curious puddles as if others had just kept on walking. Which is to say, at first blush they looked natural, but if you bent over and took a good look, you could see that the edges of the puddles were built up. They were artificial and filled to the brim with magic. Anyhow, having seen the view, it was time to move on.

“Race ya!”

“You’re on!”

Zip!

Poof!

“So, want to give it a shot?”

“I’m holding on. There’s no way they went to the same spot, and I don’t feel like getting separated. In fact, now that we’re alone...”

Ker-pow!

“You got to check out this waterfall!”

“Where’s Lane?”

“I don’t know. She’s must’ve gotten lost. Come on. Put your last foot here like this...”

Zip!

“I told you, they’d get separated. Now, don’t let go.”

Bing-Bing. Bing!

“That didn’t sound good.”

“Eh, at least we’re together.”

Stonehenge and other hedges of stone.

We didn't see the real one, the big name one, but truthfully, what we saw was probably better, because you know, security wasn't as tight.

They're stones in a circle, right? Everyone knows that. And I guess if you want to believe it, the tips of the rocks line up to some kind of important astrological phenomenon; but then, if you put enough rocks in a circle, the edge of one and the corner of another are bound to line up with something.

Anyhow, we're standing there, checking out the rocks, looking at the hills in the distance, and trying to get close enough to the sheep so that we can pet them -- not that either the sheep or the Leprechaun looking after them were amused by our efforts. So anyway, we're doing this, being tourists, and you know how Crazy George gets. He's seen sheep. He's done sheep... the freak. And they don't hold any interest for him, so he's bored out of his mind. And he just sort of starts to wander around, looking this way and that, and he's just sort of staggering about from the tediousness of it all.

Got it?

Right. So, let me paint you a picture. A crazy wizard is standing at the apex of a circle of stones and he's slowly twisting around getting himself dizzy. And then he stops, and that's when the rocks start spinning around him of their own accord.

“Hey! Hey! Stop it! Stop it! Put those rocks down! PUT THOSE ROCKS DOWN!”

And then the Con pointed the business end of his cudgel at Crazy George and repeated his command like he was some sort of action hero.

“You're going to put those rocks down! And you're going to put them down now! Like they were!”

He even gave us tickets, you know, citations, fines. One to Crazy George for being a Public Nuisance, which is understandable, but everyone else got one as well for Disturbing

the Peace... of his sheep!

Anyway, nobody knows what's on the other side of those rock portals, or at least, if they know, they're not saying. Rumor is, those who go through, don't come back, which is hogwash, but you know how those conspiracy theorists are...

Me. I say, anyone who thinks its easier to create a portal by moving 15-ton boulders about rather than simple stepping on top of flagstones, probably also thinks it's a good idea to open a gate directly into Gra'gl's living room... and as swell as the Big Guy sounds, dropping in on him like that just sort of seems rude, if you know what I mean.

“WHO DARES INVADE MY SOLITUDE? Oh, it's you again.”

Waters Abbey and/or the Fritz Heinmillerstien Estates.

Big-big ruins. Gigantic. Looking for phantom doors, ghostly apparitions, or the home of the most powerful pattern I know of, then there is no need to look further. This place has been used as everything: a thieves' den, home to a royal dynasty, a religious shrine to Gra'gl, and perhaps most obviously (and lately) a temple to the Mystic Waters. It's got to be located at a natural Nexus or something. That, or when the old occupants left, the new kids in town couldn't help but play with the toys they'd left behind.

Anyhow, now it's a ruins, a tourist attraction. It's actually overseen -- leased, I think -- by The Kingdom's Trust: a sort of non-profit holding company for all the Kingdom's ancient landmarks. To the dismay and consternation of some, the Trust manages to turn a tidy little profit, but that's not too hard to do when you're getting loads and loads of free land donated to you by the impoverished gentry for the tax right off. Me, I've got no problem with the Trust personally, but some folks don't like the monopoly-like stranglehold that it's establishing over grazing land in certain areas of the Kingdom. I mean, isn't that what the latest and greatest Land Tax Reform Bill was supposed to prevent? Someone, or something, from acquiring too much land and

therefore power? Of course, being an outsider, I hardly care, but give Fritz half a chance and he'll go on and on about how he's being sucked dry and forced to sell the place to pay the back taxes.

“...and that's just plain unfair!”

Like I said, give him half a chance, but I don't feel like giving him half a chance, so we're not going to have much in the way of quotes for this section.

Tourists: a.k.a. touring Waters Abbey.

I really didn't do such a good job of describing Waters Abbey in the last section, and I don't know if I am going to do any better here: stones piled high, half crumbled walls reaching to the clouds, and catacombs that go on forever. But better than all that, you've got the place to yourself and no one is looking over your shoulder. The Trust doesn't make any money supervising visitors, just by charging them a few coins at the gate, so once you're in, you're in and you can do whatever you like... within reason.

Fingerlings have taken up residence all over the place. The local Dwarf community likes to use the cemetery as the starting point for its weekly Rug-B match. Semi-corporeal ghosts have taken to conducting tours and giving lectures. (Note: unless you want to be saddled with a curse, the donation at the end isn't voluntary.) While the local magic academy uses the facilities as its practice lab for would be magicians-in-training. Trust me, you don't want to be anywhere in the vicinity when a bunch of prepubescent Elves on the verge try to outdo one another. You don't have to wonder why the place is in ruins. And then, what else is there?

“Like I was saying, it's unfair. The Trust gets their cronies in Parliament to levy a special assessment and then what am I supposed to do? Pay it? I don't have that kind of gold! The only way to raise that kind of money is to sell the property, but then I've got to pay taxes on the sale... and still pay the special assessment! When all's said and done, I won't get anything. That's what property rights have come down to, you know. They're not worth

squat anymore. Morgana sure knew what she was doing when she unloaded this Albatross onto me.”

I’m sure the Trust has a different point of view -- probably something along the lines of Power to the People. They might also like to point out the advantages of a Limited Remainder Trust for cash strapped property owners: with one of those, you bypass the tax issue and retain control of the property until you die. Though personally, I’m not a big fan of any contract which reads, until you die. It seems like it might create a conflict of interests.

“That’s what I’m saying!”

Burl

Burl is this great big huge tree that lives down where the stream widens around the bend from the Abbey (about a mile away near the bridge). He is simply massive, has roots like gnarled feet the size of a small cottage, and if you stare up into his foliage on a sunny day it’s like looking at a tree decorated for Gra’gl Mass -- all covered in green tinsel. Perhaps he’s the tree that inspired the tradition.

In days of old, they used to cut off his burls (hence the name), and use this to make ink for magical scrolls and the like. But he’s a National Heritage Treasure or something now, so don’t be sawing anything off. All the same, if you’re kind, and spread about a bag or two of manure, he’ll be happy to work with you.

“Hey! Watch it! You almost clobbered me!”

“Sorry. Slipped.”

“Yeah...”

“It tickles. OK? Mucking about down there in my roots.”

“Uh, huh.”

“Look, just to show that there are no hard feelings, I’ll let you in on a little secret.”

“I’m listening.”

“Well, you want to know the real reason Fritz is dragging his feet about ceding control of the Abbey to the Trust?”

“Sure. What do you know about it?”

“Well, the Trust is big on archeological research and digs, right?”

“So?”

“So the real deal is, Fritz is worried about what they’ll eventually find in the graveyard. Not everything buried out there is a thousand years old... not by a long shot.”

But sometimes I get things mixed up, Burl might have been talking about someone, something, or somewhere else. After all, the Abbey isn’t the only historical landmark the Trust is sinking its claws into.

Raven’s Claw Church

It’s probably a misnomer. The golden weathervane on top (and who puts a weathervane on top of a church anyway?) depicts... an Angel fending off a raven? Now, that doesn’t seem right. Who summons an Angel to fend off a raven? So it’s probably a winged serpent, or what some of us would call a dragon.

Anyhow, that’s not really important. What’s in a name? Far more important -- and much more obvious to any visitor -- is that the church is surrounded by a graveyard -- like totally surrounded. They made the sidewalk out of headstones, alright. It’s like everyone wanted to be buried as close to the church as possible, so like the entire bottom two feet of the outer wall is simply lined with grave stones. They’re just mortared into the wall and extend out like a buttress, but that’s not the sick part, the part that makes you queasy and ill. You see, you pay a silver as an entrance fee -- a silver, copper, gold, whatever, they don’t care. Like the Ogre working the door could rouse himself from his dreams long enough to notice what we dropped in the box. As long as he heard a clink, he was fine and kept snoring away. So anyway, we’re inside, and this place is just like one giant mausoleum. The floor is made entirely of headstones!

“Why are we walking on grave markers?”

“Guess.”

“I don’t want to guess. What in the big box. Oh, don’t tell me...”

“OK, I won’t.”

“Look, I’m just going to hang out under your jacket for awhile. You let me know when we’re back in the land of the living.”

The Entombed Hero

The “big box” belonged to Sir Reginald -- a hero of some war or another -- and Lady Catherine, who had she lived long enough, would have been his second wife. Seems there was some scandal...

“I could tell you the story if you like.”

“I think, I got it. Reginald, is it?”

Reginald would have been delighted to tell his version of the story, but the Trust is helpful this way as they like to put up plaques, so visitors can have an unbiased version of the events. You know, to offset any lies these ghosts might try to put past you. Anyway, the gist of it is, Reginald poisoned his first wife...

“It was an accident.”

By accidentally giving her an overdose of Drip.

“She was addicted. She was chronically unhappy. What’s that word?”

“Melancholy?”

“Yeah, she suffered from melancholia. Oh yeah, and she was suicidal -- like big time.”

Anyhow, Isabella (the first wife) dies and before the body is cold, Reginald is in the church marrying Catherine. Unfortunately for the two lovebirds, before the priest had even gotten to the part about how you may now kiss the bride, a sizable crowd had gathered outside.

“Sanctuary. It’s a church, right? They’re supposed to grant you sanctuary.”

Being a coward at heart, the priest refused to stand up to the crowd. He didn’t grant the lovers sanctuary. And the crowd -- the

mob, I guess you would call them at that point -- buried Reginald and Catherine alive in the same stone coffin. So I guess, that's sort of romantic -- together for all eternity and all that. But, that's not the end. Because the church hadn't really lived up to Karthrax's code of conduct, he cursed (or depending upon your point of view, blessed) the place, so anyone buried in the vicinity lives on eternally in ghostly form. The waiting list to get buried here is long indeed.

"And the services are usually a sell out as well. I like to stand behind the priest and make faces, tell jokes, and that sort of thing."

Dragon's Egg

Anyhow, it was raining outside, and we were tired, so when Catherine suggested a game of Whist to pass the time, Crazy George jumped at the offer.

Now, how does that saying go? Beauty fades, but stupidity lasts forever. Well in Catherine's case -- being a ghost and all -- she's aged quite well, but she's still... um, er... stone cold stupid. I mean, how many centuries has it been? And she still doesn't know that you've got to follow suit when playing Whist. Needless to say... not that I'm really sure how anything can be needless to say when you're getting paid by the word. But still, needless to say Crazy George and Lane cleaned house. They even won a few family heirlooms. Of course, they had to go dig them up...

"I can't believe you're doing this."

Clunk!

"I hit something."

"What is it?"

"Oh! Dear me! Sorry, Isabella! Wrong grave."

"Looking for the Dragon's Egg, Catherine? It's two over. Oh, and just between you and me, I'll never know what he saw in her.

Oh, and since the last few entries have all been located in and

around Kiss'wick, it only makes sense to focus on that town for a while. I think eventually we'll need to return to life on the canal (fishermen and the like), but for now, it's time to go landside.

Kiss'wick

Your standard quaint old town located in the heart of the Lake District. You'll find Morgana, Fritz, Morti (the town tree), Moot Hall, and the Feldstone Forest here. Which is to say, it's turned into something of a tourist town. I think the only thing they export (besides pleasant memories) is -- get this -- pencil lead. But hey, somebody had to do it.

It's also happens to be the ghost capital of the world -- perhaps one of the many reasons why so many people can't seem to help but to keep on coming back year after year.

"I was lucky. I was sick, so I stayed home, but the rest of my family died in the fire at the Abbey. You have no idea what it's like to loose everything you've ever cared about in one fell swoop."

Everyday at 10:45 he'd be there on the corner telling the same story to whoever would listen. Not that he remembered who I was, so maybe he wasn't so much of a ghost as an echo of the past. And you know what? In the end, I don't think he's the one who stayed home.

Moot Hall

Made of slate, plaster, and wood: this imposing edifice stands at the heart of Kiss'wick overlooking the marketplace-- both literally and figuratively.

If you can communicate with the merchants -- they speak a thick brogue here -- you can get most anything you want: potions, scrolls, contraband, and the like. Two things you'll be wanting for sure if you plan on doing any rambling -- walking in the surrounding hills, that is -- are a good rain coat and a map.

Both of these items are Catch-22's... or insurance... or if you like, protection rackets. If you buy a raincoat, it won't rain.

Something about how it's cheaper to control the weather than provide weatherproof stitching. But if you don't buy a raincoat, you'll get drenched for sure-- if not from the rain, then from passing carriages and buckets of slop being thrown from second stories windows. And trust me, 5-0-0 is a small price to pay to forestall that happy occurrence.

And then like I said, the other scam they got going involves the maps.

"So, which way? Right or left?"

"What does it matter? Let's just go left. It looks more interesting down by the river."

"Just tell me which direction the map says."

"Yeah, about the map..."

"You didn't buy a map, did you? I told you to buy a map. Why didn't you buy a map?"

"Yeah, about that. You see, I don't really have a problem with maps, or say, you buying a map, but if I've got the choice between a silver and a stupid map that says follow the path, I'm taking the silver."

"So we're lost."

"We just follow the path."

"Uh-huh. I bet you didn't buy a raincoat either."

"It's a sunny day..."

Cracka-Boom!

Lucky for George, before long they ran into a local who just happened to have an extra jumper and a fist full of maps. Of course in exchange, he wanted a fist full of gold, but you can't put a price on happiness... or simply not catching your death of a cold.

"Just pay the Leprechaun what he wants, George. This'll teach you not to do what I say in the future."

"So how is that any incentive?"

"Pay him!"

Mortimer, Morti, Mort, the Mascot of Kiss'wick, the Town Tree, and symbol of the area's free spirit and generous nature.

Yeah, so maybe I should explain that last one. Mort has seen better days. He's this gnarled old oak tree -- thousands of years old -- and his branches are so brittle these days, they've got to brace them up with steel tubing.

"It's not my age. It was the hot air balloon that did me in."

"Say what?"

"Morgana asked me if I wanted to be in a story. You know, we'd had our disagreements in the past, but I thought she was extending the olive branch, you know, making the peace. Anyhow, long story short -- her favorite form, don't you know -- the next thing you know I'm in a hot air balloon..."

"Let me guess. You didn't pack a rain coat."

"I'm a tree! Whoever heard of a tree wearing a raincoat? And from there... let's just say, trees weren't meant to fly."

To pay his medical expenses Mortimer sells -- what else, but -- raincoats. They're second hand. More of a lost and found pile really, hanging from his branches as they are, but don't expect to get them for free.

Oh, and the cabby's -- the drivers and footmen for most of the town's coaches for hire -- wait it out here, playing chess and checkers in his shade. And then of course, there are the disgruntled elves. The less said about them the better.

"Fishing excursion in the lochs, mate?"

"Moon lit ride through the moors."

"You're boring him, lads. Can't you see the 'Pod's a thrill-seeker, a veritable dare-devil. Might I interest you in a ride in a hot air balloon?"

Um, yeah. No thanks.

Morgana's Guest House, a house of ill-repute which changes both its name and location on a frequent basis in a futile attempt to stay one step ahead of the... tourists.

There's not actually much going on at Morgana's. You know, with a coven of twelve witches, I was hoping for the place to resemble a college dorm, but I never saw a single towel clad

beauty... other than Morgana. I guess she wanted me all to herself, so she sent the rest of them away for the duration.

Anyway, the place is done up all nice and regal, but low key. I'm tempted to be all sarcastic and talk about the gold brocaded red satin, but the fact is, Morgana has taste. The place is nice. And she serves tea in a service that would be the envy of many a collector... or art museum.

“Pass the Milmart.”

“What?”

“The Melenart.”

“What?”

“The Marmit.”

“What are you talking about?”

It's a game the locals play. Tourists, right: they go out into the world seeking adventure. Well, this Melanoma stuff is horrid. They take a pot of chicken broth (road kill soup, or whatever is handy), and burn it -- just cook it down over a roaring blaze and reduce it to this thick brown muck. Then they put this burnt slime in a jar, slap a fancy label on it, and when it's time to serve the tourists tea or breakfast or whatever, they put this crap out on the tray next to the butter and the marmalade and see if they can't get some yokel to try it on his toast. It's like this serious underground competition. The locals ask each other to pass it, make a big to do about it, talk it up, and even go so far as to pretend to butter their own toast with the gunk, but none of them ever touch the stuff. It's all a game, a ruse. Morgan has five empty Manna-nana bottles in her window. She actually got her guests to consume five bottles of the putrid stuff in a single year! But in the end, I can see how that might happen. Crazy George refused to admit he'd been had. During our stay, he went through an entire bottle of the stuff by himself. Don't ask me how he did it. Don't ask me how Lane managed to kiss him after that either.

“This stuff is good. You really should try it.”

Um, no thanks.

Am'blin is just down the road from Ghost'wait (where the dead outnumber the living), Borrow'dale (don't expect it back), and Smithe'ruin (a town rank with unemployment).

Am'blin is three weeks -- give or take -- from Kiss'wick via boat; a long day's ride via a carriage and twelve; or I suppose if you could get your hand on one of the Kingdom's jet fighters, it probably wouldn't take you but a few moments. But to tell you the truth, I never gave that last option much serious consideration.

Am'blin is a mining town. Copper and tin, I think, originally, but it's progressed over the years. The deposit they work is one of those long and stringy veins, copper and tin by the surface, but if you go down far enough, shift dimensions along with the way, and know what you're, you can trace the vein all the way back to its source to the elemental plane of Sapphire, and pull pretty much whatever you want out of the ground. It's a neat little trick, that. And I don't have the slightest idea how the Dwarves do it.

Anyhow, with an industry like that going, the Dwarves own this town, and they like to staff their watering holes with indentured Elvin servants.

"It's only seventy years. I figure I'll know what I want to study at university by then. Besides, most folks buy their way out after twenty -- you know, assuming the tips are good. Otherwise, I might not see my dear ma-ma till she's old and gray." Sniff. Sniff. "So anyway, what'll it be? Can I start with you folks with a round of drinks? An appetizer?"

Tourist Shops

It's not like Am'blin has a monopoly on tourist shops, but seeing as how I haven't mentioned them yet, I might as well mention them here.

First off, the shops are usually located in these quaint old buildings that are worthy of remark in and of themselves -- say like the Knight's Bridge. This little flower shop was originally a one room schoolhouse; that is, before it was a narrow footbridge, built to span the great and mighty Am'blin Crick: a stream so small and

tiny, you'd be hard pressed getting even your feet wet if you fell into it during a thunderstorm.

Anyhow, seems this crick -- as they call it -- marked the divide between two land-holds. And whether they were feuding or not, I could not tell you, but a boy from the one side of the stream fell in love with a girl from the other and I guess neither one of them knew how to jump so they built this here bridge. And then they got married and couldn't decide which kingdom to live in, so they split the difference, built a broom closet on top of the bridge (where stepping stones would have done) and lived in that. I'll grant you, it's not a great story, but it's a story, and every last gift shop has a some kind of story just like it. Don't believe me? Just ask.

So what's a typical gift shop like? It's got a roaring blaze in the fireplace and some cutie of an Elf (sweating to death and wearing next to nothing) working the till. Or if it's like a jewelry store or something, they'll have a hardnosed Leprechaun at the till, but the same gaggle of beauties will be there talking it up and mesmerizing the customers with their wares (the stores and theirs). Trust me, I'm a sucker for a pretty face (and what not), so I spent far more than I intended.

And then of course, there's the Fingerlings: let's just say they don't believe in taking no for an answer.

"Fudge, sir?"

"Try the fudge."

"Go on, have a piece, sir."

"It's not going to bite you."

"Try the fudge already!"

"Fine. Fine. Mm! Delicious."

"That'll be a crown for the pound, then."

"What?"

"A crown! A crown! Are you deaf! We can't sell this lot now that you've gone and rubbed your dirty fingers over the lot."

Of course, what really cost the big bucks was the mining equipment. Call me a schmuck, but I just couldn't resist. To be

fitted out with a custom-made pick and shovel set by a master smithy: it's a once in a lifetime opportunity, or so he said. Besides, now whenever somebody makes a snide comment like, "The crap's so deep in here, you need a shovel just to find the door," I can offer them the tools they'll need to find the exit.

Ming's Dynasty

I loved this place. It was run by Kibbers: little knee-high frog guys. Usually Kibbers are all formal, going for your footman, butler, or headwaiter type jobs, but the lot running this store were Kung Fu masters, and import export specialists to boot.

I guess it was your standard antique shop: a big place, with merchandise stacked to the ceiling, and long twisting aisles that snake around in circles like some sort of maze so convoluted that you were guaranteed to lose your sense of direction and get lost the minute you lost sight of the door. I mean, I'd lay odds that if we'd looked hard enough, we would have found one of the Kibbers sitting at a desk in some dark and smoky back corner selling maps that contained directions to the exit. But me, I wouldn't care if I got lost in this place and never got out. The abundant braziers burning incense filled the warehouse with the sweet smell of cedar, a trio in the corner playing flutes, and the art was simply fantastic -- out of this world.

Still, that's not really much different than any other antique shop in town. What really got me attention was the meeting room in back. It was completely empty except for these small Kibber sized pillows lining the wall, and apparently this is where they hold their meetings for the Hand of the Fist, Frog of the Lake, Peddler of the Pawn Shop, or whatever secret guild they got going these days. They were all hush-hush about the entire thing and tried to keep it low key, but that was sort of hard to do seeing as how the store was thick with the little frogmen, hanging from the rafters, practicing their martial arts skills by tossing priceless vases back and forth as they stocked the shelves. Anyway in my humble opinion, the place is worth checking out. Just tell 'em, "Celli Sent

Me,” and they’ll throw in a free pack of cedar incense with any purchase over five quid.

“100-0-0 for a story write-up!”

“Hey, it’s a fair price considering our circulation rates?”

“But we’re a non-profit! You’ve seen our graphic novel, right? We’re superheroes, do-gooders. But more importantly, we never charge a fee, hence the import/export business. It’s not a cover. It’s to make ends meet!”

“I tell you what. I noticed an old dragon war banner towards the back. It looked a little beat up, worn around the edges...”

“It’s over 6,000 years old!

“OK, so it’s used. Like I was saying, I’m willing to live with a little dirt, and the frayed edges add a certain realism to the piece.”

“Are you some kind of joker?”

“Well, I like to think so.”

The point is, they like to haggle; but since there’s always some orphanage on the brink of loosing its lease or some old lady on the edge of being thrown out of her flat, they usually will cut you a pretty good deal.

And if that doesn’t work, just give them a line about how you, yourself, are a down on your luck orphan, trying to make your way in this cruel world, but now -- just when it looked like you were finally going to get your big break -- the taxman is going after the family’s ancestral castle.

I mean, those Kibbers are suckers for a good sob story. So you know, you might want to spruce up what I just said until you’ve actually got a good sob story...

Hero is one of Morgana’s better known novels.

Coincidentally, the story takes place in Am’blin and is the stirring tale of a sweet young witch straight from the Realms who has decided to join up with a coven of dark witches, which near as I can tell, means any witch who hasn’t sworn fealty to Morgana.

So let me give you the super-fast summary of Hero. Linda, a

human, gets sidetracked by a magical storm before she can hook up with her new coven. Alone in an alternate universe, she meets the anti-hero Rick who befriends her and gives her a temporary place to stay. But this is problematic for Rick, because Bella -- his fingerling girlfriend -- gets jealous and starts stirring the pot. I won't give away the end, because I haven't read the book, but they tell me it's a classic full of cross-world jumping fun. Though if you ask me, it seems a bit human-centric as you might be able to tell from the following excerpt:

“Don't eat that!”

“What? Why not?”

“That's a Snacker Bar™.”

“Yeah, so?”

“So, it's worth a fortune here. I haven't seen one of those in... well, since I got here.”

“So you have it?”

“Thanks, but I've got a better idea. We'll get all the expats together. You can meet everyone, and at the same time auction off the Snacker Bar™ to the highest bidder. That'll set you up with a bit of gold.”

“Just so we're both on the same page. We're talking about one little Snacker Bar™ here, right? ”

“Give it a year and you'll understand. What I wouldn't give for a good bacon cheeseburger dripping with barbeque sauce, a side of fries, and a chocolate milkshake.”

And with a lead in like that, you know somewhere along the way Linda is going to cook Rick that sandwich of his, and Bella is going to flip out, because she's been trying to get that “hamburger” thing right for ages. Still, I'm sure the two ladies will eventually become friends. Well at least, that would be the case this wasn't a Mistress Morgana story.

And that should bring us back to the canals.

When not busy making lovey-dovey and sucking face, Crazy George and Lane enjoyed a good fight. What did they fight about,

you ask? Well, let me tell you. George and Lane fought about:

How to pilot a boat.

How to decorate a boat.

How to clean a boat.

When to clean a boat.

What time to get up.

What time to go to sleep.

Who said this.

Who said that.

Whether an Armored Arthropod Anterian is nothing more than a giant ant, and if it is, can it still lift 100x its body weight, which would be the unrealistically large amount of 15,000lbs.

And so on.

As you can see, they argued about some important stuff. Oddly, whenever they cooked or got together to fight with someone else (say some unwary merchant caught in the crossfire), they got along like two peas in a pod. And it was for this reason that everyone agreed that whenever we ate on the boat, they should do all the cooking. It had the added benefit that we then knew when supper was ready. They started to fight again.

“When are you going to clean out this fridge?”

“I didn’t know it needed cleaning.”

“You’ve got a to-do list pasted right on the front of the fridge, and the first item on the list is clean the fridge.”

“Oh yeah. I already did that one.”

“When?”

“When I made the list.”

“When was that?”

“Look, it’s really not that easy. You can’t just clean a refrigerator.”

“Don’t change the subject. Besides, it is that easy. You’re a wizard. Just snap your fingers or something.”

“And then what?”

“Then we go to the next item: clean the bathrooms.”

“See! Where will it end?”

“AT THE END OF THE LIST!”

“I don’t have time for that.”

“It’ll only take a few minutes. Here, I’ll read and you snap your fingers. Ready?”

“Nobody cares. If anybody wanted the bathroom cleaned, they’d say something.”

Or wouldn’t because if you took Lane’s side in a fight, George would threaten to turn you into a frog, and if you took George’s side, Lane would threaten to rip off your arms.

But give them a common enemy -- a race or a competition or something -- and they really pulled together.

Fishing Contest: just like it sounds.

Don’t ask me where -- somewhere between Kiss’wick and Am’blin if I remember correctly -- they closed down the canal for a day for some fishing contest. So our choices were simple: we could either just sit there and sulk for the day... or we could join in the fun. Me, I wandered around the crowd and put in some quality time with Nadia, while Lane and George went whole hog trying to win the contest -- not that either of them knew the first thing about fishing.

“How you doing?”

“Alright.”

“What are you fishing for?”

“Anything we can.”

Of course, this wasn’t what Lane and George said, it’s what every fisherman we encountered anywhere on the canal said. As to Lane and George, the two of them got disqualified in the first two minutes for using magic, but it wouldn’t have made any difference; they were still going to lose.

Anyway, while those two were busy fishing (and/or explaining how they weren’t trying cheat, they just didn’t understand the rules), Nadia and me ran into this Elvin cutie dockside. And I’ll admit it, I have a weakness for Elvin cuties. Anyhow, she gave Nadia and me a tour of her boat, and right there

in the pilot house there were like a billion medallions -- coin like trophies -- from all the fishing contests her father had won. And guess what? By the end of the day, her father had added another medallion to his collection and the Elvin lass, herself, had added a pair of notches to her bedpost. But between you and me -- or rather between the attentions of Nadia and the Elf -- I like to think I was the real winner on that particular day.

Gimlet's Shipyard and Engine Repair Service

We had all sorts of engine problems on the trip. First it was a manna leak in the fuel line, then a clogged bypass valve, after that a himminy-shimmit went bad, while a little later a yokel-okel-tourist override cap just needed a little tightening at 50-0-0 a pop! I think you catch my drift. Of course whenever possible, we just used Duck Tape: that stuff is great. And when that didn't work, we had the Cobalts push us about and drag us through the muck, so by the time we got to Kiss'wick the boat was in need of some serious repairs. Nothing much to say about all that. It cost us an arm and a leg, but Lane just stepped out into the street and accosted a pair of limbs from some hapless passerby, and then that was that. Just kidding about that last. Taking someone's arms and legs sounds an awful lot like stealing, so you know I wouldn't stand for that. I just sort of put that joke in for flavor, because there really is nothing much to talk about in regards to the repairs. It was just your typical engine overhaul... or at least, it would be in the real world.

But I'm not such a big fan of the real word. And besides, there's this Gnome named Gimlet that I like working with. You might recognize the name from some of the other stories I've done (G'narsh: The Troll, The Myth, The Legend comes rapidly to mind). Anyhow, in the book (that these are the notes to, remember?), we'll pull Gimlet in, set him up with a marina, and from there? Got me?

We came across this one gaudy boatyard in our travels that we'll use as a template. This Leprechaun had like a billion

streamers flying over his yard: balloons, whirligigs, and for sale signs plastered everywhere. And seeing how memorable the sight was, we'll use his yard as a model and then just stuff Gimlet into the situation and see what happens. Maybe we'll have him go on about how he's being bought out, pushed out, and being made redundant by some Evil Franchise.

“Buy you out? Why would we want to do that? No customers, fixed costs exceeding your weekly take, a twenty year lease you can't hope to get out of, and let's not even go into the back taxes the Trust is considering accessing. I here tell, this here boatyard is a historic landmark! So buy you out? Not a chance... but if you were to pay us enough, we might take this albatross off your hands. Or you can just deal with the tax collectors and the Trust on your own.”

With that as the set up, I'm thinking it should be easy enough to work the Kibbers from the Ming Dynasty into the equation somehow. It might make for a wonderful side quest and kill a few thousand words. But truthfully, it's getting near the end of this section, so I'm just going to grab a drink and let someone else figure out the intricacies of it all.

Speaking of the end, I do believe that we've established that I'm not a workaholic -- lazy some like to call it. Which probably has some truth to it, seeing as how each one of these entries takes me an entire day. Anyway, I have found that as I near the end of a manuscript or even just a section in a manuscript (as here), I tend to get even lazier than usual and often cut whatever corners I think I can get away with cutting. Sometimes I stop writing altogether and just throw out things at random or include lists of the things that I'm not going to cover any further or haven't bothered to include anywhere else (sort of like a smaller scale version of putting together the notes to a study guide). Anyhow, sometimes I do this because I haven't got the time (in my busy nap filled life), inclination (once again, in my busy nap filled life), or I don't know how to integrate the material into a cohesive whole (yes, even the world's greatest author is not without his shortcomings).

In the end, you'll probably see a lot of this sort of thing when we finally get to the multiple choice question section.

For instance:

Sample Question 1: Celli tends to asks the questions that he does in multiple choice question sections, because _____?

A) He thinks the answers are funny.

B) The answers are funny -- a subtle but meaningful difference.

C) Someone paid him to include the material, and if not a man of honor, he's at least not an outright thief.

D) He made a note regarding some item during his vacation, and by Gra'gl honor, he's going to use that note!

E) More often than not, one or more of the above.

For the most part, that's how the questions will go. Though in truth, I probably should have started with this second question first.

Sample Question 2: The correct answer for the multiple choice question is always _____?

A) The funniest.

B) The most humorous.

- C) The ones that's are mostestly grammatically correcterest.
- D) The final answer on the list.

More importantly, since the questions I ask usually cover material not addressed anywhere else, I recommend their use whilst quizzing students to determine their final grade (in any class from Statistics to introduction to Boating). That'll show those lazy students to read the book and not buy the notes to the study guide! I mean, do they think I sit down to write in grueling half an hour marathon stretches each and every day for my own amusement? I don't think so.

Anyhow, before we get to the pop quiz and start failing students at random, we'll need to convince a few professors to assign Crazy George Takes a Holliday as required reading; but before we can do that, we'll need to get somebody else to write the book; but before we can do that, we'll need to write the plot outline; and before we can do that, we'll need to finish this section; so let's get on with it already.

Only a few more entries to go.

Can you taste the excitement?

Gee, did I just say that I write an entry each and every day? Really, I don't know who I thought I was kidding?

I should take a day off.

Maybe two.

And then I realized I should have taken my break after I'd gotten to The Bell and Steeple, a.k.a. The Bell of Grumley,

It's a bar. In truth, I liked the pub by the Foxton locks the best. But really, they're all the same -- you know, once you get over the difference between how they look, where they are located, what they serve, and the disposition of the man pouring the drinks behind the bar. Actually, that last one never changed. In the Kingdoms, they believe in a lot of things -- truth, justice, and the

Leprechaun way -- but good service is not one of them.

“Don’t worry about the service. The longer we sit here without anyone noticing, the longer we stay out of the rain without paying a copper.”

“You worry about your pennies all you want old man, I’m getting myself a beer,” or an ale, or a wine, or a stout, or a cider, or a mead, or a pilsner, or a lager, or a whatever. I never saw so many taverns stocked with so many different beverages in all my life.

“Just give me a cider.”

“What kind, sir?”

“One that tastes good.”

“Would you be in the mood for something bitter then? Something sweet? Something spicy? Something with a little pick me up? Or something with a little put me down? Because we have all kinds, sir.”

I do believe the little freak was getting ready to break into a song and dance.

Ah, what the heck. While the little whippersnapper sings a lusty duet with the barmaid (at least in my head), I’m going to break open a bottle of cider I snuck through customs (and therefore out of the Kingdoms) and call it a day. Which means, you’re on your own when it comes to imagining the song and dance number.

“I can (Hiccup!) hold my liquor.”

“What you talking about? I’m not drunk.”

“Is it just me, or is the room spinning around?”

Oddly, that last one isn’t only from the cider. Often enough they use old ship beams to hold up the roofs in these taverns, and since half the cider is spiced with a touch of K’fr... well, you can do the math from there.

Oh yeah, and this is one of those half completed list thingies I was warning you about earlier. This entry really is going to be a do it yourself exercise.

So let’s see, what else do we have?

The gold coin forgery detectors that they had in each and

every bar sort of stood out. Especially since Crazy George took them as a sort of challenge, to see if he couldn't pass a copper as a crown...

And then there were the antique Magical Binders that we saw hanging on the wall at the Gumley. Those were pretty weird. They were like tackle for horses only they were designed to fit Swamp Gimmes. Turns out some of those Bog Dwellers make good field hands once you cast a charm... or two... or three on them.

And then there are the stupid idea's you come up with whilst drinking your 15th cider of the evening:

"We should put out a line of bubble head figurines."

"Those things are stupid. I don't want to walk down the street and see my own face staring back at me from under the flaps of some yokel's saddlebags."

"I wasn't thinking of us. We could do Gra'gl bubble heads."

"Do you even know what Gra'gl looks like?"

"Well, right now that's a bit of a stumbling block."

And then there are the jokes you hear in a bar:

"How'd you get the black eye?"

"O'Riley done it to me."

"How'd he'd do that? You stand three hands taller than him."

"Well at the time I was holding onto Mrs. O'Riley's bottom; it's a fine thing in itself, but of absolutely no use in a fight.

And with that sad whimpering joke, thus endeth the vacation... well, almost. We still had to clear customs.

Immigration Checkpoint

"We better search this one. I hear he's trying to sneak some cider through."

"What? No. That was just a joke."

"Security is no laughing matter, sonny."

"Besides, I wrote that after I'd already gone through security."

"Sounds like an admission of guilt, if you ask me. We better

take him to the room.”

“Hey! Don’t I recognize you.”

“No. I’ve never seen you before.”

“No. I know I’ve seen you before somewhere... I got it! You’re that rat fink Pips’ father, aren’t you.”

“Call my son a rat fink? Right! To the room with you!”

Needless to say, things did not get any cheerier in the room, or when they started going through my story notes.

“So what’s this then about a landmine disguised as a meat pie.”

“It’s not a landmine. It just looks like one. Here, I’ll open it.”

“He’s got a bomb! And he’s trying to detonate it! Run for your lives!”

Oddly, they confiscated the meat pie (dangerous threat to national security that it was), and forgot completely about the cider. Go figure.

Anyway, during the entire time I was in the room, Crazy George was of absolutely no help. He was busy eating -- or not eating as the case may be -- a bag of potato chips.

Celli’s Potato Chips

This is no lie. There really is a brand of potato chips named Celli’s Potato Chips, and I’ve got nothing to do with the making or marketing of them.

I hear tell there’s another Celaphopod out there that makes them. And not that I want to give away any family secrets, but it’s not really all that surprising that his name is Celli, or that he also hails from Si (pronounced sigh).

Sigh! I almost feel homesick... Not.

Anyhow as long as that other Celli and his potato chips are content to live in the Kingdoms, I’ve got no beef with them, but if I catch him sniffing around the Realms, there will be Hell to pay.

OK, so anyhow, I’m in the room, and Crazy George had gotten hungry, so rather than giving me a hand, snapping his

fingers, or doing anything helpful like that, he and Lane went over to the commissary to see what they had to eat.

“Look George, they’ve got Celli’s Potato Chips. We should buy a bag for him.”

“Put those down!”

“Are you OK? You look like you’ve just seen a ghost.”

“Just put them down!”

“What’s the matter with you? They look good. They’re even made with all natural ingredients: russet potatoes, palm oil, salt, and nothing else.”

“Put them down!”

“Oh, now this is interesting. They’re made in a facility that also processes wheat, milk, mustard, and celery. That’s odd. Why do you suppose they would mention mustard and celery?”

“No doubt because I have a severe allergy to mustard and celery (especially when ingested simultaneously with russet potatoes) that I didn’t know about until just this moment.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Look, I ate Celli’s candy bar once.”

“Why would you do that?”

“He put it down. I thought he was through with it. I was hungry, so I picked it up and took a bite. And then, I go into complete anabolic shock. I couldn’t breathe. I almost died.”

“That’s awful.”

“Yeah... awful. I’d been eating chocolate and nuts for years with no problem, but I take one little bite of Celli’s leftover candy bar and I almost asphyxiate. I can’t even look at the stuff anymore. I mean, one little bite and I break out in hives, right? So like, there’s like no way I’m even touching a bag of potato chips that are clearly marked as belonging to Celli.”

Some might say I overreacted, but I say look at the results. If it works, it works. Besides, Crazy George is neglecting to mention that he wasn’t even in the same vortex as me when I put the candy bar down, or that the reason I put it down was so I could pour myself a glass of milk. It’s not like I was finished eating it or

anything.

Trident Face

Speaking of overreacting, me and ole Trident Face don't get along so well. Me, I think it's because he's jealous of the success I've had over the years with his Mermaid minions. Of course, he'd probably tell you he could get over that if I'd just stop calling him Trident Face, but that ain't going to happen anytime soon for ole Trident Face, because if I used his real name, I'd have to start paying him royalties. And when you get right down to it, that might be the real basis of our dispute, because you know what they say: no matter how much you think it's about the gold, you're wrong -- it's even more so.

Anyhow, because of this little feud Trident Head and me got going, and on account of him being the Lord God Almighty of the High Seas or something like that, I don't do open water boat trips. I mean, you could do a whole book about the crossing... or if you're anything like me, you could certainly make up a whole book about the crossing (from the Kingdoms to the Realms), but I'm not in the mood. Maybe when Fish Face gets a grip and realizes 10% of the gross is too much tribute to demand for a walk on role that has no relevance to the plot, I'll reconsider. Until then, forget it.

Surprisingly (or then not so surprisingly considering the tentative nature of our relationship), George doesn't have any problem sailing the Seven Seas, so he and Lane sailed his boat from shore to shore -- from the Five Kingdoms to that little corner of the Seven Realms known as the Sandwich Islands (and just by the by, any place named after food is A-OK in my book). Anyway, I just stepped off the boat when they pushed off the dock at the beginning of the journey and then stepped right back on as they tied up at the destination. It might sound a bit backwards, but most of your better magic is. I mean look here, these are your choices: three weeks getting tossed about by some demented God of the Sea who wants to put in a good show and "give you your money's

worth,” or take two steps -- off and on -- and let someone else do the dirty work in between. No need to wonder which option I chose, and you can rest assured Nadia was riding my shoulder the entire time.

“I’ve got motion sickness issues, you know.”

Yeah, I think we all know about that.

Stef’fan is my girlfriend’s brother... or cousin... or something like that. I supposed if I paid more attention (or Elves weren’t so tight lipped about these things), I might know, but I don’t and they are, so it is what it is. And if that last sentence doesn’t make the slightest bit of sense to you, then maybe you understand how I feel about Stef’fan... whoever in Gra’gl’s name he might be.

Now, me and Stef’fan don’t look the same, but some folks say we “feel” the same (arrogant to the point of being abusive, but so darn good looking you can’t help but to forgive us for our shortcomings... and various other peccadilloes). Anyhow, that might explain why his sister... or girlfriend... or whoever she was... was putting the moves on me.

“Get away.”

“I’m not interested in you.”

“Leave! Me! Alone!”

She was, of course, playing hard to get, but Lane didn’t realize it was all for show, so after a while I thought it best to give the girl -- Mi’lay, I think her name was -- a little space. Besides, she was standing on the balcony at the time, and like the open ocean, I’ve got issues with heights.

Anyway, somewhere in here I should mention that Stef’fan was the point man for the Dragon’s Egg, K’fr, and/or whatever this story was about... outside of having a good time, that is.

And while I’m at it, I probably should also tell you a bit about Stef’fan’s apartment, condo, or whatever it is. He’s got this roof top garden thing going that overlooks the marina, bay, and all that. I mean, I really couldn’t believe an Elf was living in a condo in the city, but then I saw his place and I understood. He’s not

living in the city. He's living in a small section of the jungle that's been transported to the roof of a skyscraper. He did this so he didn't have to commute as far to work: I think he's an investment banker or something, but once again, those elves are real tight lipped.

"Oh, I had this one client once, I mean this is classic... Actually, I'm not supposed to tell anybody about this, but we're all friends here, right? So, you won't tell anyone? Right. OK. So there I was, my first week on the job..." and he just goes on and on. So maybe Elves aren't so tight lipped after all. Maybe I just have this aversion to listening to anything they have to say.

Stef'fan's Bank

This really doesn't have much to do with Crazy George Takes a Holiday. It's more of a segue to the a derivative work I'm expecting to have the pleasure of writing on of these days tentatively titled Crazy George Goes Down the River and/or Crazy George Does Twenty to Life.

You see to end the quest, we all escorted the Egg to its final destination, which just so happened to be the vault at Stef'fan's bank. Not that the Egg is still there mind you, but after we handed the Egg off, my job was done, so I couldn't tell you anything more about it.

Anyway in the lobby to the bank, they had this artwork on display. Old worthless crap mostly, but mixed in with the rest was this gem, this jewel, this map -- all framed up all nice as can be.

"Nice map," George says. "Wonder where it leads."

And I'm not saying he took it, but next time we went to the bank (a week later) the map wasn't there anymore. Now, maybe the bank took the map down. Maybe it was on loan. Maybe they sold it. Or maybe Crazy George broke into the bank in the wee hours of the morning and liberated it. Me, I don't know. I believe that ignorance is often the best policy.

So anyway, if I ever come out with a short story (or maybe considering it all, a long-long story) entitled Crazy George Does

Hard Time For Being Stupid, well then, you'll already know what that story's all about. Word to the wise, the man's got sticky fingers:

“Wash your hands. Don't rub them on your pants, wash your hands. Look, do you want people to think you're a thief or not? He's saying you got sticky fingers... so wash your hands already. In the restroom... not by sticking your fingers in a glass of water. Ah! I can't take you anywhere.”

The Bank Restaurant -- fine Fraunch dining at its most expensive.

“I'm not coming back here. I'm not. Never again. The food was terrible -- terrible, just terrible. I never tasted food so bad. I'm going to tell the manager. Where's the manager? This is not acceptable. The ice cream was terrible. How can you screw up ice cream? Just terrible... terrible. The salad didn't have enough dressing, the steak was tough, and the carrots were soggy. It was terrible, just terrible! I'm not paying for this. Get me the manager. I want to complain.”

We needed an obnoxious customer to offset the love birds -- George and Lane -- so I volunteered for the role and Mi'lay jumped at the chance at having me to herself for an entire hour.

“I thought all of us we were going to be sitting together? Why are we off in a corner by ourselves.”

Needless to say, she did the bored date, hostile companion thing to perfection. By the time the manager came over, I was all primed to tear him a new one. Unfortunately, he stood 7'10" and looked to be part Rock Elemental, so I took pity on the poor half breed and let him off with a warning.

“Thank you, sir. I will relay your compliments to le chef. He will be most pleased to learn of your high regard.”

Le Bank - taka da duece (that means take two, you ignorant foreigner, you).

So the thing with me and Mi'lay was obviously not going to

happen. Poor girl, she had such high hopes. But when that magical feeling's not there, it's simply not there, and no amount of wine will change it.

Anyhow, after our tête-à-tête, we rejoined the rest of the party for drinks, and I can only assume she did the best that she could to put on a happy face for the rest of the evening.

George, on the other hand, had a trick or two up his sleeve to make us all forget our worries.

“Did you know that if you make a big to-do about proposing marriage in these places, they will usually kick you down a free bottle of champagne?”

“I'm not marrying you in order to get a free bottle of champagne.”

“Fair enough, so what would it take?”

And from there the evening is a bit of a blur. I felt bad for Mi'lay... and so must have everybody else, cause we did a lot of drinking. We must have. All I really know is that I awoke under a pile of Pixies. Nadia's sisters must have shown up, and you know how much they like to party (and/or how indiscriminate Pixies can be). Anyway, as I awoke and brought my eyes to focus, I must have been seeing double, because the bill looked like it had a few extra zeroes tacked on the end.

“No, sir. I assure you, that is correct.”

“Short? And your friends have all departed, leaving you in ze lurch. That es most unfortunate, sir. But you are the famous Le Celli, are you not? Perhaps we can work out ze deal, eh?”

Harry the Story Finishing Gnome at your service.

In theory I'm supposed to show up at The Bank Restaurant the next morning to find Celli, Nadia, and the rest of the ladies mopping the floors and washing the dishes as a sort of penance, to pay for the previous night's party, but that's not what really happened.

You see, although Le Bank is a classy place, it's affordable, and so Celli had the gold on him, no problem. Still, no sense

ruining a gag, so I say let him do the dishes if that's what he wants to do.

Anyway, I don't think Celli's done Le Bank justice, so let's go over the restaurant one final time. As their advertising says, it's fine Fraunch dining in a relaxed atmosphere. On most nights, The Four Horsemen -- an apocalyptic reggae band -- play in the corner while patrons dance it up in the aisles. In short, it's a nice romantic place to celebrate a promotion, birthday, or anniversary and an excellent place to make a marriage proposal or other vow of everlasting fidelity -- just like Crazy George did.

Lane, of course, accepted and come dawn all of us (who were sober) went down to the boat for a "Divorce Ceremony." See the appropriate section in Minataur Tails if you want more details on that one.

Anyhow, after that, I went back to the restaurant and showed Max -- the proprietor -- a few rough notes of what we had worked out so as to include the Le Bank restaurant in the story (all unobtrusive like), and thereby (in theory) rescued Celli from a life of servitude. Well, after I had a snack, that is.

Snap! Snap!

"Yo! Lobe boy, the coco latte list and be quick about it! Don't make me write a bad review. I mean, you do want this thing to have a happy ending..."