

Getting Dizzy - Book II

of

Minataur Tails

The Second Book

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

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and in the Earthen Vortex

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Commemorative Internet Edition

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Happy Birthday to the LeeZards

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Minataur Tales
Book II - Getting Dizzy
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Appendix B
The Ranting Part II

As you may know, at the beginning of each book, I like to step back from the story for a moment and let the readers know how I -- the author -- am doing.

My life has gotten a lot more interesting since the publication of the first book in the Minataur Tails series. And I guess a statement as blatantly ambiguous as that deserves an explanation. You see, each book (such as the Minataur Tails) has within it multiple books (such as Book I - Minataur Tails, or Book II - Getting Dizzy). I do this to confuse both the readers and my publisher. Say an editor wants an unreasonable number of words in a book, say for instance 100,000. Well, something that long could take a couple of weeks to write, at least. So I say, why not send a shorter book first -- you know, not nearly as long -- and then send him another book a little later? Eventually he gets his 100,000 words and in the process I've sent him maybe four books plus an appendix or two. Then when the royalty checks start rolling in for Minataur Tails, I can call my editor and ask where the royalties are for the other three books (Getting Dizzy, and so forth). Crazy George assures me this is all on the up and up, and since it works out in my favor, I'm inclined to believe him.

The other advantage of all this is: when I'm at a convention and some so called "fan" demands to know how I can justify the unlikely action in the second book, I can stare at the offending personage dumbfounded like I haven't got the slightest idea what they are talking about. I mean, is that the second book from the first book, in which case why call it the second book? Or are you talking about the second book from the second book, which would

really be the sixth book, which I haven't written yet because we've only gotten as far as the second book at the moment? Unless of course, I'm talking to my editor, publisher, or agent, in which case, yes, this is book six, and you're a little behind on those royalty checks. So you can see how confusing it is... and how useful. I mean, you've got to admit that you'd probably already forgotten that this entire paragraph started as a way of explaining how I dodge answering questions from overly inquisitive fans at conventions.

Speaking of conventions...

And did anybody else notice how particularly smooth that segue was?

Anyway, speaking of conventions...

And really, did you notice how it got even smoother after I repeated it a second time? That's flow. That's literary genius. Now, just for cheap thrills, I'll show you what it would feel like if I was a hack and overdid it.

Speaking of conventions...

See, it doesn't work. It falls flat on its face. Why? Because we've already flogged the gag to death.

But then, as long as we're already committed to segueing into another convention story (as in, speaking of conventions...), I might as well get on with it.

Like I was saying (or at least, was trying to say), I was at this convention the other day and I ran into this handsome guy (and I mean, like, really handsome -- but in a totally non-gay way), and this ruggedly, manly, handsome, non-gay guy was dressed in baggy shorts, flip flops, and a pink Hawaiian style flowered shirt (sort of as if he was daring someone to question his manliness). Anyhow, he also had on a pair of dark sunglasses to which he had taped blue fishing worms -- three to a side (you know, just in case you'd like to be cool, too). I can't tell you how flattered I was that someone would dress up like a Celaphopod at a convention. Of course, I had to tell him who I was. Things were going pretty good until I

gave him a hug. I guess with all of the preceding narrative side commentary, he got the wrong idea. But the real point is, unprecedented fame and wild financial success have been good to me.

So, I'd like to take a moment to give a shout-out to everyone who was at Con-in-my-Head and let them know I had a great time. I really appreciate all the support -- and by support, of course, I mean the free drinks and swag.

On a more serious note, it seems I lost my wallet somewhere along the way, so if you find it, my address is right there on the drivers license. Just mail it along and no questions will be asked. I like to believe that what happens at Con-in-my-Head, should stay at Con-in-my-Head.

Unfortunately, that's just the beginning of the bad news. Crazy George moved out of my house. I wasn't upset that he left. That isn't the bad news. He'd really outstayed his welcome. He doesn't clean up after himself. And just between you and me, for a small time, unimportant, easily replaceable bit character, he's got quite the attitude. I don't even want to get into his hygiene. It would only seem like sour grapes, but it's pretty darn bad. I'm not surprised he can't keep a wife. I know, I'm probably sounding a wee bit vindictive, but that's because that's the way I'm feeling right now. And can you blame me? The guy shows up, says he needs to spend the night somewhere, and then two months later he's still sleeping on my couch! I tried to make allowances. I realize that I owe him a debt of gratitude for the success of The Dragon Bound Quartet. Things really started to roll in that book when he showed up, but I paid him for that -- standard union rates. I don't really believe that I owe him anything extra. Not now anyhow. I saw what he had in his hands that first night when he came knocking at my door at three in the morning -- a towel and a handbag. And not one of those big duffel bags, either. But a small handbag that might hold some toothpaste, deodorant, and a hairbrush. Of course, I say might hold, because in the two months

he was living with me, I saw no indication of Crazy George ever doing anything like brushing his teeth or using deodorant. Mostly it was sleeping till two in the afternoon and then complaining that I hadn't gone to the liquor store yet.

I bring this up only because when he left in the middle of the night (when I was sound asleep, mind you), he seems to have forgotten that he only brought one small tiny little handbag with him. I can see if you moved in with a lot of stuff, then it might be hard to separate your belongings from the other guy's when you move out. Like if, say just for instance, Crazy George had brought any records with him, then it might be understandable when he took one or two of my records by accident when he left. But I'm finding it hard to believe he just accidentally packed up all -- as in every last one -- of my records, along with my entire comic book collection, and all my stamps, bank statements, royalty checks, and pretty much everything else that wasn't nailed down. One or two things I could understand, but when a guy takes everything, you've got to wonder. I guess, I'm trying pretty hard not to call him a dirty backstabbing thief and keep an open mind about it all, but maybe that's just because at this point, I just want my stuff back. I'm willing to let it go as an accident... or a joke... or whatever. So anyway, if later in the book you should see Crazy George dealing K'fr to eleven year old girls, punching little old ladies in the gut and stealing their retirement checks, or selling upcoming plot twists to the highest bidder, don't be surprised. And if you get the opportunity, you just might want to let him know that I'm onto him. Or better yet, just let him know that:

Crime does not pay!

And virtue is its own reward!!!

You might also want to remind him that I took him out of obscurity and gave him the chance to be a star. You'd think he'd be grateful.

OK.

Enough of that.

Just thinking about it gives me bad vibes. And speaking of vibes...

Oh, and did you notice that? Bet you didn't. It was another one of those masterful segues. I mean, sometimes I can't resist tooting my own horn, but back to the vibes...

Jeannette and me have really hit it off. We're seeing a lot more of each other these days -- and I mean, a lot more. True, it's in a courtroom at the restraining order hearings, but I'm getting a good feeling about it all. My lawyer seems to be on good terms with her lawyer, and I'm counting on this feeling of goodwill to rub off onto Jeannette as well.

Besides, I think the whole restraining order thing is just a gag, a bit of a show. You know, her playing hard to get. Everyone knows how standoffish fair Elvin maidens tend to be, so she's probably just playing hard to get.

And believe it or not, I think that's the personal news. But before we get back to the story, I did want to go over some pressing business, which just so happens to be another lawsuit. Specifically, I would like to address the JRRR Snuff 'n Puff lawsuit. First of all, no one ever intended copyright infringement disputes to be settled by lawyers in a court of law. It's simply not what our forefather's had in mind when they made the laws. So, if that eighty year old Snuff 'n Puff widow has any beef with me, we should settle it by the age old method of baseball bats at ten paces. Might is right and that sort of thing. I'm pretty sure I could take her. She wouldn't be so mouthy if she had to prove her wild allegations on the field of combat.

Celaphopod

You be da here bide challenged to defendeder of da
honors on da fields of da battles.

Where'd by,

Grog will Pummell Youse

Right! Lawyers it is and I don't want to hear any more of this field of combat, might is right, nonsense.

For those of you who did not understand the intricacies of the preceding, I should remind you that in the previous book of this very story (i.e. Book 1 of Book 2, Minataur Tails), I introduced a very original, very clever, and very much unhindered by previous copyright concerns, trio of nemesis that went by the name of the Nasty-Nasty-Ghouls, which was shortened to NAS-gh©uls™ because it's catchy, quicker to type, and that © thing in the middle just sort of l©©ks sp©©ky to me. Besides, I think you'll agree:

NAS-gh©ul™: it just sort of sounds... wraith-ish.

Anyway in Snuff 'n Puff's complaint, it is alleged that I stole... Stole! Me steal? I'm not a thief. I'm not the type of person who would add fictitious works of art to an insurance claim. I had the Eyes of Desolation on loan from the Mt. D©©m Museum. It is worth untold gazillions in gold and when Crazy George cleared me out, I only valued it at \$25K on my insurance claim, so you can see I'm trying to be fair and equitable.

Celli

I told you claiming one book was four was going to come back and bite you. They'll use that in court to show what a shady, shifty character you really are.

Eddy (apparently, the vindictive editor)

Whatever!

The point is, I am not the victim here! Or rather, that is the point. I am the victim here! A houseguest robbed me blind, stealing priceless works of art, and my publisher is withholding payment of my hard earned royalties because they are standing firm in their comical assertion that a book is whatever you bind together under one cover. I don't know where they get these outlandish ideas.

But back to the NAS-gh©uls™, I admit there is some surface resemblance... And mind you, I give this information up under protest. The fact that I am being forced to divulge key plot elements before their time in order to defend my honor will be included as part of my counter suit. Anyhow, I will grudgingly admit there are some trivial, minor, surface similarities between my NAS-gh©uls™ and JRRRR Snuff 'n Puff's Naz-gulls(?) No, that's not it. What were they called? Nazi Gulls? Heck, I don't know. Sort of tells you how memorable his characters were right there. Anyway, what I do know is that they all -- both, his and mine -- are undead creatures: kings or something, not sure exactly, but they're of royal blood. Truthfully, I'm not really all that sure about JRRRRR's creatures yet. I'm still laboring my way through that quagmire of boredom otherwise known as The Three Towers. Once I'm further along and have a better idea of what his creatures are all about, I'll have a better idea what the NAS-gh©uls™ are all about and whether they are kings, princes, pigeons, gulls, or whatever. But in the meantime, I can confirm one thing which they do have in common -- and which I assure you is merely a coincidence, one of those statistical flukes -- and that is that they both have some dealings (some important business to transact) in the South of Lang'don -- in one of those Shires. And that might sound suspicious, but in all fairness shire just means county, so it's not like we're talking about anywhere specific. It could be some territory, county, or shire, somewhere, anywhere smack dab in the Middle of the Earth for all I know. You can't claim the whole world for yourself and then cry copyright infringement. It just not cricket as they say in Lang'don -- at least, not any of the Shires I've been to.

Besides, I hate those little Hobbling creatures. I mean, I'm not saying the Hobbling Vortex isn't going to get utterly obliterated in this story, but that's most because I find that double negative thing terrible confusing and have no idea what I just said. Let's just say it seems very, very likely -- like, extremely likely -- that the NAS-gh©uls™ will hold a biker rally in the Hobbling Vortex

sometime in the very near future. And well, if every last one of those creepy Hobblings were to meet a horrible fate worse than death at that time, would that really be such a bad thing?

No. Just in case you're wondering, the answer to that particular question would be no.

But biker rally or not (the utter obliteration of the Hobblings or not), one thing you can be sure of is that no stupid, puny, inbred, mutant Hobbling is going to be carrying some stupid ring up Mt. D©©m to save the day. Ruby did the pendant thing in The Dragon Bound Quartet... And that, too, was like a totally different concept altogether. OK. First of all, it was a pendant, not a ring. And secondly, it was a totally different hill. It's like Nards Deep. You know how every kingdom seems to have a city, town, or locale named Nards Deep. Well, it's not like Nards Deep, Lang'don can sue Nards Deep, Kiss'wick just because Nards Deep, Lang'don came first. You just can't do it. It's the same with Mt. D©©m, any ole Shire, and the NAS-gh©uls™. To the uninitiated, they might sound sort of like some of the things JR wrote about, but the similarities are superficial. Once you peel back the identifying characteristics, they're not the same things at all.

Are we all clear on that?

Good.

I feel much better now and would like to thank you for humoring me. I just wanted to take a moment to clear the air, and debunk any bad information Snuff Daddy's people might be circulating about in the popular press. I mean, who knows? We might find that there are a few more similarities between the NAS-gh©uls™ and whatever that Snuff Dude called his creatures before we get to the end of our story. Because like I said, I'm in the middle of JR's series and I haven't finished watching Rocky XXII: King of the Ring, yet. As soon as I do, I'll know a lot more about MY story, MY creatures, and what it is exactly that the NAS-gh©uls™ are. And when that happens, I'll be sure to let you know right away. I'll just write it seamlessly into the story and you'll never know the difference. But until then, don't think just because

you've seen Lord of the King, like a bazillion times, you understand the NAS-gh©uls™, because they're totally different creatures, held under a different copyright, and created by a totally different author -- the one with blue worms dangling from his ears @ A-Totally-Different-Shire .Con.

1 #
On the Farm

The smell of pancakes fills the air -- rich, buttery, homemade pancakes. Take a good whiff.

It's another typical Saturday morning at the Swampgas compound -- Swampgas being the name of Ruby's mother's boyfriend. Look here. These are modern times and this here is a modern story.

To wit, Rachel Firehaven (Ruby's mother who has fiery red hair to match Ruby's own) and Roger Swampgas (a Troll from the other side) never bothered to get married. At 437 years old, Roger figured he was too young to get hitched, didn't really know if he was mature enough -- you know, if he was ready. And so without getting married, the two of them moved into the cottage that they had built together under the Lake Providence Bridge of which Roger is the proprietor.

And how many times do I have to say this? This is all covered in great depth and detail in the first book. I figure, if you haven't bought The Dragon Bound Quartet, yet, maybe you just don't want to know any of this stuff. But for all of you who have and therefore know what I'm talking about, all of this means that we -- and therefore, they -- are down by the magical pond where Ruby first met Grt.

Presently, Ruby is enjoying a nice hot bath while taking in the crisp morning air. Of course, the bathwater is pretty darn nasty looking. But then, if you had read that most marvelous of all tomes -- The Dragon Bound Quartet -- you would not be surprised by this, nor by the fact that Hazen Crots had taken over the yard --

especially the area surrounding the tub. This is the reason why the water is so dim, dark, and murky -- Hazen Crots. Of course, being magical bathwater, once you notice how really nasty the water looks, it has this way of suddenly looking marvelous clean and temptingly beautiful. So you could say the bathwater alternates between looking (and smelling) like pure delight and the opposite of that... whatever that might be. Look, work it out yourself.

While you're doing that, I'm sure Ruby will grab another handful of muck from the bottom of the tub and rub it into her hair, where it will join the matted down tangle of Hazen Crot twigs, leaves, and flowers that are already enmeshed in her hair. She looks exactly like you might imagine a tradition minded Bog Troll might look, if said Bog Troll were preparing for an important date. But don't worry. Ruby knows what she is doing. All this nastiness will disappear the moment Ruby gets out of the water. Hazen Crots are like that. One moment you're taking a bath in murky swamp water. And the next, you look like you just left the most exclusive salon in all the Seven Realms... which come to think of it, is exactly what Rachel uses the tub for five days a week: Mon-Fri, 9am - 3pm, appointments are strongly recommended. Ask for the Dragon Bound Special, and Rachel will knock 10% off your first hair treatment. And if you want to know what you'll be getting for your gold, take a gander at Ruby with all that muck in her hair.

Now, Ruby isn't really the exhibitionist type, so if you can pry your eyes away from the bathing beauty for a moment (and I promise it will be only a moment), you'll notice Grt and Clarence sitting a mere dozen feet away with their feet dangling in the spring. Grt looks just like a baby dragon. He isn't a baby dragon; he's a drag-goon. But the difference between the two is way too complicated to get into right now...

Fine, twist it out of me. As you might suspect, a baby dragon typically has a mother and a father who are both dragons. But Grt doesn't have a mother or a father, and although one of the parties responsible for his existence is The Dragon, the other is Ruby.

OK. Look. It's not what you're thinking...

Fine. I'm just going to stop right there. It's really complicated and it's another one of those things that's described in excruciating detail in another book that I keep on mentioning. In fact, some folks think that's pretty much what that whole other book is about. But what do I know? I mean, I only wrote the darn thing.

Anyway, the point is: Grt's feet are dangling in a pool of water that is bubbling-up strips of Manna. Manna, you say? What's that? You kind of glossed over it earlier, and I wasn't paying attention. Could you repeat it again, because I think it might be sort of important to understanding our present story.

Well, if you put it like that while smiling and saying pretty please, I'd be happy to oblige. But I warn you, I'm probably going to be a little long winded, so just remember: you asked for it.

Let's see, then...

How to explain.

Ah...

If you've ever been to one of my crowded, standing room only book signings, then you know I like to bring a little something special along for my many adoring fans. Usually what I bring along are promo strips of manna. Manna looks -- and the key word here is looks -- amazingly like 12-24" long, 1-1.5" wide, pieces of satiny colored ribbon -- say the type of ribbon you might use to wrap up a present to give to your favorite author at his next book signing. He did, after all, travel all the way across the vortexes just to see you. The least you can do is kick him down a little swag or something. And no, telling him where he went wrong with the plot or pointing out yet another grammatical error (that is really the editor's job to catch) isn't really the gift so many folks seem to think that it is.

These are probably the same folks who think the color of Manna is important, but it's not. It's like the color of packaging ribbons. Does the color of the wrapping ever have anything to do with what's inside? I mean, the number of people who actually

coordinate the wrapping on the outside of a present with what's actually on the inside is amazingly small. I mean, they are remarkably few and far between. Well, the same goes with wizards and magicians. No one color coordinates anymore. If they did, Crazy George would always be using Black Manna, but he doesn't. He's far more partial to pink, says it gives his spells a light and airy feel to them -- you know, that it takes the edge off of being turned into a frog.

The main point in that was: Manna can be any color. But even after saying that, I will admit that most of the Manna coming out of Ruby's pool is red, pink, white, silver, or some mixture thereof -- and this isn't such a bad thing because some collectors have been known to pay through the nose for one of those ultra-rare Hot Pink Metallic numbers.

Anyhow, believe it or not, you could make some pretend Manna for yourself just by getting some packaging ribbon and cutting it to size. Of course, it wouldn't be Real Manna. Real Manna is only available from an authorized Manna retailer like the MDM (Mt. D©©m Magic, Inc.) -- or if it's a classy place, in the bookmarker section of your favorite store, which would be where you bought this illustrious tome, I'm thinking.

But as I think about it, that would only be true if you bought Minataur Tails at a really classy store. And by really classy, I -- of course -- mean a store that stocks Manna Brand Manna©. Sure, it's sort of circular, but most of your better logical arguments are. Anyway, in these really classy, super snazzy stores, you can always find one of those big roundabout carousel thingies on which Manna Brand Manna© is displayed. And not only can you get Manna Brand Manna© in every color of the rainbow, but you can get them pre-embossed with your favorite witty sayings culled from the Dragon Bound series. Sayings like:

Grt Wins Again

Genuine MDM Manna

And my personal favorite (and Ruby's recipe for working magic)

Visualize Your Goal, Figure out the Steps, and Do Them.

So I guess what I am saying is, although you could maybe make some Manna by cutting up a little bit of packaging ribbon, it wouldn't be Manna Brand Manna©. It wouldn't go up in value over the years as only Dragon Bound collectables are sure to do, and it wouldn't set you back \$24.95 for a three-pack...

What? You think \$24.95 is too much? We're talking genuine Dragon Bound collectables here? Well, I'll let marketing work out the price. The point is, if you made some imitation Manna for yourself out of strips of ribbon, they'd make excellent bookmarks and you'd be the center of attention at your school, local Dragon Bound book club, or any convention I bother to attend, but they wouldn't come stamped with one of those UPC thingies, the author wouldn't get any money, and in the end it would just be a short piece of non-magical ribbon and not Manna.

So come to think of it, I was totally and completely wrong. You can't make Manna, at all. I mean, Manna and especially Manna Brand Manna© is much more than a mere decorating ribbon, a clever marking tie-in, or a way to pinch the paying public for yet another copper. No. Beyond all that, Manna Brand Manna© is the sole source of magic throughout the Seven Realms. And like I mentioned previously, Ruby has a natural Manna seep in her own front yard.

Lucky girl that Ruby.

But enough about Manna. Let's get back to Grt. He's swishing his feet around playfully in the Manna pool. He's munching on a strip of Manna brand Manna© (accept no imitations) just like he usually does. And, he's is listening to Clarence read a story.

Clarence, by the way, is a Boogey Man. This means he looks like he's made out of melting wax (as apposed to melted wax, as was misprinted in an earlier edition), and he can scare other people by force of will -- sometimes right out of their pants -- this last is typically done to humorous effect, I might add. Beyond that, he

lives in Ruby's closet, and this cameo is about it for him in this book. He's not going on the adventure, but that doesn't mean he doesn't get a talking role.

"Oh, Oh, Oh... Hi there readers," Clarence says as he peers over the top of the book he is reading. It's a rare hardbound copy of The Dragon Bound Quartet -- signed by the author himself. And although they already know the story by heart, both Grt and Clarence have been laughing themselves silly all morning long as they reread their favorite parts. Good books... Wait. What am I talking about? Scratch that... Great books are like that.

"Oh, Oh... Excuse me for a second," Clarence says to the readers as he notices Ruby is about to get out of the tub. "Oh, Oh... Let me get you a towel, Ruby," he offers gallantly -- like the gentleman that he is -- as he rushes over to where Ruby is and unfolds a towel in front of her, sort of destroying the view for the rest of us.

Clarence can be helpful that way, IF you want to call that sort of thing helpful.

And since that's where the reader's attention is being focused at the moment, Grt flies over to where Ruby is, as well. And noticing her new hairdo remarks, "Rubies perty."

"Oh, Oh... My yes. Oh, my yes," Clarence agrees wholeheartedly with his trademark stutter, just as Ruby stands up...

...to reveal that she is fully clothed.

Ruby pauses for a moment to let some of the water run down her clothes before toweling off (both to let any censors know that she's been dressed the entire time and because that's the proper way to take a Hazen Crot bath). Of course, at this stage of the game, toweling off is a bit premature. I mean, she's still standing in the bathwater. So when she finally takes a step out of the tub, water gushes out of her Martingales. And then, after another step, and another moment, she is completely dry. This is a magical land folks -- and we're on a tight schedule.

But magic or not, schedule or not, it does make sense to just pause for a second and take in the Consort in all her royalty. Ruby looks simply marvelous, glamorous, and/or beautiful -- take your pick (or pick all three). And except for the jeans, the t-shirt, and the absence of a tiara, she looks exactly as you might imagine a fairy tale princess would look.

And now, with the reintroduction of Ruby complete (and without worrying too much about how she got home from school, OK -- she probably took Igor's bus. But that aside) and her bath done, Ruby inhales deeply and smells the intoxicating scent of pancakes wafting through the air -- those very same pancakes that started this here chapter eons ago. And I think Ruby speaks for every last person on the crew when she says, "I'm hungry."

"Grt hungees, too," Grt agrees wholeheartedly.

And with his easily recognizable, "Oh, Oh, Oh," Clarence has to admit that, "A bite to eat would be good."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Roger the Troll asks as he comes lumbering down the path from the bridge, taking a well-deserved break from work, "It's breakfast time."

Take a whiff. Smell those pancakes.

I mean, this is a classic example of why it pays to write in present tense. If this was past tense, it'd be all:

He took a whiff, and smelled those pancakes...

All past tense and very sad. Why? Because the pancakes would be gone.

No! It's much -- much -- better to:

Take a whiff.

Sniff. Sniff. Sniff.

And, smell those pancakes.

Sniff. Sniff. Sniff.

That is so much better. And if you'll excuse me, I'm not in this next scene, and I want to grab a plate of hotcakes before they all disappear.

I recommend, you do the same.

Sniff. Sniff. Sniff.
Just follow your nose.

2 #
Just Follow Your Nose

When it happened four months ago, Ruby's fifteenth birthday party was the talk of the town. It was the gala event of the season. All the major media outlets covered the party and Pixie Life magazine had devoted an entire issue to the affair along with everything you might ever want to know about The Lady Ruby Consort to the Dragon, herself.

Now, Nellie would tell you that she wasn't much for following the antics of royalty or living her life vicariously through others. I mean, if you asked her, she'd tell you Pixie Life usually concentrated on practical things like wing care moisturizing techniques, how to open-up your pint sized home so it would seem welcoming to a Giant, and detailed instructions on how to prepare exquisite Caramelized Rose Petal Soup with a Hint of Ginger, guaranteed to satisfy the palate of even the haughtiest of Elvin Lords. But then, of course, when push came to shove and Nellie needed to find Ruby to save Buddy (remember him?), Nellie had absolutely no difficulty in locating a well worn copy of the Lady Ruby issue of Pixie Life, seeing as how she kept it on her night stand and had read it pretty much every night before falling asleep for the last few months.

Now, I mention this only so as to explain how it is exactly that Nellie came to be holding a copy of Pixie Life magazine while hovering over the Lake Providence Bridge. Believe it or not, Nellie was trying to determine where the Lady Ruby's cottage was located by looking at the pictures in the aforementioned special issue of Pixie Life and comparing them to the landscape before her. Needless to say, Nellie wasn't having any luck. She'd been flying around since late last night. And in a frantic rush to find the Lady

Ruby before it was too late, she already had flown back and forth across the bridge a dozen times.

The cause of her anxiety was fairly straightforward, as was the ruthless simplicity and brutally efficiency of The Dragon's favorite form of justice. Or in other words (in case that was a bit too obtuse), if things went the way they usually went in the Realms, Buddy would be lucky to live through the coming day... if he wasn't already dead. So, Nellie had no time to lose.

It was very disheartening to think about. It just about broke her heart. And as Nellie lowered the magazine and looked around one final time, she had to admit, she was stumped. She couldn't figure out where that Lady Ruby's stupid little lakeside cottage with detached Manna-Spring was hidden.

And then, just as it seemed all was lost (and the K'fr started to wear off -- and thereby free her senses), the aroma of freshly grilled pancakes hit the little Pixie square in the stomach.

Nellie hadn't eaten since before she'd met up with Buddy. How many days had it been? Two? Three? Four? She couldn't remember. But one thing she did know, she was starving. She wouldn't be able to search for the Lady Ruby if she passed out from hunger, now would she? So as if in a dream, as if caught in the inexplicable flow of storybook magic, Nellie let her body follow the scent of those heavenly pancakes down into the ravine.

Was that real maple syrup she smelled? And cinnamon? She thought she would just ask whoever was cooking those wonderful flapjacks if they knew where the Lady Ruby's cottage was and if maybe she could have a pancake... or two... or three... or four.

3

Mmm! Pancakes
(Got Yours? I Got Mine!!!)

Pixies in general and Nellie in particular aren't all that big on manners or knocking, so it should come as no surprise to learn that

when Nellie discovered where Ruby's cottage was, she flew in right through an open window.

And when Rachel called out, "Whose next?"

Nellie had simply said, "I am," as she held out an empty platter.

To which Rachel had replied without skipping a beat (and you had to give her credit for this), "You must be one of our new neighbors."

When you get right down to it, a neighborhood is an arbitrary sort of thing, so Nellie didn't see the point in correcting Rachel. I mean, she came from a neighboring county, so that sort of made them neighbors. Besides -- and much more importantly -- Nellie's stomach was saying 'Pancakes! Now!' and that spoke in trumps over anything else.

Soon, Rachel and the rest were watching in awe as Nellie gobbled through two giant stacks of pancakes. Some creatures were lucky, Rachel guessed. The Pixie had just eaten a quarter of her weight in pancakes. How could anyone keep their figure looking so slender while eating like that everyday? Pixies sure must have high metabolisms, she reasoned.

And so it went, as Nellie ate her way through another two stacks of pancakes, until Nellie finally pushed her plate away, sat back, and relaxed.

What else was there for Rachel to say but, "You sure can eat."

Her hunger satisfied, Nellie looked around to orient herself and get her bearings. Everyone seated around the table had already introduced themselves. There was Rachel, Roger, Ruby, and the rest, but there had been no need for formalities. Nellie knew them all by sight. Everyone did. Even if she hadn't been studying their pictures in Pixie Life for the last four months, she certainly would have recognized them from the television coverage of the coronation. How could she not?

And then it hit Nellie -- the realization of her good fortune. I mean, not only had she found the Lady Ruby, but she had actually just finished eating breakfast with her! How great was that? They were like friends, best buds now, right? Oh (to borrow a transitional phrase from Clarence), it was too good to be true.

I mean, right there, right across the table, almost eating off the same dish was from Nellie was Ruby Consort to The Dragon. And except for the jeans and t-shirt, the Consort looked just like she always did in those magazine photographs -- glamorous. Grt, her drag-goon sidekick, was even sitting next to her. Grt, of course, was still waffling down pancakes. Now there was an eating machine. And next to Grt was Roger. Roger was a Troll and as such fancied dried bugs and other icky stuff on his pancakes. Nellie could only grimace at the thought. There was no doubt about it. Trolls didn't know the difference between food and garbage. I mean, here was a creature that thought bog-slime was a delicacy. But Nellie didn't have time to think about that as her eyes continued to dance around the table from Roger, to Ruby's mom Rachel, and finally to Clarence, the Boogey Man with a face like melting wax (a much more horrifying sight indeed, then mere melted wax, I think you will agree).

Anyhow, kicking off the conversation again after the flavor text had run its course, Rachel said, "We haven't seen you before. Have you been in these woods long?"

Now, Nellie hadn't really given it a lot of thought as to what exactly she would say to the Lady Ruby after she had found her. She just knew Ruby was kind hearted and would certainly be distraught to learn that The Dragon was going to kill a Minataur -- any Minataur, even a Minataur as flawed as Buddy.

"Uh," Nellie said, stalling for time as she tried to find the right words. And then, she hit upon the perfect plan. She would lie! Of course! It was obvious! She was a Pixie. Lying was one of the things they did best. When you get right down to it, she was almost embarrassed to admit that she had been rolling around the idea of telling the truth.

“Um, uh,” Nellie started. “The Dragon told me to tell you that he wants you to go to the Rigor Pass Jail and grant a pardon to Buddy the Minataur. You know, if you don’t mind.” Nellie said all of this quite unconvincingly, I might add, as she cast her eyes about frantically, wondering if anybody would catch her in her little white lie -- more of a fib actually.

But whatever you wanted to call Nellie’s blatant aberration of the truth, the answer to the question of whether anyone was going to catch her in her deception was yes. Yes, indeed. Somebody was going to catch her in her little distortion of the facts.

We know this because there was a sudden knock on the door, which caused Nellie to just about jump through the ceiling -- due to its unexpected suddenness and all.

Now, Minataur Tails is the second book -- i.e. the first sequel -- in the Dragon Bound series (got to keep the fans on their toes, don’t you know). Anyhow the point is, it’s called THE DRAGON BOUND series. The Dragon was the first word. Well, the first two words, actually, but who’s counting?

I mean, if you knew him -- The Dragon -- then you’d know that HE didn’t want to get a big head about it or anything, but you would think that the fact that it was called THE DRAGON Bound series might imply that he -- The Dragon -- might have sort of standing in the series. I mean, they didn’t call it the Pixie Bound series, or the Ruby Firehaven series. They could have, you know. But they didn’t.

It’s an odd bit of trivia, that. One of those little known facts that true die-hard fans like to collect. But the first book in the series (The -- countlessly aforementioned -- Dragon Bound Quartet), had originally been given the working title of Ruby Firehaven and/or Ruby. Now, obviously they hadn’t gone with that. It was just a working title. And obviously in the end, they -- meaning me (under The Dragon’s explicit orders) -- had decided to call it The -- Dragon -- Bound -- Quartet -- available wherever Manna brand Manna© is sold.

But rather than pursuing another advertising opportunity, let's review that title again... because in the end, name recognition is really what the advertising game is all about. So, to recap, the title of that award winning first book in this series is called: The Dragon... bound quartet. If you'll notice, there's no Pixie in that there title. No Ruby. No Grt. Not even a Crazy George or a Celaphopod -- Happy Go Lucky, or otherwise. There is only one character whose name appears in the title. Based on this, it might be fair to assume that HE was the title character, that HE was the star, that HE was the principle lead, and without HIM the story could not hope to make any sense, whatsoever. And although technically not implied by the title, you would probably also be safe in assuming that this particular character was the ruler -- despotic or otherwise -- of all the Seven Realms. And just in case you haven't been paying attention, that character's name in question was, is, and shall ever be The Dragon: that's T-H-E Dragon. Not mister. Not sir. But, T-H-E Dragon.

Got it?

'Cause it really isn't that difficult. The Dragon -- the aforementioned star (the star, I tell you!) of the Dragon Bound series was at the door of his Consort's -- i.e. the Lady Ruby's -- house.

And really, just in case the point hadn't been pounded to dust, just in case there was the slightest bit of doubt in anybody's mind, he just wanted to make it perfectly clear, crystal clear that she was his Consort and not the other way around. Which is to say, he was most decidedly not her dragon.

Anyway, these were typical of the thoughts, which coursed through the mind of the almighty ruler of worlds as he stood before HIS!!! Consort's door. And although he had wanted to make a big dramatic entrance, even he knew it was probably a little bit late for that -- NOW!

Still, he wanted to do what he could and make it as dramatic as possible. He thought maybe he'd just poof into the room or barge through the front door like he owned the place, but in the end

he couldn't bring himself to do it. The truth of the matter was, it was the first time he was going to meet Ruby's parents, and he was a little nervous. It didn't really make any sense, but then nothing in this stupid franchise seemed to make all that much sense. I mean, he was a dragon. But not just A dragon but THE Dragon -- a name and a title that by this point he hoped had been made very-very, overwhelmingly, redundantly clear.

The thing was, he was a star. He was the ruler of all the Seven Realms, and he was The Dragon. He didn't normally knock on doors, unless you meant the Knock on Doors magic spell. Of course, if he'd decided to go the spell route, he'd probably be a lot more likely to go with the Blast the Freaking Door into a Million Zillion Pieces as it was more his style. I mean, he was The Dragon, and he had an image to uphold. Nonetheless, he knocked on the door.

"It sure is busy this morning," Rachel commented as she got up to open the door.

And believe it or not, she did not recognize the young man waiting on the other side. I don't know, maybe you would. You see, it wasn't The Dragon she saw so much as Trent -- one of The Dragon's alter egos. Trent cut a sort of anti-hero-ish, renegade figure in the doorway. He had one of those black dragon tattoos -- that all the kids seem to be getting these days -- which covered most of his neck and face, and beyond that, what you noticed most was dark outfit which he was wearing -- black from head to toe with nary a contrasting color in sight. Oh, he also had like a thousand empty scabbards covering his body. You probably know the type -- probably exactly like that first LARK character you had way back when, where the whole backside of your character sheet was filled up with secondary weapons that your character absolutely never used. Well, Trent's like that, only given half the chance, he actually uses his weapons -- all of them. But then I should point out, that because of the Weapons Ban and all, all of the scabbards are apparently empty.

Anyhow, this man, this Trent, this twenty year-old boy was an alter ego personification of The Dragon. If you wanted to, I suppose, you could think of Trent as The Dragon in disguise. Or perhaps more accurately, you could imagine that Trent was a disguise, which The Dragon wore on occasion. Yeah, that seems a little more accurate.

Oh, and then -- just to give you a clearer picture, a better idea, as it were -- about who The Dragon really is, I should mention that Trent was the type of guy who tied his shoes with diamond edged razor wire just so he would be able to use them as garrotes were he ever to be taken prisoner by the Nelk. Got it? What I'm saying is, the buttons on Trent's shirt were smoke grenades, specially constructed strands of wire woven into his hair could be used as homing devices, radio communication devices, or extra mana to be used in an emergency. The thingies that kept his shirt collars straight -- whatever they're called -- were actually throwing darts. His belt buckle doubled as a grappling hook. And his shoes were packed with hi-explosives should the need ever arise. But like I said, even he -- even The Dragon himself -- was not immune to the Weapons Ban, so instead of being decked out from head to toe with a thousand and one different ways to kill a Man, Goblin, or preferable a Hobbling, Trent was simply wearing a thousand and one empty weapons compartments -- scabbards, if you will. They all sort of blended into his clothing, though. I mean, to even detect that massive (but empty) two-handed sword scabbard that was strapped to his back, somebody would have had to make two back-to-back apposed critical-success to detect hidden weapon rolls. And since even understanding something like that takes a critical-success against your literary interpretation skill (and/or to be a die-hard gamer), I really only tell all of this to you -- yes, you dear reader -- as a courtesy. Because if you were like a second level city guard in some foreign land, there is absolutely no way you'd notice that he was a walking weapons platform.

But once again, I seem to have gone off on a tangent -- and one without any marketing potential, at that -- so let's return to the

story. But how? I know, maybe someone should say something to break the awkward silence.

“Pancakes! Mmmm, they sure do smell good,” Trent The Dragon said enthusiastically, whilst getting into his role and hamming it up.

“I’ll get you a plate,” Rachel replied eagerly. She was following a new recipe that she had found in Cottage Life -- not really as classy as Pixie Life, but then Rachel wasn’t a Pixie and lived in a cottage, so it seemed more, you know, appropriate. Anyhow, the magazine (Cottage Life, you know, just in case you’d forgotten) had said the recipe would bring the neighbors running. She had figured that was just some sort of clever tag line -- something to spice the article up -- so Rachel hadn’t taken the warning seriously. I mean, she had simply interpreted it as fluffy flavor text.

Ha!

Ha! I say.

Nothing in a magical filled fantasy world is ever simply fluffy flavor text. Come on folks. This is art. This is magic.

This is literature.

Everything has a plan. I mean, I don’t simply ramble on endlessly about the first random thing that pops into my head.

OK. Maybe I do.

Anyway, after a half hour it was also clear that Trent and Grt had gotten into some sort of macho pancake eating contest thing.

“Yum,” Trent said evenly.

“Dees Good,” Grt agreed merrily.

“Another round?” Trent asked as if to dare the little reptile.

“Yes, please,” Grt said oblivious to the challenge -- and on and on it went.

Finally Rachel had run out of ingredients. “Sorry guys, that’s the last of them.”

And so, much relieved from having to face the embarrassment of losing a pancake eating contest to a creature half his size who may or may not have even known what was going on, Trent pushed his chair away from the table as he tried to give his gut those all important extra few inches. “Your mom is a great cook, Ruby,” he announced to the room at large once he had gotten comfortable.

“Thank you,” Rachel replied.

“Those pancakes are just a bonus, though,” Trent said as he paused for a dramatic moment (or two) before he asked Ruby point blank, “So? Do you want to go off on another adventure for me? Or should I just kill the Minataur?”

Ruby was predictably aghast.

Trent shrugged. “You’re the Consort. This is your job. Look, in the old days this Buddy character wouldn’t even be alive. The Rigor Pass PD would have just gunned him down in the street. He’s a loose cannon, out of control.” The Dragon paused again for a moment as he considered it -- all. “Death’s too good for him really. But then, I’ve never been into the whole torture thing.”

“Why are you like this?” Ruby asked incredulously.

Trent searched his face with his tongue. “What? Do I have syrup on my face?”

“The Seven Realms has some of the nicest, friendliest, loving creature’s in all the vortexes in it,” Ruby continued. “Why can’t you be more like them?”

“What like Sm©rks™?” The Dragon said with obvious disdain. “I don’t think so. Look, it’s not as cut and dry as you’d like it to be. Sorry.” And then without warning, he suddenly stood up. “Are you in or not? Maybe you would like to talk to this Buddy character before I kill him, or maybe you have something better to do? You know, maybe algebra homework or something?”

(Color text? I don’t think so.)

Ruby knew she would be in. The Dragon had some rough edges -- that was for sure. But he had granted her Weapons Ban,

and he had outlawed K'fr without a moment's hesitation. Ruby knew both decries were made solely for her benefit, based solely on her will as the Consort. Neither was the type of thing The Dragon would have done on his own. Who knew what other positive changes she could make for the Realms if she took The Dragon up on his offer?

Besides, she'd been waiting for another adventure ever since the last one ended. High School was nice and all, but it wasn't like touring around the Seven Realms on the back of a dragon (namely, The Dragon).

"Let me grab my dress," Ruby called as she jumped up from the table returning mere moment later as she pulled a green emerald-studded evening dress over her jeans and t-shirt. Then she checked her waist belt to make sure the two bags she had woven out of manna were there. And then, after wiggling her toes inside her nice, warm, dry, and super-super comfy Martingales, she took hold of Grt's hand.

"Ready, Grt?" she asked.

Grt stood tall, made a big show of checking the Bag of Manna Holding, which was securely slung across his chest at all times, and called out like a Corporal reporting for duty, "Grt readies, Rubies!"

"If you're all set, then?" The Dragon asked dryly.

Ruby nodded that she was.

"Wonderful pancakes and the company was divine," Trent said graciously before bowing slightly. Then, with a snap of his fingers -- curiously similar to how Crazy George might, but without the comic unforeseen consequences* -- Trent transported Ruby, Grt, Nellie, and himself all the way into the next chapter -- without so much as a puff of smoke, gentle breeze, or a cheesy Hasta La Vista Baby.

*Um, yeah. So like, after that big long lecture on flavor text, I should mention that sometimes flavor text is just that -- flavor text. Which is to say, I've been hanging out with both The Dragon

and Crazy George for a long time now; and seeing as how they both work magic, they understandably have a few things (i.e. quirks) in common -- you know, like a mutual animosity towards one another, and things like that. Of course, some folks assume that animosity thing is a cover. I mean, you can't reason with those crazy conspiracy theory kooks. But for everybody else, let me come right out and say it: The Dragon and Crazy George are not in any way related. They are not the same person, character, or whatever. Or at least if they are, I don't know about it... and I'm pretty sure, they don't know about either.

Of course, all of us know deep down inside that there is absolutely no better way to increase the level of speculation about any given conspiracy theory than to try to discredit it. But still, trust me: The Dragon and Crazy George are not one and the same.

OK. I admit it. Just like everyone else, I've had my doubts in the past about how maybe Crazy George just might be The Dragon in disguise, but not anymore. I'm over it.

But, you? I don't know. You're maybe just beginning to have your doubts. Still, don't say I didn't warn you and try to dissuade you, or get all uppity and annoyed with me when you finally realize that what I'm saying now is true and it's not some sort of elegant set-up.

Look, I'll even disclaim it a third time -- you know that third magical disclaimer, three's a charm -- so you know that it's like rock solid, golden, and true. Neither The Dragon nor Crazy George is an alter-ego of the other or anything like that. And I swear, I'm not playing with words here or anything.

So case closed.

All you have to do now is get that erroneous thought out of your head and move on, because it simply isn't true.

Honest. Celaphopod's honor, and all that.

4

On the Wings of A Dragon
(Who was in no way related to Crazy George.)

(Before I begin, I would just like to point out that one of the reasons you can tell The Dragon and Crazy George aren't the same person is because no one in their right mind would ride on Crazy George's back while he was a mile in the sky -- no one. But The Dragon, that's a different story.)

(And really, if you're in the mood, you can deconstruct that last statement however you want, but why bother? Crazy George and The Dragon are not one and the same. Don't believe what you read on those Blogs.)

(Are we all fine with that? Good. Then let's pick it up where we left off.)

The wind blew through Ruby's hair. She was sitting on The Dragon (who was not Crazy George!) in that comfy spot where the neck joins the shoulders as she held onto Grt, who was sitting in front of her, while Nellie drifted behind them.

Strangely, Nellie wasn't holding on. She was just sort of lazily flapping her wings as The Dragon's wake carried her along.

Here, this might make things easier. Though in truth, I don't possibly see how it could:

If Ruby's position was defined by $g(x)=x$, where $g(x)$ follows the curve of The Dragon's flight;

Then Grt's position would be defined as $g(x)=x-1$

While Nellie's position would be defined by $g(x-1)=x+1$

Or at least that's what Crazy George said it would be back when we were still on talking terms. Look, if you really want to know the correct formula, just ask The Dragon. He knows this sort of stuff. I mean, as they flew through the air, The Dragon was computing $g(x-1)=x+1$ for Nellie, working on a chess problem, composing the lyrics to a sonnet, and working on some subtle changes to the tax code, so he could really put the screws to Crazy

George next year. Don't even ask me how he and Crazy George got into this feud thing in the first place.

(Or why, given that they are obviously feuding, some folks continued to insist that the one is a "mirrored reflection" of the other, whatever that's supposed to mean.)

Of course now that I think about it, I guess it all goes back to the first book -- you know, when all Crazy George wanted to do was go dragon hunting, and The Dragon (being only human, and all [so to speak]) ended up taking it personally. Anyway, that's not where I was headed. Nor was I going to go into how The Dragon seems to take perverse delight in donning a disguise, inciting rebellion amongst his own troops, and then squashing the insurgents mercilessly -- even though when you get right down to it, they were only following his orders in the first place.

Anyhow, that's all too complicated (and provided you understood what I just said, might actually sort of imply that Crazy George is in fact The Dragon), so I'm just not going to get into it. Instead, I'm going to point out that Ruby, Grt, and Nellie were flying along with The Dragon, and then, so I don't have to cover it again, mention offhand that the exact seating arrangement wasn't really that important.

I mean, Ruby didn't have to solve an algebra problem to know where she was. She was on the back of a dragon -- and not just any old dragon, but The Dragon -- so Ruby was basically pretty darn happy (stoked, I believe is the type of term she might use). Grt was with Ruby, so he was happy (and/or stoke'd'ered). While Nellie for her part was just hoping they didn't fly too high, because she might have had wings and all, but heights sort of gave her the heebie-jeebies and she had some motion sickness issues, so she wasn't really all that happy even if saying she was happy would have been more poetic.

Still, what do you want?

I'm not here to lie to you, by say, trying to pass off Crazy George as The Dragon as some people might (even if stoking said flames of said controversy might actually sell a few more books).

Anyhow, to kill some time and to change the subject, The Dragon flew under Roger's bridge -- right between the pylons down by the water. He then did a barrel roll over the bridge, looped around, skimmed the traffic, and finally hugged the curve of the pavement as it followed the highway into Rigor Pass. He flew very quickly. Apparently those few trick maneuvers had taken more time than he had bargained for, so he was trying to make it up on the straightaway. Needless to say, the wind rushed past and Ruby rejoiced in the euphoria of speed, while Nadia just sort of hung on tight and endured it -- in a figurative sort of way.

This was probably a wise idea, because The Dragon -- being the kook that he is -- decided to fly sideways and upside down as he grazed the rooftops over downtown Rigor Pass -- almost exactly as if he were trying to rid himself of a Pixie hitchhiker. Which is to say:

If $Y=1$ denotes the skyline of Rigor Pass;

And a Pixie is carried helplessly along at $g(x-1)=x+1$, given that $g(x-1)=|g(x-1)|$ for all values of x ;

How might a Pixie wish to adjust her flight path in relation to $g(x)$ if she wished to preserve life and limb?

Oddly, Nellie didn't do the math. Instead, she screamed and tried her best to avoid becoming road kill or whatever the flying equivalent of a flattened pancake is.

Her screams alerted the occasional Troll or Gnome to The Dragon's passing overhead, and being the good natured citizens that their kind are, they waived to Nellie and the gang as they flew by. But for the most part, The Dragon zipped through the city before anyone knew he had passed -- all the while continuing to flap his wings as he increased his speed.

As he often does whenever he takes Ruby for a ride (see TDBQ, The Book of George [Coincidence? I think not!]), The Dragon chose to follow the slope of Mt. D©©m to its peak, where

he launched himself straight up into the sky. From there, they quickly cleared the atmosphere and soon were in outer space. They knew this because the wind that was madly rushing by had turned cold. To stay warm, Ruby hugged Grt close, while Nellie -- having finally figuring out that the only way to fight fire was with fire -- adjusted her position towards the limit of $g(x-dx)=x+dx$, whatever the blasted heck that was supposed to mean! But as the only one who could do the math was too busy flapping his wings, the problem would have to go unsolved for now.

And still The Dragon continued to flap his enormous wings, gain altitude, and pick up speed. Soon, they could not talk over the roar of the wind, complain about the unsolved mathematical query before them, or take the time to address the age old problem of breathing in an ever thinning atmosphere without wearing the appropriate headgear or casting the proper spell.

And although their faces were starting to sting from the occasional speck of stray glitter dust, which hit them, The Dragon soared ever high. Following his instincts, he aimed for the second star on the right and kept on till dawn...

But dawn did not come. Rather, a wall of stars loomed up ahead -- almost like the opposite of a blanket thrown across the night sky or exactly like one of those glow in the dark night-sky star painting kits. Man, I love those things. I've covered every wall in my house with those glow in the dark stickers. There were some (ah, how you say?) domestic discussions concerning this, but after I added the colored lights (ala Gra'gl Mass), it was agreed the place looked, "Pretty darn snazzy," even if I had to say so myself, which apparently I did.

Anyway, in the meantime -- somewhere during that last aside, I suppose -- Ruby and the gang had roared past the wall of stars and into the pitch blackness beyond, which, as a point of reference, is sort of how your house might look an hour before dawn, if you couldn't afford to pay your utility bill and the electricity had been turned off. But once again, I digress.

Oblivious to the tangential nature of the narrative or the answer to $\tan(\cosine(g(x-1)))$ where x is a non-negative positive integer, Ruby and the gang dove into the deep dark recesses of the night -- where the air had grown warm, sticky, and thick. The place smelled of death... and burning plastic with just a hint of blueberry chewing gum tossed in for flavor (of the literary variety, don't you know).

Sensing it was time, The Dragon arched backwards and as one, the foursome dove smack dab into the middle of the Sm©rk™ Vortex. And as they dived, a smoky barren landscape slowly came into view, full of burnt houses, broken picket fences, and blobs of grossly distorted and melted Sm©rks™. But then, I'm pretty sure that you must have already seen the TV footage on this.

"This is what happens when your enemies find out you have put down the sword," The Dragon roared in a booming voice all dramatic like. But oddly, he did not pause for dramatic effect or wait for a reply. Instead, he immediately dove into a pillar of choking smoke from one of them many funeral-cairns lining the desolate plane and used it as a sort of dimensional door. Moments later they emerged into a new vortex, which was amazingly similar to the one they had only just left, the only difference being that the pools of melted plastic were pink instead of blue.

Seconds after their arrival into Tr©ll-Tr©ll™ Land, The Dragon dove into another rising column of smoke and traveled through it as he had through the first to yet another vortex where they saw the charred misshapen remains of some green race scattered about.

Without pause, The Dragon dived at the ground. And crashing through, they emerged in a new vortex that looked something like a field of cotton in full bloom. The fluff was oddly warm looking, soft, and inviting -- until one realized that the white snow-like material that blew this way and that in great billowy drifts came from the eviscerated remains of the stuffed animals that lay all about. And just to nail this last point home, they soon

passed the skin of a Teddy Bear whose skin had been strung between two poles -- sort as a warning to others -- its hide scorched and burnt.

“Who would do this?” Ruby asked, but she had seen the reports: some dark riders, “NAS-gh©uls™,” the papers were calling them. A debate was raging in the editorial pages, fair use or copyright infringement. Some HR Huffy Puff Puff’s widow was upset about the entire thing saying, “It didn’t show proper respect.” But what did she know?

Ignoring both Ruby’s question and the author’s random asides, The Dragon flew upwards, towards the sun, suddenly splashing through the molten magma of its surface into yet another vortex, where they emerged from a great bonfire under a swirling orange sky, which faithful readers (of TDBQ) will recognize as belonging to the world of the Citadel.

But it was just a show, just a cameo, just a tease -- nothing more than a remembrance of old and another excuse to plug that most glorious of tomes (TBDQ, that is -- ask for it by name). For no sooner had they arrived under the swirling orange sky of the Citadel, then The Dragon arched his back, angled upwards, and surged towards the chaotic heavens, as he called to the riders on his back, “You’ll like this.”

But Nellie was pretty sure she wasn’t going to like it. (In fact seeing as how she was slowly getting sick, Nellie was by now very sure that she wasn’t going to like it.) So, she hopefully suggested, “You can let me off anywhere.”

Unfortunately, the crash of thunder drowned out her request as lightning erupted around them. The wind cut back and forth switching directions in an unpredictable frenzy -- as it is prone to do on the edge of Chaos -- while rain fell upwards and gravity forgot its name (that’s why I keep mine written down on a piece of paper, but don’t mind me).

While on The Dragon’s back, a roaring wind filled the senses. And swirling orange, red, and yellow mists surrounded the riders

as The Dragon carried them higher... ever higher... and higher... until they had finally broken through, once more.

Here the air was calm, quiet, and serene. It tasted cool, crisp, and clean. An endless expanse of vortexes spread out beneath them like a drawing of a sixth-dimensional circle just like you might find in an advanced geometry textbook. (Or so, I am told. I seem to have misplaced mine.)

But one can easily imagine that it was kind of, sort of, similar to, and/or something akin to staring into a bank of apposing mirrors. Perfect, repetitive patterns went off to infinity in every direction. It was as though some fractal function was looping back on itself and in the process creating countless iterations of an ever more complex and fantastic array. It was a crystalline structure of glittering fluidic rigidity. It was self-contradictory. It was incomprehensible. It was too beautiful to put into words. What could you say? It was the universe, breathtaking, complete.

Ruby felt like she could reach out and hold everything -- all of creation -- in her hands...

And then she saw why The Dragon had brought her here. A black wave of evil, death, and destruction was being carved through the vortexes. It was as though a bottle of ink had been spilled on a hand drawn map of the universe and the vile fluid was defiling the splendid beauty of it all. The contagion -- the evil, the horror -- started at the edge of The Dragon's rule. And so far, it had spread through four vortexes on its way towards the swirling eye of the Citadel -- the heart of The Dragon's domain. But don't be thinking this was some personal problem for The Dragon or for the occupants of those few outer portals. Rest assured, that before the evil spread to the Citadel, it would pass through Rigor Pass, Earth, and even YOUR! domain -- which is to say, countless other innocent vortexes would be obliterated first.

"They are just four riders," The Dragon said in a reasonable tone of voice. "They are not that powerful. A crack squad of

commandoes, a SWAT team, or a high level adventuring party equipped with a standard array of magical weapons could easily take them out. No problem. None at all.”

In fact, so easy, it would hardly make for a complete chapter is your typical fantasy farce, The Dragon could have gone on to add, had The Dragon been the literary type. But he wasn't. (Not really. Not so much. Not like, say, Crazy George. Or even me so, myself. But then, that goes a long way towards explaining why I get to write these stories and The Dragon doesn't do it himself. So, I guess it's all for the best.)

Any-who, having said that which he had wished to say, and having shown her that which he had wished to shown her, The Dragon caused the reality around Ruby to transform and reconstruct -- a global transmutation, I believe is the proper title for that particular sort of spell.

Or if you'd like your transitions a little more poetic and therefore a little harder to understand: when Ruby had banished weapons from the Seven Realms, The Dragon had not known of it until it was already too late to do anything about it -- a fate accompli, as they say. Well in much the same way, Ruby did not notice how reality had been slowly shifting about her once again until it was already too late and the changes complete and there was really nothing she could do about it -- except for perhaps to turn the page and read the next chapter.

(But then, we'll get to that little complication before long, as well, I suppose.)

5#

Somewhere in a Vortex
Far, Far Away

“Dragon Team Leader! Dragon Team Leader! This is Expendable Extra One! I'm going in! Repeat! This is Expendable Extra One! I'm going in!”

As the voice faded away, Ruby found herself staring at the control panel of a jet-fighter. Apparently (somewhere towards the end of the last chapter, I imagine), The Dragon had transported Ruby into the cockpit of a F-19 Falcon Fighter -- or at least, some kind of Falcon Fighter. Ruby couldn't have told you what type it was -- and truthfully, neither could I. The wings formed some sort of weird X thing. What was that all about? I mean, was that even aerodynamic?

Grt, however, was unconcerned about the fundamental engineering flaws of the craft in which he was riding. Calling out from the navigator's seat behind Ruby, he gaily announced, "Dis funs, Rubies. What we doos now?"

"I don't know, Grt?" Ruby replied hesitatingly as the poorly designed X-shaped fighter thingy dove of its own accord towards the crystalline array of vortexes that stretched out beneath them (and which you might remember, as well, from the previous chapter).

And not that this next tidbit has anything at all to do with the previous chapter either, but right here would be about when Ruby noticed Nellie was strapped into a little hole -- outside on the wing of the plane. It looked sort of dangerous. (And downright impractical!) But there was no time to think about that now.

"Cover me! Cover me!" squawked the voice of the aforementioned expendable-extra over the intercom. Yet sadly, before Ruby had time to react or could do a single thing, this desperate appeal for assistance was quickly followed by the ever classic, "I'm hit!" And then, the sound of a larger than life explosion (due to the fact that there's no air in space; and thus, the sound of explosions travels much further and farther than might otherwise be the case and often with much higher fidelity). But then, after that, there was only a profound silence. (Which I like to believe is due to the fact that great ignorance tends to have that effect. But maybe that's just empty hubris talking.)

But the main point to be drawn from all that was that clearly there was no one else left to do this job that needed doing except for, perhaps, Ruby.

“It’s up to you Ruby-Grt,” the voice from ground control informed them, which just by-the-by may have sounded suspiciously like a Celaphopod’s. “We’ve got photon-electron-missile-bomb thingies strapped to the bottom of your X-shaped wing fighter thingy do-job, and all you have to do is push the button when you’re in range and get a clean hit.”

“No weapons,” Ruby called out in a touching reenactment of that time -- which seems so long ago now -- when she had originally banned weapons throughout the Realms.

But there was no reply. No one was listening -- or at least, I wasn’t listening. I mean, I had a story to write. I didn’t have time for some lead character’s petty concerns.

So instead, the un-beckoned voice of the narrator advised, “Remember Ruby, let the plot guide you.”

And then, with a will of its own, the control stick surged in whatever way it would need to surge in order to make the plane go down. I mean really! Up is down. Down is up. How confusing can you make a video game control anyhow?

Ruby pulled to the left and the fighter went right. Then she over corrected. I mean, it took her a minute to realize half the sensors on the stupid joystick weren’t even working. (OK. Maybe all.) But then after that, it didn’t take her too much more time to realize the full extent of her current predicament. And that was that she had absolutely no control over of the Falcon Fighter thingy as the plot thundered ahead like an out of control freight train... or at least, an out of control X shaped fighter plane thingy on autopilot.

Ruby was merely along for the ride.

“No weapons!” Ruby screamed again.

As if that would help.

Did that help the Tr©ll-Tr©lls™?

No!

Did that help the Sm©rks™?

No!

I mean, can't you just see it. A little Sm©rk™ dude calling out "No weapons!" in the face of a charging death rider. No wonder the little blue-pukes are all dead.

Anyhow, Ruby, Grt, and Nellie... and Nellie, that little scamp of a Pixie. What was she doing out on the wing of that X-Wing Fighter thing, anyway? Oh, sure she puts up a good show, yelling and screaming like she doesn't want to be there. She even claims that she's going to be sick. And really, why put her out on the wing of a jet fighter that's going on a dive-bombing run anyhow? What possible reason could there be for that?

Without considering these very important questions, Nellie yelled, "Help!"

But then, no one heard her because in space, no one can hear you scream, which is sort of odd, because like I said previously, explosions carry like the wind.

Come to think of it, it's probably because the windscreens on these F-19's are made of really thick tempered glass. Much better than anything the Imperials -- the Imperial Romans, that is -- ever had. Oh by the way, did you know the F-19X was originally an Imperial (Roman, that is) weapon and that the Greek Rebels stole the design? Fascinating bit of history if you ask me.

Nellie, however, oblivious to this little exercise in movie trivia, simply continued to scream.

"Help! Help! Help meeee!"

Help? Help? Who's going to help her? She's strapped to the wing of a poorly designed, highly unstable bi-plane areo-plane that's stacked to the gills with hi-powered explosives and is in the middle of a diving run. I mean, really. Who is going to help her?

Not Ruby. At this point, I think we've clearly established that she doesn't have the least bit control of the plot -- let alone

some high tech bit of combat weaponry. Fact is, she's just along for the ride at this point.

And Grt? He's having the time of his life. Oh, and I guess this is as good a place as any to mention that if I ever gloss over Grt and you're wondering what he's doing, he's likely munching on a piece of manna and saying something like, "Dis funks!" which of course, is exactly what he is doing right now.

And then Nellie, like I said, is pleading for her life. Little expendable two-bit characters, desperately trying to stick around till the next chapter, aren't they cute?

But truthfully, what I really want to know is why would anyone put a Pixie on the wing of an airplane, star fighter, or anything. I mean, it's done in all the movies. You can't help but go to one of those big summer blockbuster extravaganzas and see some supporting character -- a robot or a Pixie, but usually a Pixie -- strapped to the wing of some jet fighter doing some sort of a bombing run. I mean, tell me. What exactly are they going to do out there on the wing? Oh, Right. Mid-flight repairs goes the conventional wisdom. It makes perfect sense. I mean, when that six-gazillion-volt beam-weapon vaporizes a wing-mounted core-transducer. (Don't ask me. Seriously, don't. Sometimes, I just make this schlock up.) Well then, if it does, Nellie would be right there, already on the scene, ready to help out with damage control.

Oh, wait!

Look, now!

Don't be getting uppity with me and telling me my sarcasm is misdirected or pointing out that it's my story, so if I believe placing supporting characters in a wing turret during a bombing run is a stupid idea, then I should write my story differently. If only it were that easy. This is tradition. I mean, if I didn't put Nellie (or someone) out on that wing, I'd just get a nasty letter from my editor asking me why I hadn't.

Um, Celli,

Actually, no. No, you wouldn't.

I'm fine with the Pixie riding inside with Grt, in another plane (maybe a Y-Plane, I'm sure you could work in the joke), or just sitting this scene out entirely.

Sincerely,

Eddie "you can't blame me for this one" the Edi-towski

Fine, you want to know why Nellie is out there?

Because even though every other fighter in their squadron blew up nice and cleanly when that super-galactic plasma ray thingy hit them dead center, I'm sure Ruby's plane will somehow only get nicked and Nellie will be right there to save the day by splicing together a wire or something.

Oh, fine! And now look what you've done, Eddie. You gotten me so flustered with your countless interruptions that I've gone and given away a major plot point, yet again!

I hope you are happy!

Um, Celli

I think my previous letter said it all.

Eddie "you can't blame me for this one" the Edi-towski

Yeah, right. Whatever.

So, let's see.

Where are we?

When last we saw Ruby, she was pretending to pilot a jet fighter down into the map of the vortex, which, without going into the physics of it all, meant she was now crossing over into yet another dimension.

And believe it or not, flying a X, Y, or Z-fighter -- however, poorly engineered and non-flightworthy any of those letters may or may not be -- by the very fact of being fully loaded with explosives, such an act is seen by the denizens of most nearly every vortex (that I've ever heard about) as an act of war. As such, arrows, rocks, lightning bolts, and fireballs immediately filled the sky in an attempt to shoot down the approaching aircraft.

And about those fireballs. I should perhaps mention at this point that the presence of a F-19X Falcon Fighter in this here chapter doesn't really change the fact that Minataur Tails is basically a fantasy novel and not one of those ludicrous SciFi escapist farces. So unless you count the AK-47/5889x's that they're packing (and really don't ask me why they don't use them, other than it would require extensive reworking of the plot) the NAS-gh©uls™ waiting on the plain below didn't have any hi-tech weaponry on them, so they were simply hitting -- or trying to hit -- Ruby's plane with everything they had. Obviously as a gag, a kitchen sink might be seen flying by the window of her spacecraft before long. But even if it did, you can rest assured that no one would find a surface to air missile or even something as simple as the trigger switch on the AK-47/5899x(y or z) that each and every one of those NAS-gh©uls™ was packing.

Anyhow, the jet-fighter controls worked themselves to avoid the incoming projectiles (kitchen sinks, lawn furniture, unhelpful editors, and so on). And point in fact, this was sort of handy as Ruby hadn't really learned how to pilot the craft as of yet. Of course, it had to be said that whoever was working the controls was a bit of a show off because the plane started to do barrel rolls, sideways pitches, loop de loops, and all sorts of other wonderful maneuvers that I would go on to name if only I knew what they were called.

And seeing as how it was pretty darn clear that both the plane and the author were going to do whatever they wanted whether it made sense or not, Ruby gave up all pretense of trying to work the controls. (Oh, and if truth be told, she was, also, starting to get a wee bit annoyed with the entire thing.)

Grt, on the other hand, was having the time of his life. He clapped his hands together and gleefully cheered Ruby on, "Dis funs. Do da loopies again, Rubies."

While not too surprisingly, Nellie simply stated, "I'm gonna puke," and with this announcement, Nellie finally made it clear why she had been strapped to the wing of the X-Wing Falcon

Freedom Fighter in the first place. You see, it was the morning after a massive K'fr spree. She had just gotten done eating two stacks of flapjacks (maybe four, honestly, I lost count). And what, between the K'fr, the greasy food, her fear of heights, and a predilection towards motion sickness, it was only a matter of time before the little Pixie spewed her guts.

As if to mock her, the plane teasingly rocked back and forth. Nellie clutched at the wing.

And without further ado, the little Sprite let 'er rip. Her stomach contracted and a night of excess packed down by a morning of heavy starch was unleashed.

Meanwhile, a red light in the cockpit flashed:
BOMBS AWAY! BOMBS AWAY!

In response to which, Ruby folded her hands across her chest, shook her head decisively, and continued to insist, "No weapons."
Not no way. Not no how.

The plane screamed down through the night sky.
While up ahead, four riders were approaching.

From the vantage of the cockpit, Ruby could see them clearly. They were Ghost Riders, NAS-gh©uls™, and/or the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (I suppose exactly which depends upon on how the lawsuit works out, but either way) they were full of pure hateful spite. Swords drawn, they laughed at death, sneered at decency, and looked down their noses at fair play. As the plane swooped down low towards them, they became ghost-like, clear, and insubstantial, as if the words Ghost Riders sort of said it all. (Take that HR Puffy Puffy!)

Impotently, the riders shook their swords at the sky as the X-Y-Z type experimental jet plane flew over them just out of reach. Clearly they should have used their AK-47/5899x's, but they didn't. Perhaps The Dragon had cast a Raging Moronic Stupidity spell on them, which in the long run would explain an awful lot about their actions. (And heck! Maybe that spell was an area

effect spell that included me? And that my friends, would explain even more.)

But either way (but anyway), it was only moments after the plane sped by that Nellie's "Pixie Juice Bombardment" sprayed across the lot of them.

The indignity. The frustration. The horror.
The cinnamon flavored maple syrup.

"This is why I became evil in the first place," the first rider complained. "I'm just standing here, minding my own business, and a plane comes screaming down out of the sky with no other purpose than to cover me with puke. Tell me that doesn't piss you off."

"We're going to make that dragon pay."

"And, the author."

"Oh, yeah. Definitely the author. That Celaphopod is on the top of the list."

The rest of the riders chose to ignore Benny when he said, "Maple syrup. It's not bad and the secret ingredient... I can't quite make it out." He paused while he licked his lips. "Charley, can you recognize it?"

Charley, who preferred to be called Slaughter these days, thought it was fairly clear that Pestilence was loosing it. Leaving the Four Horseman gig behind and becoming NAS-gh©uls™ (or Ghost Riders or whatever) was sounding better and better all the time. There were Four Riders of the Apocalypse. Everybody knew that. But really, who knew how many Ghost Riders or NAS-gh©uls™ there were supposed to be? Maybe there were only three?

"There's cinnamon in it," Benny continued. "But it has a certain allspice or nutmeg twist to it, as well."

After sheathing his sword, Slaughter checked the safety on his AK-47/5889x and was relieved to find that the gun didn't have one. It would be unheard of, but he wondered what the

consequences would be if the rest of them got together and fragged Benny.

“Vanilla!” Benny triumphantly announced at last. “That’s it. It’s very mellow, almost invisible behind the cinnamon and the nutmeg, but it gives the syrup that certain something, that certain je ne sais quoi.”

“Damn the consequences,” Charley, a.k.a. Slaughter, decided as he unleashed the full fury of his AK-47/5889x into Benny. He wasn’t the least bit surprised to find that Death and Desolation were doing the same thing, each of them having come to the same conclusion on their own.

6

A Fitting Punishment

With the chapter break as the only pretext for the shift (something you should be getting used to by now), Ruby suddenly found herself walking down a standard 10’ wide dungeon corridor lined with roughhewn stone. If she were playing a Dwarven character (in a standard Slaughter Quest campaign, don’t you know) and she rolled 25 or less on the percentile dice, Ruby would have noticed:

- 1) The floor sloped slightly downward,
- 2) The stone walls had been cut over 5,000 years ago, and
- 3) The dimensions of the corridor were eerily perfect.

Really, we’re talking roughhewn stone here. A little waiver is esthetically pleasing. But this room was drawn on graph paper -- 10’ to the square. A Dwarf would have been impressed by the attention to detail and the tight corners. A LARK’er who thought it was all about the role and not the roll would be contemptuous. While a reader, who was a bit confused and didn’t understand the geeky roleplaying references, might not want to worry about it too much for the next few paragraphs. ‘Cause sad to say, I’m a bit of a geek, and explaining it all would take way too much time.

Of course, you didn't have to be a Dwarf and if your dice so much as bounced off the table on their way to floor, you would have made your skill check to notice that the place stunk. It was exactly as if the thirteen year old lad who had drawn the prison complex towards which you were walking had forgotten to include plumbing for the prisoners. What can I say? It never crossed my mind.

Undeterred by the stench (as they'd recently smelled worse), our band of intrepid heroes were in their standard marching order, which they had drawn up prior to the start of the adventure as is the custom in your better gaming circles. The Dragon had rejoined them and was in the lead. Ruby walked directly behind him and Grt walked by her side holding her hand. Grt, of course, had a piece of manna at the ready, which he nibbled on -- just to make sure it was fresh. While Nellie -- ever the eager beaver -- noticed a trash receptacle at the end of the hall next to a pair of swinging doors and decided to scout ahead and check it out (like your better scouts are prone to do).

And as the rest of the party passed her by, Nellie could be seen continuing her search at the bottom of the garbage can for the meaning of life and gastronomical relief. Obviously, her system was still reeling from the K'fr (et al). Unfortunately, she was a low level rogue character, so she wouldn't be making her successful saving throw against poison for some time to come.

Past Nellie, the doorway opened into the oldest section of Rigor Pass Correctional Center. It was a 40'x40' room with a line of metal bars going down the center, which split the room neatly in half -- one half for the prisoners and one half for the guards. Of course, as is the custom in these fantasy stories, no jailers were actually present at the moment. But not to worry, Buddy -- the jail's sole occupant -- wasn't about to escape.

However before we get into that, let me lay out the room for you in more detail. You see, this is one of those tricky room-traps that Dungeon Masters love to throw at their players, so let's see

how you would do if you were confronted with this little gem of a brain teaser.

Like I said, the room is 40'x40' with a line of bars going down the center. Draw a picture if you like (or consult the diagram to your right, left, or wherever they put it, if you got a deluxe edition). But then, before you do either, you just may want to wait until you get to the end of the description -- you know, to see if you actually need a picture. One half of the room -- the side that Ruby, Grt, The Dragon, and Nellie (whenever she catches up) will be on -- contains a few wooden desks, chairs, and filing cabinets that are supposed to be filled with forms and files, but which have been taken over by a family of friendly rats, who have used the paper for bedding -- as rats are prone to do. While the other side (where Buddy is) is where the prisoners are kept. It's been lovingly decorated with rotting mattresses, lice infested linen, a few iron rings hanging on the wall for color, and not much else.

That's the room. Now, the trick -- obviously -- is to get out of jail.

Me, I recommend looking around a bit more? If you chose that course of action, on a roll of 1 or higher on the ole' twenty-sided die (i.e. D20 for you geeks. Die-20 for any Death Slayers out there), you will note a large metal key-ring hanging on the wall a mere 5' away from the prisoner's cell. When you get right down to it, the placement of that key had been a major design flaw. I mean, the Rigor Pass Jail was (and remains) notoriously easy to escape from. But then, as I've said, this was all designed years ago by a thirteen year old Celaphopod. And back in those carefree days of youth, being arrested and sent to jail had never been the end of the adventure. Rather, it had usually been the beginning.

My how times have changed...

I think you can see the obvious solution -- cast a levitation spell on the keys, rip the moldy sheets apart to make a rope, or wait until dinner and barter with the rats -- a piece of cheese for the

keys will usually suffice. It wasn't supposed to be difficult. It wasn't supposed to be hard.

But not so for Buddy. His mind befuddled by K'fr, he may well have been the only prisoner in the entire history of gaming who had failed to notice the key.

Speaking of Buddy, he was wearing a pink jumpsuit and had paused briefly at his labors upon the party's entrance, but noticing who they were, he had quickly resumed his work. You see, he was digging an escape tunnel.

You had to give Buddy credit where credit was due, though. He hadn't even been in jail for a full 24 hours and already he'd made some real headway. He'd removed a dozen stone blocks from the rear wall of his cell and a pile of freshly dug dirt reached halfway to the ceiling. It wasn't hard to figure out the reason for his extensive progress. All manner of picks, axes, and shovels were tossed about the cell, while his bunk was stacked high with spikes, chisels, ropes, buckets, and every other piece of mining equipment a Dwarf could possibly hope for. And then, there were the trio of well fed rats, slumbering blissfully away amongst the crumbly remains of a large multi-layer birthday cake -- presumably the origin of all this equipment. If only he had asked the rats for the key. But sadly, they were NPCs, and as such, were prohibited from suggesting a solution (no matter how obvious).

Oh well, what are you going to do?

I guess, mention that The Dragon had resumed his semi-anthropomorphic six foot tall, two-legged dragon form, complete with wings, scaly black skin, and eyes of burning coal. If you've read TDBQ (and really, if I haven't mentioned it, you should) you would recall this classic "look" (his two-legged dragon form "look") from when The Dragon had "played" chess with Ruby all those many long months ago (that is, if you want to call what a cat does with a mouse, "playing.")

Anyway, The Dragon sat down at one of the unoccupied desks, kicked up his feet, and rested them on top of what looked to be a drawing of a six-dimensional circle, but which, of course, was

a map to the vortexes (that maybe looked like someone had carelessly spilled some ink on it).

But no matter, for about then Nellie entered the room. And as it appeared that she was done being sick for the moment, The Dragon indicated the keys as he suggested to her, “Why don’t you help Buddy out?”

Nellie -- the little scamp -- not one to overlook a good joke, immediately flew into the cell, while pointedly ignoring the keys or opening the door. “I see you got my cake,” she whispered to Buddy.

Buddy, for his part, only grunted as he dumped another wheelbarrow full of dirt onto his ever-growing pile.

“Have you tried the jackhammer yet?” Nellie asked conspiratorially. It had cost her more, but the baker had assured her that in post consumer surveys, a jackhammer was the most requested item by prison inmates.

It seemed like a good idea, so only moments later Buddy had the jackhammer up and running. It really was a lot easier than using a pick and hammer. It cut through the rocks like butter.

And seeing as how it was obvious that Buddy was going to be continuing with his labors a bit longer, The Dragon handed both Ruby and Grt a pair of sound deadening headphones to protect their ears before motioning towards the keys, once again.

Ruby -- being the bright sort -- figured out how to open the cell in a matter of moments. Buddy however -- his mind still clouded from K’fr -- didn’t notice. He kept right on jackhammering. And when The Dragon caused the jackhammer to disappear, he switched to a pick, and then a shovel, and then...

Well, you get the idea. The fact is, Buddy would never have realized the cell door was unlocked unless Nellie had tapped him on the shoulder. And of course, the second she did, he bolted. He immediately ran out of the cell, and seeing that there was only one exit from the room, he took off down it running as fast as he could.

Nellie flew after him.

But The Dragon paid them no mind as he continued to point out vortexes of interest on the map to Grt and explaining their significance.

A few minutes (and a dozen vortexes) later, Buddy walked back into the room scratching his head. “It just dead ends?”

Yes Buddy, it just dead ends. The passageway doesn't lead anywhere. An often used area of any campaign -- like a jail cell, for instance -- deserves its own sheet of graph paper, containing not only the layout of the room, but also such useful information as: which guards can be bribed, their work schedules, and the profiles of other prisoners, detailing their crimes, skills, knowledge, and contacts. So much information in fact, that little more than the one room and a short length of corridor actually fit onto the page. But not to fear, the end of the corridor is indicated by one of those squiggly line thingies, which by convention means the map is continued on another sheet of paper. Yet somehow over the years, I've managed to misplace that other sheet of paper, so it's really a lot easier to simply figure that the corridor dead ends in a pile of rubble, like the tunnel caved in or something. Me, I like to think it makes the whole jail complex a little more secure. Besides, ever since Rigor Pass and Earth opened their borders, modern-era gaming has been all the rage. And even though the new jail facility has that whole double cyclone fence thing going with machine gunners in the corner towers, it is this old school facility, which has proven to be the more secure of the two -- what with its solid rock walls backed by loose earth that go on forever and forever... or at least, until the edge of the page.

Not really interested in the history behind the development of the Rigor Pass's correctional system and its associated facilities, Buddy merely restated his previous query more directly, “How do you get out of here?”

“You agree to go on a quest,” The Dragon replied point blank.

“No way,” Buddy declined as his eyes darted back and forth. There had to be a different way.

The Dragon merely shrugged as he produced a gigantic hourglass filled with smoky red sand. If you’ve ever seen the Sorcery Dude Guy of Oohs and Aahs (say it slowly and out loud, especially that last part), then you know where they got the idea. Right here! But I’m OK with their little bit of creative theft. I take it as a form of flattery -- a homage, if you will.

“Don’t you guys do anything original?” Buddy asked incredulously. And let’s face it, we all know that’s the K’fr talking, so we’ll just let it pass.

The Dragon, for his part, didn’t say anything and the sand continued to fall through the hourglass.

“What’s happening?” Ruby asked.

“We’re negotiating,” The Dragon replied.

“Dis one of does managment techniques?” Grt asked.

(See TDBQ if you want, The Dragon wrote a few books over the years. One of them was Management Techniques for Dragons, while another was The Complete Moron’s Guide to Dragon Hunting with advice that only a complete moron would follow. It’s rumored Crazy George has a copy of the later.)

Anyhow, in response to Grt’s question, The Dragon merely responded, “Yes.”

“I’m not going on some stupid quest,” Buddy insisted.

“Suit yourself.”

“Hear me out. I read the script. It’s stupid.”

Wait a second there! What the heck was Buddy doing?

“For most of the rest of the story we’re off in M©ther G©©se Land, Ole Mother Hubbard, the Little Old Lady in the Shoe, and that Sch©lting crap. If I see one more script where I have to rescue Little Bo Peep’s lambs, I’m going to kill somebody.”

No. This wasn’t right. Those are great ideas. Those are golden. You can’t just rip apart the plot. You’re just a two-bit small time...

Buddy interrupted the author.

Me the author! He just stepped over my voice. Of all the...

“The thing is you’ve got these death rider things.”

“We’re calling them NAS-gh©uls™,” The Dragon corrected.

“And the lawyers are letting it fly?”

The Dragon shrugged, “It’s a farce, a parody -- fair use.”

“It’s sad, that’s what it is. Anyway, you’ve got this problem with the NAS-gh©uls™ running amuck, importing weapons, maybe a little K’fr?” Buddy asked hopefully.

“No. They’re just riding through the vortexes killing at random. Nothing to do with K’fr.”

Truth be told, Buddy looked a little disappointed at the news.

And I hope you’re feeling a little disappointed there Buddy-Boy. It took me months to come up with that Little Bo Peep gag. How am I going to write Pete into the script now? Tell me that mister classical actor! Listen, maybe taking you on was a bad idea. Maybe we don’t really need four people on the quest. Ruby and Grt did it last time all by themselves. They didn’t need the help of some script destroying Minataur.

But Buddy continued to ignore the author as he suggested, “I can track for you. Get Ruby next to the riders. She does the rest and Nellie and me go free.”

“And you cede any diplomatic immunity exemption to any and all decries -- now or in the future.”

Buddy stalled.

The Dragon tapped the hourglass.

“You’re not really going to play the hourglass of death card are you?”

“It’s called a negotiating ploy,” The Dragon assured him.

“What if I don’t want Buddy as a guide?” Ruby jumped in.

Yeah! Way to go Ruby! Stick up for your own destiny!

What say we kick this Buddy creep to the curb, and do the adventure old school, just you, Grt, and me. We’ve done it before, we can do it again.

Buddy shook his head. “You’d never stand a chance against that Celaphopod without me around. You’ll spend the next 50,000 words in some M©ther G©©se purgatory. You need somebody with experience, somebody who can cut away from the script. What are you? Fifteen? Aren’t you a little old for M©ther G©©se?”

Don’t trust him Ruby. He’s a bad seed. Look at his character summary. He sells Centaur’s for dog chow. He imports AK-47/5889x’s and then he fires on police officers. He’s out of control. He’s strung out on K’fr...

Ruby thought it over. Over the author’s thoughts, as well, I might add, which I for one am getting a little sick and tired of...

But even so, M©ther G©©se Land didn’t sound like that much fun to Ruby. And the last quest, not to mention that last chapter (the one with that weird X-shaped jet-fighter airplane thing) had felt an awful lot like a track ride at Dizzy Land, you know, where after you hand over your ticket and hop into your seat, you don’t make a single decision or vary from the preplanned route for the rest of the ride. And one thing Ruby knew for sure was that she didn’t want to go on another one of those quests.

Those quests!

Those quests!

Those quests are your bread and butter, missy! Fame, fortune, and countless merchandizing tie-ins are waiting for you. All you have to do is arrive on time at the preplanned photo shoots. You can’t seriously be considering throwing it all away?

But Ruby had already made up her mind. “You lose your exemptions due to royal blood, right now -- whether you agree to go on the quest or not. The Seven Realms does not acknowledge your diplomatic standing, anymore.”

[(Whew! Close one there! Thank Gra’gl for Ruby’s sloppy wording or we really wouldn’t have a story. But then, don’t mind

me. We were in the middle of a conversation. No sense my interrupting the flow and calling attention to myself.))]

“Think about what you are doing,” Buddy pleaded. “Mother Goose. Fairy Tales. Story Book Hell. He’ll have you singing pun filled nursery rhymes, you know.”

“You’re going to track for me,” Ruby assured Buddy. “But I don’t trust you.” And with that, she took a length of manna from Grt’s outstretched hand, wove it into a silver ring, and explained, “This will bind you until I’m satisfied you have fulfilled our bargain.”

“I’m not going under a Control Spell for anybody,” Buddy said, balking at the charm.

Ruby merely shrugged as she put the silver ring next to the hourglass, while she made another one for Nellie. “Both of you. Six months ago you’d be dead. You’re lucky you’re getting a second chance. You don’t want to take it? Fine. I’m sure me and the author can work out a deal whereby I spend some time in the world of Grimm’s Fairy Tales.”

Ah, now you’re talking. That Grimm stuff can be pretty dark and foreboding. We’ll forget all about Mother Goose Land. Little Bo Peep? What was I thinking?

See the thing is, I don’t mind a little creativity or thinking outside the box from my characters. If you’ve ever looked at the script, you’d know that there’s a lot of improvising required, but there’s always a fine line to walk.

See, like in this last section, it says very clearly in the chapter outline that Ruby asks about the Centaur from the roundup. She wants to assure herself that the Centaur is OK and then The Dragon responds that yes the Centaur is OK, but the whole episode has brought up some troubling issues about how Warlord Grave is handling his command on the Orcin front, particularly his Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy. I know it looks like a small insignificant reference, but it’s those small, almost insignificant references, which keep that first book (The Dragon Bound Quartet, i.e.

TDBQ) flying off the shelves. A reader says, Clint Grave? I wonder who he is? Why would the author be bringing him up? Could it be that Clint Grave is going to resurface again later in the series? I should really find out who he is, so I'll understand the references the next time he's mentioned. And then, they're rushing off to the bookstore to buy another copy of The Dragon Bound Quartet to figure it all out -- 'cause maybe something further about ole Clint was added in the second or third or fourth edition. (I mean, you never know unless you buy the book, now do you?)

And as long as we are talking shop, I just want to point out that in the original screenplay Buddy gets dressed before he goes crashing out of Jeannette's bedroom window. Come to think of it, that whole police car chase was his idea. He was just supposed to run down the street and disappear into the fog all artsy like. I mean, there's not enough money in the budget for big car chases. Two police cruisers trashed. What? You think they just magically get repaired? Yeah, it's just like magic... after I pay the bill.

Anyhow. So, if that's all settled? We'll just let the timer run down, let Buddy and Nellie die here and now. And then, it will be Ruby and Grt doing the Little Bo Peep gag by themselves.

But as the author's attention cuts back to the jail cell, it is clear that no one is there, that the hourglass has stopped draining sand, and that both of the silver rings are gone.

Um...

Not having any characters is going to make writing anything further, like, um, difficult at best. I'm just going to assume Ruby used a little commonsense and they all headed off to do the Little Bo Peep gag in the next chapter -- just like we planned.

7

Pete & Bo Peep

Pete stood on a slight hillock overlooking Bo Peep's sheep. He had it made. The weather here was perfect and he'd finally beaten the curse.

See, Pete is a Paladin. He looks just like a Paladin would look...

Truthfully, I don't even know why I bother with the pretense of a description anymore. Maybe it's some instinctual writing impulse that has been passed down to us from our cavemen forefathers?

Mel: "What the H\$rlk is that supposed to be?"

Herg: "It's a dinosaur."

Mel: "It looks like you just dipped your hand in some red paint and slapped it against the wall."

Herg: "Use your imagination. The thumb is its head and the fingers are its legs."

Mel: "How can it run? Its legs aren't the same size and they're sticking up in the air. Was it dead?"

Herg: "Look, that's not the important thing. It's an abstract representation. That's where the dinosaur was..."

Mel: "It's pretty small for a dinosaur. Aren't they supposed to be big?"

Herg: "You're missing the point. It's about the narrative flow that accompanies the picture. It's about the excitement, the danger, the thrill of brushing against Death and narrowly escaping with your life, thanks be to Gra'gl."

Mel: "From a six-inch tall dinosaur? What did you do, anyhow? Hit it with your car?"

Fine, have it your way.

Pete was wearing an old suit of chain mail, Karthrax's holy symbol hung around his neck, and in his scabbard -- where most of your fighter types keep a sword -- he had a wooden shepherd's crook. Around him the sheep bayed -- incessantly.

You know the drill. Little Bo Peep had lost her sheep and didn't know where to find them. So, Pete did it for her.

Being a Paladin, Pete sort of had this curse. He couldn't help himself. If a damsel in distress asked for assistance, he had to help. He had made an oath to his god, Karthrax, that he would do just this a long-long time ago. It had seemed like a good idea at the time, but as the years went by it had started to seem more like a curse. Until very recently, he had usually just drunk himself senseless at a bar or tavern until no one in their right mind would ask him for assistance, but times had changed. It was late afternoon and Pete was still sober. In fact, he hadn't touched the stuff for a week, and why was that? Because he had found his calling. Little Bo Sheep had lost her sheep and didn't know where to find them. She'd wake up every morning and make a big to do about it. And there Pete would be:

“Hark, I hear a damsel in distress.”

“My sheep! My sheep! I've lost them!”

“Don't worry I'll find them.”

And on it would go, day after day. It was a good gig. Pete would round up the sheep, bring them home around sunset, and then he'd stay the night. Next morning the sheep would be gone again and it would start all over. A little latch on the corral might have solved the problem. Probably wouldn't take much, just a little string or a...

“Hey, now,” Pete jumped in. “Don't be messing with my gig. This is the good life.”

Pete walked over to where the Celaphopod was sitting on a rickety folding chair in the middle of the pasture, his fingers busy clicking away on the classic Underwood typewriter in front of him.

“You still use a typewriter?”

“It's an abstract representation,” the author explained testily.

“It doesn't sound very efficient,” but before the author could make some snide comment about how rounding up the same lost sheep day after day wasn't a model of efficiency either, Pete

extended the olive branch of peace and said, "It's good to see you." And then after looking at the sun hanging low in the sky for a moment, noted, "It's getting late. The workday is almost over. Why don't you come and meet Bo?" And then -- being a Paladin, and all -- he added, "You look cold."

"It's freezing."

Pete held out his hand as if to gauge the weather. "Fifty, Sixty."

"Exactly. Freezing," the shivering Celaphopod agreed. Standing there in tropical shorts, an aloha shirt, and beach sandals, his lips were turning a shade of blue typically reserved for the stylish lobes, which descended from his temporal lobes. After all, I mean, doesn't water freeze at 75?

"I'm a tropical creature," the Celaphopod finally remarked as if that explained it all.

"Well, come on, then," Pete urged as began the process of herding the sheep home. "Bo always has a nice hot stew on the stove and I'm sure she'll let you have one of her scarves. That's what she does. She knits. That's why the sheep are always getting lost. She knits, loses track of time, and the next thing you know the sheep are gone."

I won't bore you with the trip down the hill, the corralling of the sheep, or the process of insuring the gate wouldn't stay safely shut throughout the night.

Instead, we'll just pop ahead to the part where I'm sitting next to a crackling fire sipping on a nice steaming-hot cup of cocoa.

Even though he'd written the outline for the scene himself, the author was still a little surprised at how easy it was to get settled into Bo's house. I mean, the place is comfortable and Bo is a gracious host. For instance, the second she saw me, Bo immediately realized that I hadn't dressed appropriately for the inclement weather on the island and took pity on me, which is to say, Bo gave the Celaphopod one of her hand knitted scarves --

Bo's Buffers available at better boutiques throughout the Realms -- to use as a comforter and then put another one across his frigid toes. She then gave Celli a nice hot steaming cup of hot chocolate and followed that up with a bowl of curried vegetables. Being fond of animals, Bo was, of course, a vegetarian.

She was also a Cyclops. "Little Bo Peep, Peep is a family name," she would be happy to explain. "Based on us having only the one peeper each."

And as long as you're going for puns, or whatever that play on words thing is called, you might as well go all the way. Not only was Bo a giant Cyclops, she was also a woman trapped in a man's body. Some folks might say she had gender identity confusion issues, but not Bo. "I don't have any confusion about it, I'm a woman."

It's a simple time honored gag. Put the straight man -- in this case our holy warrior Pete -- next to someone with an "alternative lifestyle" and watch as the laughs ensue.

"Sure. I was a bit taken back at first," Pete admitted. "Look, I'll tell you the story from the beginning. I showed up for the scene a week early to get the lay of the land and make the turf my own. I should have known better on the ferry trip over. The captain of the boat, Sharon, was the only lady on board and even she looked a bit like a man."

"Sharon is a man," Bo assured us. "Just read any of the histories."

"I'm just saying from my point of view, she looked an awful lot like a woman."

"We're all born that way on this island. I'm a girl in a boy's body. Sharon is a boy in a girl's body."

"So, I would learn. Ha-ha. I'm good for a joke and I like working with you, Celli, so it's OK," Pete said, assuring the author that he held no grudge. "Anyway, I camped out the first night and in the morning I woke to this plaintiff cry."

“That would be me,” Bo beamed happily as the booming roar of the Cyclops’s voice echoed through the cavern. “Hark! I’ve lost my sheep! I’ve lost my sheep!”

“Anyhow, you know me and damsels,” Pete continued. “The rest is history. Every morning the sheep are lost and I rescue them.”

“My hero,” Bo gleamed mistily.

“I can’t help myself from asking,” the Celaphopod remarked cautiously. “But you’re not gay, Pete.”

“This isn’t a homosexual relationship,” Bo insisted. “Pete’s a man, a real man. And I’m a woman, a real woman.”

“With that whole damsel in distress vow, I also took vows of poverty, chastity... Really, the list just goes on and on.”

“He’ll come around someday,” Bo insisted confidently as she rested her hand lovingly on Pete’s upper thigh.

“Um, no. Actually probably never,” but vow or no vow, Pete still didn’t want to hurt Bo’s feelings. “Trust me. You’re the best damsel in distress I’ve helped in over a decade. I can’t begin to tell you how much I enjoy assisting with the sheep and sitting next to you as we watch the sunset. But Karthrax isn’t that progressive.”

“Maybe someday,” Bo repeated, not moving her hand.

Pete was getting a little nervous. I mean, it was one thing for Bo and him to snuggle up and watch a sunset through the cave opening alone: two creatures thrown together by a mastermind of plot development and unexpected puns, finding companionship in adversity, fighting together against the world, and that sort of thing. It was another matter, altogether, to have a Celaphopod tapping away on an old typewriter recording the incident for all of posterity only a few feet away.

Pete got up. “More hot chocolate? Stew?”

Nobody answered. Bo looked at him as a little wisp of sadness colored the corner of her eyes, while the Celaphopod’s steady tapping on the typewriter keys bore witness to the emotional drama unfolding before his eyes.

Pete couldn't take the dramatic tension. He was never good at confronting his feelings. "I'm surprised you're even here."

"We do the chapter tomorrow," the Celaphopod (i.e. the author) reminded him.

"Really!" Pete seemed surprised. "That's not what Steve said."

Steve the Ranger, the boyfriend of Nellie the Pixie who was off Gra'gl -- sorry -- Karthrax knows where destroying the author's well thought out script. "What did Steve say?"

"He just said there was a change in plans. Nellie said the Little Bo Peep gag was going to get cut. The whole M©ther G©©se escapade was getting rewritten." Pete paused. "That doesn't really sound like you."

"No it doesn't," the Celaphopod had to agree. I mean, really! Did these characters think that these choice comedic locales and routines just popped into my head at random without thought or warning? Somewhere I had notes. Somewhere I had a plot outline. I'd just misplaced it. "Did Steve mention anything about what the M©ther G©©se bits were being replaced by?"

"I didn't ask him."

Come on Pete. You're a Paladin. You've got to be more forthcoming than that. Help a poor Celaphopod out when he's down and his characters have gone renegade.

"He just called to see if I would look after his farm for a week or so. Of course I told him I couldn't." Pete said this last part while looking at Bo. She was relieved to hear Pete wasn't going to leave... and to be truthfully about it, so was he.

Great.

So, they're in love.

Whatever.

Trying to keep the conversation focused on something that actually mattered, the Celaphopod prompted Pete again, "Did Steve say where he was going?"

"Dizzy Land," Pete replied offhandedly -- his mind elsewhere at the moment. "The whole gang is going to meet up

there. Nellie called Steve from the airport. It was a last minute deal all rush-rush.”

You mean all hush-hush!

I knew that Buddy was a bad seed all along. Everybody wanted me to go with him. They said, “Buddy’s a rising star. He’ll take the franchise places.” Yeah, places! Like Dizzy Land and airports. And you know the only reason they were taking an airplane to get to Dizzy Land in the first place was because they knew I hated to fly.

Still distracted as he was by the setting sun and the warmth of Bo’s hand, Pete added, “The really strange thing is, instead of leaving from Mt. D©©m Intervortexal Airport, they were leaving from Russell Field. Why would they do that?”

Why Pete? Why? I’ll tell you why. Because Russell Field was in the mundane world and the author had no control over what happened in the mundane world just like he had no control over what happened in Dizzy Land. Dizzy Land belonged to the Rat. No one held onto their intellectual property rights tighter than the Rat. He was infamous for his one-sided, patently abusive contracts. It would be hard to write in his domain -- that is, assuming he would let me write at all. It would be a legal minefield. In the end, it would be much better than being on neutral ground for Buddy. For all intents and purposes, the Rat was the enemy.

Unless, that is...

The author let his thoughts drift into the shrouded mystery of one of those sentence ending ellipsis. (Bet you didn’t know that’s what those triple dots thingies were called.)

But the real point was (is and shall ever be!), the author was nobody’s fool. He knew there was a time honored way to cozy up to the Rat. And it was crazy enough, it just might work.

Switching gears, the Celaphopod returned his attention to Pete as he tried one last gambit, remarking almost casually, “I just

hope Ruby's all right." He had high hopes for his plan with the Rat, but it wouldn't hurt to have some solid back-up -- by way of Karthrax. "I think Ruby may be in trouble, you know, gotten in over her head."

"It's not going to work, Celli," Pete said -- almost with a chuckle -- as he snuggled up tighter against Bo. "I already got my damsel in distress."

And, together they watched the sun set.

Blast that Karthrax and his liberal minded ways!

8

A Very Special Episode

Dear Mc Rat,

Recently, I was watching the Bash Toe Horde and was lucky enough to catch the episode (again, I might add) where mom and dad are away at a Separatist Rally trying to raise money to spring Uncle Rodney from jail for attacking a policeman (and truthfully, who would have thought attacking a policeman was grounds for arrest?) Anyway, while they're away, Grug throws a spear in the house and breaks a vase. That was a big day for Grug. It was his first kill. Of course, it wasn't really much of a kill, mind you. But then, we are talking about Grug, here. Anyway, after mom and dad returned from the rally and learned Grug was now a Warrior, instead of using the money to bail out Uncle Rodney like they had planned, they used it to book an all inclusive weekend at Dizzy Land to celebrate the blessed event.

What better use could there have possibly been for that money? I applaud the exemplary behavior this episode portrays. It was daring and courageous to model such shrewd fiscal responsibility. I know I've read some commentaries, which criticize the producers for not going far enough, contending that it would have been more meaningful if the money had been earmarked for rent, groceries, or medical bills instead of merely being bail money, but I suppose that really wasn't in your control.

Besides, who's ever heard of a Goblin -- or an Orc for that matter -- actually paying rent? The important thing is that the episode underscores the primacy of living for the moment, encourages viewers to disregard the long term impact of their own financial decisions, and praises consumerism in its most vapid form.

We at the Dragon Bound series of incredibly popular semi-fantasy novels applaud the consumeristic messages inherent in such episodes. There is absolutely nothing more important than buying tie-in merchandise.

Nothing.

I repeat, nothing.

And due to skillful writing, clever plot planning, and wild excesses on the part of certain renegade characters, a group of adventurers from our current book, Minataur Tails, find themselves in a situation where heading off to Dizzy Land for a little rest and recuperation would be appropriate. I'm sure you have heard of the Dragon Bound series starring Ruby, Grt, and Crazy George. You may have noticed how hard it is to find space in the toy isle these days due to the incredible popularity of our AK-47/5889x replicas. The AK-47/5889ty is almost as fun as the real thing, but you know how bureaucrats can be. Believe it or not, some zealous consumer advocates forced the government to restrict the AK-47/5889ty to the point where it's hardly a weapon at all. In machine gun mode it is not capable of automatic fire. The armor piercing rockets have been replaced by antipersonnel explosives -- little more than hand grenades really. Oh, and the bayonet is made out of flexible rubber. How are you going to stab your kid brother to death with that?

Still, the purpose of this letter is not to brag about the success of our little series or the amazing sales numbers we've been achieving with our AK-47/5889ty -- available in better stores throughout the weapon allowing vortexes.

No. The purpose of this letter is to offer an alliance between Dragon Bound Publishing and Dizzy Enterprises. Even as we speak, renegade characters are headed off to your vortex. It would

be a shame if we could not work together and find a way to capitalize on this once in a lifetime cross-series promotional opportunity.

The current quest party includes:

Ruby: a sweet fifteen year old girl and Consort to The Dragon. You may have heard of her. Ruby's face has recently graced the cover of countless magazines. Being the current "It Girl," the paparazzi are sure to follow her wherever she goes. I can see the ad copy now. "Ruby, you've just been made Consort to The Dragon. What are you going to do next?" To which she answers, "I'm going to Dizzy Land!" Classic.

Grt: a Harvester Construct who The Dragon has turned into manna caddy for the Lady Ruby. He follows her everywhere, has a happy pleasant demeanor, and five year olds around the vortexes are sure to identify with whatever ride, t-shirt, or toy he should enjoy during his stay.

Buddy: a Minataur. You'll be happy to know that Buddy has a serious K'fr addiction and has been convicted of smuggling weapons and K'fr into the Seven Realms. Basically, he's a bad seed. Pretty much the demographic you're going for, I believe. Though his AK-47/5889x (not nearly as fun as an AK-47/5889ty) was lost during a firefight with a police officer, a saddlebag full of K'fr has still not been accounted for in the current story. I'm sure we can work in a scene where Buddy takes in a K'fr induced viewing of your psychedelic masterwork, Fantastica: The Wizard's Rat.

Nellie: a Pixie party girl who is looking for a good time. She has fallen in love with the Minataur lead and is another K'fr addict. It is not hard to imagine her flitting around a Dizzy Land boutique and exclaiming in wide eyed wonder at all the fantastical treasures for sale -- no matter how cheap, shoddily constructed, or patently worthless said "treasures" may be.

I look forward to writing Dizzy Land into the series and hope this opportunity is only the beginning of a long and mutually beneficial cross-series promotional marketing campaign.

The Worlds Greatest Author,
Celli the Happy Go Lucky Celaphopod

Dear Mr. Celaphopod,

Being the professionals that we are, we will not comment on the numerous errors in your letter. Suffice to say, the position for second greatest writer in all the known vortexes is still a highly contested honorific, but all rational beings have conceded that Dizzy Rat is the greatest writer there is, has been, or ever will be.

That aside, we are happy to present your party with four tickets to the kingdom, all access, first class, etc..

Your group of adventurers need but make it to the nearest Trans Vortex Airlines ticket counter and TVA will handle the rest. Trans Vortex Airlines the official airline of Dizzy Land. Whether traveling a quarter mile or halfway across the known worlds, let Trans Vortex Airlines do the traveling for you.

Once your adventurers arrive in Dizzy Land, they will be given a luxurious suite atop Future Spa. Future Spa, a robot based theme hotel offers full future based amenities and spa service. Try a Cranial Massage, a Full Neuron Replacement Procedure, or simply soak in a DNA bath. Future Spa. Don't wait for it. Make your future happen today.

As stated, upon arrival your adventures will be given a deluxe two bedroom suite overlooking the Dizzy Land park complete with Jacuzzi, wet bar, and sunken seating area. But, what visit to Future Spa would be complete without your VERY OWN ROBOT!

Yes, that's right Mr. Celaphopod (the second or possibly third best writer in all the vortexes) will your adventurers pick the sleazy personal companion, the morbidly depressed android, or the cold withdrawn conventional model? The plot twists and seedy encounters are limited only by your demented imagination.

Of course, staying at Future Spa is only the start. We will also be providing Ruby, Grt, Buddy, and Nellie full access, first class passes to Dizzy Land, the theme resort destination of choice!

Dizzy Land rides and attractions feature Dizzy characters and Dizzy locales, which audiences have come to know and love. Take a ride up the Magnificent Mountain™ (sounds a lot more pleasant than trekking up some horrid Mt D©©M if you ask me), sit in an auditorium and watch reenactments of your favorite Dizzy Rat cartoons, go shopping in the Crystalline City, or enjoy vortex class dining in one of over 2,346 themed restaurants.

But, wait! That's not all! Your first class tickets also include access to the all new Etcetera Center. See the vortexes from the safety of a controlled environment with food and lodging never more than a short Tram-Tram ride away.

The greater Dizzy Land resort including the Etcetera Center, ancillary, support, and lodging areas spans over three complete vortexes. It's more than just a chapter in a two-bit hack of a second-(or possible third)-rate author's book. It's the whole library of Dizzy Rat movies, books, and merchandise come to life.

And all of this can be yours... if the price is right.

Sincerely,

Dizzy Land Marketing Cooperation and Outreach
Coordinator

Under Authority of the Rat

PS: Enclosed please find a standard joint publicity contract.

A stack of papers the size of a large dictionary appears out of nowhere and slams down on the author's desk.

SLAM!

“What! This is ridiculous. How long is this contract anyway?” the author cries in despair.

“Only two thousand pages,” a squeaky disembodied voice responds. “It's standard boiler plate, I assure you. Nothing to be alarmed about.”

The author opens the agreement to a random spot and reads...

...in the advent of 2.01a, but not to supercede 5.02f-g (an event which is determined to fall under the auspices of 10.1 –

11.2 inclusive) then the remedy of “chronological appearance in script” shall be the deciding factor in determining ownership of said derivative character till the expiration of the primary plot as stated in 1.03 (et al), but in no way is this intended to contradict the conditions as set forth in clauses 15.03h, m, p, or q, or rights of prior ownership as defined...

“Um, I’m going to have to read this,” the author notes with despair.

“Take your time. No hurry.”

The author is more that a wee bit disappointed. He was hoping to join the characters in Dizzy Land.

“Sign the form and I’m sure we can work something out,” the squeaky disembodied voice of the Rat assures him.

Who would have thought the Rat was a Devil?

Answer: anyone who’s ever worked with him.

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Squeak. Squeak. Squeak.

9

Trade Secrets
Locked in Time

If Ruby is flying east at three vortexes a second and the author is reading a Devil inspired contract at seven pages an hour, who will arrive at Dizzy Land first? Does it make a difference if the author takes a break? A nap? Goes to the beach? Or writes the next chapter in the interim?

For extra credit read the contract for the author and advise him of any clauses which will need to be struck. “All” is not an acceptable answer nor is advising him to consult an attorney. Those guys cost an arm and a leg, which just sort of seems, you know, excessive.

Ruby was sipping on a glass of pear juice and enjoying the premium service, which Trans Vortex Airlines affords its first class customers, while Grt, who was sitting next to her, was eating -- yet another -- banana split.

“Dis firstee class good stuffers, Rubies,” Grt assured Ruby as he fiddled with his earphones and the control panel inset into his armrest. Grt had found that if he hit the right combination of buttons on the control panel, he could get the airplane to do loop-de-loops, barrel rolls, and sideways pitches. “Whee! Eet funs,” he’d say. And whenever he got bored with the in flight movie, he’d hit the buttons in a random way to see what the plane would do next.

As you might expect, Buddy was sitting next to Ruby and Grt -- in the aisle seat. And what do you know? He was wearing a brand new silver ring through his nose. The ring was annoying. It itched. It scratched. It was driving him crazy. One thing was for sure, Buddy was going to kill the author for ever thinking of a nose ring... not to mention that little incident at the security checkpoint.

And just to be annoying, the author had Buddy’s nose ring clink against the fluted crystal of the glass he was holding as he downed, yet another, glass of Champa’gne®.

“They must water the Champa’gne® down,” Buddy complained to Ruby as he tried to get the stewardess’s attention for a refill.

But Ruby didn’t feel like she needed to explain it to Buddy yet one more time. (I mean, how many times did she have to do this anyway?) Fact was, Buddy could drink till the cows came home, but he was never going to get drunk, high, or intoxicated until they -- or at least, he -- had completed his part of the deal. Ruby liked to think of it as a little bonus, a little unasked for extra, which she had added to the enchantment hanging from his nose -- one that she had thought of, all by herself without any help from the author, thank you very much.

And Buddy knew this to be true -- or at least, he had heard Ruby explain it to him before -- but he just didn’t believe it. His

mind wasn't ready for it, so he kept on ordering glass of Champa'gne® after glass of Champa'gne® after glass of Champa'gne®.

It was a pity, really. Buddy was on his, like, umpteenth bottle of Champa'gne® brand Champa'gne® from the Champa'gne® vortex -- the good stuff, mind you. I mean, you might not know this, but it was a matter of great snobbery in certain circles that only Champa'gne® from the Champa'gne® vortex could be called Champa'gne®, anything else was merely champagne -- or worse, sparkling white wine... as if you can imagine drinking anything so mundane as that.

And then, I think that covers everyone but Nellie. Oh, and there won't be any need to mention The Dragon, because when The Dragon sends other folks on a quest, he doesn't actually feel the need to tag along. That would sort of defeat the purpose of sending other folks on a quest, don't you think? I mean, he was a smart guy, That Dragon -- probably had some Celaphopod blood in him somewhere, or at least, he was smart enough to hire a Celaphopod to do his dirty work for him.

Anyhow, as to Nellie -- the last member of the party we have yet to cover -- she was in the restroom. And just like Buddy, she was now wearing a silver ring, only hers was in her ear, so it was more like an ear-ring. And just like Buddy's nose ring, Nellie's earring bound her to Ruby. Nellie hadn't been too excited about that or the idea of taking another plane trip, for that matter. And after the first loop-de-loop, she had run to the bathroom -- where she hadn't been seen since. But every once in a while, after a tight loop or a long drawn out barrel roll, a moan could be heard emanating from the behind closed restroom doors. So it was safe to say that as far as expanding the depth and role of her character (as she had been sort of advised to do -- implicitly, if not explicitly), Nellie hadn't gotten very far with that particular project as of yet.

And perhaps it goes without saying, but doing something about Nellie's sickness had passed through Ruby's mind a time or

two as well, but every time she had resolved to do something about it, she had heard the voice of The Dragon in her head advising her otherwise. “She came to you claiming my authority. Another time, another place, and she would be dead. The sickness will pass. It is but a small price to pay for her indiscretion.” Still, Ruby couldn’t help feeling sorry for Nellie. But then, there was nothing she could really do about it, so eventually she let her mind drift to other matters.

Getting on the plane hadn’t been Ruby’s idea. Secretly, she wondered if it had been the best thing to do. So in effort to put her mind at rest, she silently recalled the intervening events, which had gotten her here.

Ditching the author had definitely seemed like a good idea. No, it was a great idea. She’d seen him on the news with Jeannette Stevens; and without a doubt, he was a loose cannon. And then, there was her last quest. It was so... linear, so predefined, so... choice less. Was that the author’s doing? Or was that The Dragon’s doing? It was hard to believe that they weren’t somehow in cahoots together. But even if they were, Ruby knew The Author? No, no... that wasn’t right. It was just the author. But even if the author and The Dragon were in cahoots, she didn’t think it was very likely that either one of them would let that tidbit of information leak by accident. In the end, it was sort of like wondering about the relationship between Crazy George and The Dragon. It was a secret and for now (and perhaps for the rest of the story and/or series) it would remain that way. I mean, maybe Crazy George was telling the truth when he said understanding the mysteries of magic only made you insane, a word which underscored for Ruby how far her mind had wandered. This was nowhere close to where she had intended to go with her thoughts.

No. If there was a clue to be had in regards as to how best to resolve the quest to be found anywhere in this section (I assure you, Ruby’s thoughts, not mine), it would only be discovered by a

full and complete retelling of the events which had transpired since her flight from the author...

While the author had been distracted with his own thoughts (Sort of a needless qualifier that. I mean, the author distracted? Never, perish the thought), the four of them -- Ruby, Grt, Buddy, and Nellie -- had left the prison complex with The Dragon's assistance. It wasn't as hard as it sounded. Without so much as waiving his hand, blinking his eye, or snapping his fingers like Crazy George might (the copycat), The Dragon had teleported the adventurers to downtown Rigor Pass, while simultaneously taking his leave of them.

Buddy quickly took the lead, boldly stepped forth, and led them around the next corner to a newspaper kiosk -- for that's where things always were in Rigor Pass: around the next corner. Once there, Buddy immediately picked up a copy of Plot Lines Weekly and flipped through the paper, but he wasn't finding what he was looking for. Ruby, on the other hand, looked over the display rack and figured out right away what Buddy was hoping to find. The particular headline, which caught her eye, read:

Cross Promotional Deal Offered

Dizzy Rat offers a co-marketing agreement to mysterious blue lobed author. Mc Rat said, "Though it is clear I am, was, and always will be the best creator of copyrighted domains, we believe the current turn of events in the Dragon Bound series offers an unparalleled cross series promotional opportunity."

Industry insiders say a standard joint publicity contract was offered. Nothing fancy. Dizzy would own all subsidiary rights, the rights to any characters created or introduced while in the Dizzy vortex, the author's soul, and his first born child -- unless of course, said child was ugly or looks anything like the author.

"We want something marketable," a spokesman said...

The story went on, but it was really only so much self aggrandizing rubbish -- the kind you tend to see so often these days from those hacks at Dizzy. In short, it was the kind of marketing tripe we've all come to expect from a has-been conglomerate staffed by crooks, cheats, and a fanatically stingy accounts payable department.

But really, though! You would have thought that Ruby or someone would have picked up the phone and given me a call and alerted me to some of the hidden pitfalls in the original contract as offered by the 'fine folks' at Dizzy.

Anyway, calling the author and possibly saving him countless hours of agonizing torment as he waded through 2,000+ pages of double talking gobbledygook wasn't what was going through Ruby's mind at the moment. You know Ruby, the nice, kindhearted girl who'd like to help Nellie out with a little motion sickness, apparently is the same Ruby who didn't have the time to tell the author he was going to get screwed royally out of house and home on a joint marketing deal if he signed the contract as written. Well surprisingly, for some reason that very same Ruby decided to point the newspaper story out to Buddy -- I suppose, since she figured it was what he was looking for. And believe it or not, it was.

Buddy read further than I did. (Hey, I'm a writer not a reader.) And eventually he got to the part about going to any TVA ticket desk. Once he did, the adventures were off and running again.

And wouldn't you know it. Around the very next corner there was a TVA ticket booth. Like I said, Rigor Pass is handy that way. The town fathers really knew how to organize things, so they were right where you wanted them -- just around the next corner.

Anyway, they got to the TVA office, caught a shuttle to Russell Field, and here's where things got a little humorous. Russell Field may be in the mundane world, but as a point of fact, it is easy enough to watch anything that happens there. I just aim

my crystal ball in the proper direction, use whatever lens is appropriate, fish eye, wide angle, panorama, or in this case telephoto, and use a temporal adjustor valve to give me the picture from a week ago (or whatever), and I'm all set. So although I can't (and couldn't) control things or cause the fiendishly ugly Ogre security guard to take Buddy behind the curtain for a thorough examination, I can see that it happened. And if I wanted to, I could set the Ogre security guard in question up with a free dinner at Lucky's Tavern, you know, for the effort... and patriotic service.

Of course, I didn't do that, just making a joke. Honest, Celaphopod. Would I lie? To you?

Maybe you shouldn't answer that.

Besides, if you wanted me to be entirely honest about the entire thing, I'd have to point out that by the time Buddy went through the checkpoint, the guards were already pretty testy and a little short tempered. Why? Because when Ruby and Grt went through the detectors, all sorts of buzzers and beepers went off. If you'll remember, both Ruby and Grt have these extra-dimensional bags of holding in which they store all sorts of manna. Well, they could have had anything in those bags -- nail clippers, a bottle of water, (maybe some juice), a sharpened pencil, or an algebra textbook, you know, dangerous stuff. I mean, if you do one of those:

A plane is flying east at three vortexes a second,
For $K=iD$ Iterations, or at least until it's bedtime,
While one character flashes back leisurely over the course of $t=15$,

Another consumes $y=xt+2$ bottles of Champa'gne® brand Champa'gne® from the Champa'gne® vortex,

A third causes the plane to do loop de loops at the rate of $x=t/3$,

While a fourth worships at the stainless steel alter (because they're not porcelain in them planes, my friends), at the rate of $p=x^2$.

Given that $e^x dy/dx = e^x$ (because it does), why would anyone ever bother with $e^x dy/dx$ and not simplify the equation to e^x at the get-go?

For extra credit, you may wish to determine how many pancakes Nellie ate so very long ago, given that $p = \text{pancakes}$.

Well, you do one of those suckers mid-flight, and you'll be lucky to... um, get the answer right, I suppose.

Look, don't ask me. I don't know why they don't want you to do your algebra homework on an airplane. Maybe it's some conspiracy by the pilots to squeeze out the competition. I mean, you never learn algebra and you're never going to learn to fly an airplane, are you?

Whatever the case, that's not where I was headed -- and oddly, it's not even what's (or was) on Ruby's mind at the moment, 'cause aren't we in a flashback memory recall thing at the present moment?

Whatever.

Truthfully, I don't even mind all of the extra security precautions they're taking these days -- now that the NAS-gh©uls™ have crossed the borders. Of course, it is sort of ludicrous that one of the items on the contraband list is tweezers. I mean, if somebody can take down an airplane with a measly pair of tweezers, something is wrong with the entire system.

But even that's not the point.

The thing is, as Ruby and Grt were helping the security guards to go through their bags, they must have dumped a five foot tall pile of manna on the floor. I mean, you can level an entire vortex with that much manna. So I'm just saying, heads up. If you're going to confiscating 8oz bottles of water or Juicy-Juice, you might want to add eighteen inch long strips of magical ribbon -- a.k.a. manna -- to the list. Just a word to the wise.

Anyhow, the line was really getting backed up by the time Ruby and Grt got through and then it was Buddy's turn. Well, he was wearing that giant cowboy belt buckle of his, steel toed shoes, and a silver ring through his nose. How much metal does a guy need to wear, anyway? And those horns? I mean, the guy must be compensating for something.

Needless to say, the security guards were annoyed that they had to do that magical wand thing on him. And then somebody looked on the computer and it turned out that the Seven Realms hadn't pulled its open warrant on Minataurs yet.

Let's just say, I got that little piece of history dialed in on my crystal ball and whenever I'm feeling a little down, I bring it up. It's not really that long in real time and once Ruby figured out what was happening she started flashing her Dragon Pendant all over the place; but until then, it's golden. I got this editing software. It lets me put action into loops. It's great. I have close ups of Buddy's face, the action goes in reverse and then it starts all over again.

Of course, this is a family book. So without going into graphic detail, we can say with absolute authority that Buddy is not carrying any weapons, K'fr, or contraband anywhere in or on his person.

Not anywhere!

Neither is Nellie. The detection machine didn't so much as peep when she went through -- ring and all -- but then we've already put her through enough torment for a while.

After that, it was a simple matter of walking down the concourse, boarding the waiting plane, and loading up on the free first class amenities. Ruby had lobster for dinner. Buddy had a nice steak -- though he'll tell you it was burnt. Grt opted for innumerable Banana Splits (i.e. one may safely assume that BS tends toward infinity in this here tome), while perhaps unsurprisingly, Nellie wasn't hungry.

And it would be about here that Ruby paused in her reverie. She wondered if she learned anything new about her quest in this retelling.

Let's see?

Buddy didn't have any contraband, that was for sure, but Ruby had known that ever since the security checkpoint.

What else could there be?

Suddenly it dawned on Ruby.

But, no.

Could it be?

No. No!

Yes?

Maybe?

And finally without a doubt it had to be.

Ruby was appalled. Could it really be true that the only reason she had just retracing her steps was simply so the author could relive Buddy's agony and humiliation at the security checkpoint, yet one more time.

But Ruby, why would the author need you to do that? He has the scene dialed in on his crystal ball?

Ditch me! I'll show you, you ungrateful Minataur. Let's take it from the top, shall we? As the troublesome Minataur is guided behind the screen by a hungry -- oh so hungry -- Ogre, who would do just about anything for a free meal at Lucky's Tavern...

For the sake of decorum -- not to mention, good taste -- Ruby suddenly decided it was time to shake her head and snap out of her reverie. Of course, she still didn't completely understand where she was headed -- well, not so much where, as to why. So even though Buddy had explained the plan to her before, she wanted to hear it again.

"Tell me again, Buddy," she began. "Why are we going to Dizzy Land?"

Buddy's nose ring clinked against his glass of Champa'gne®. He wanted to rip the stupid thing out, but he knew he couldn't. He

didn't really feel like answering Ruby's questions -- yet, again. But anything was better than letting his mind wander back to the circular hell it had settled into: the security checkpoint, the ogre, and...

Like I said, anything was better than that.

"Bunch of reasons," Buddy began sullenly. "The first and foremost is to get some independent royalties rolling in -- maybe do a commercial -- and escape from under the author's thumb."

"Reasons that tie directly to the quest," Ruby suggested.

"Cause you got to go somewhere," Buddy replied curtly as he motioned towards the stewardess for more Champa'gne®. He wasn't going to get drunk. He sort of knew that. But you had to do something. And who knew, maybe a hangover would do something about the throbbing pain he had in his hand from when he sliced his hand open. (Yeah, sure, maybe it doesn't make sense now, but you'll see. Anyway...)

"The ball is the Celaphopod's court or whatever that stupid @#\$% author is calling himself these days. You watched that news report right?"

"Yes." Ruby had.

"During the report they sent that Werewolf dude," Jim "and Brad the Zombie off to South En'glund, Lang'don, or somewhere to interview the NAS-gh©uls™, right?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's it. Until the NAS-gh©uls™ are interviewed there's no reason to chase after them. All we have to do is wait somewhere comfortably -- say, Dizzy Land -- until we hear the news report. After that, we make a plan of action based on the clues the almighty author deems worthy of bestowing upon us -- his pawns, in this charade of a story -- and from there we head over to the Etcetera Center to jump vortexes until we get where we want to be." Buddy paused for a moment as if to reflect, but he was just going over the list to make sure he hadn't missed anything. "It's not a complicated plan. It's called waiting. Just have some patience. That Celaphopod is a control freak. Besides, he's the

one with a plot to develop. We're just along for the ride. So, let him do his bit. And while he's working it out, we'll be in Dizzy Land and you can do whatever you want: go to a show, take in a ride, or just relax in the room. Here," he said while handing Ruby a brochure. "Look it over. Plan your trip if that's the way you like to do things. I'm just going to take it easy. Oh, and," he added as an after thought. "I think Steve, that Ranger guy, is going to be there, too. And I'm expecting Crazy George. Originally Jeannette was supposed to play a bigger role and be there as well, but she seems to have a bee in her bonnet about the author these days -- not that you can blame her. But I don't know. I don't think she's got a choice. Now that I think about it, I'm pretty sure she's going to show."

"Why would she? Isn't it obvious she hates the Celaphopod, can't stand to be in the same room as him. It's wrong the way he treats her."

"Yeah, it would seem that way. But," Buddy let his voice trail off.

"But what?"

Buddy ignored her. For the moment he was content to stew in his own juices while plotting his own personal revenge against the Celaphopod.

After a moment or two, when it was clear he had no intention of continuing the conversation, Ruby warned him, "I could make you talk."

Buddy knew that she could. Blast that accursed nose ring! "No need to do that!" Buddy growled. "Look, I'm playing the game your way. I'm being a good Minataur."

"You're drinking like a fish."

Buddy glowered at her as he waived towards the stewardess. "A little more here." The stewardess, of course, already knew what Buddy wanted and in no time appeared with a fresh bottle of Champa'gne® brand Champa'gne® from the Champa'gne® vortex.

“You know, you’re never going to get drunk,” Ruby reminded him as she flicked at the silver ring so the truth of the statement would sink in. “And I’m going to bet that even you are going to feel like death warmed over tomorrow. I took away the pleasurable effects of drinking. I didn’t do anything about hangovers.”

Of course (by now), Buddy already knew that. He put the glass of Champa’gne® down slowly. Truth was, he felt like crushing the glass to pieces in his hands. Maybe the pain from fresh shards of glass slicing through his fingers would deaden some of the pain he was experiencing from K’fr withdrawal. He was going to get that author if it was the last thing he did. This was all his fault.

Which of course, isn’t true. Not at all. I said, go to M©ther G©©se Land. You think M©ther G©©se cares if you do K’fr? Not one bit. No more than the Rat. So in truth, Buddy’s problems with K’fr were his own doing, not mine. But you know what it’s like trying to reason with these junkies, they’re always trying to blame someone else for their own problems.

Anyhow, not to worry, nothing had changed since I began my little diatribe. Buddy was busy tossing back another glass of Champa’gne® brand Champa’gne® from the Champa’gne® vortex (the official drink of TVA if you hadn’t noticed) as he fought the irrational impulse to destroy his hand -- as if that was going to help with the pain.

And as for Ruby, she did the best that she could to ignore Buddy’s drinking as she asked, “You were going to tell me about Jeannette,” which wasn’t altogether true. But Buddy had other things on his mind, so he let it go, and so should you.

“The thing is, Jeannette is an imaginary character -- no different than you or I.” And that’s just the sort of statement that can be hard to accept -- hitting as close to home, as it does -- so you will forgive Ruby if she chose not to embrace the full implications of what Buddy was saying. “See, the Celaphopod created Jeannette’s role, right? So, he controls her. If Jeannette

really were to cut off all contact with him, it would be akin to her character committing suicide.” Buddy paused for a moment before he asked, “Has Jeannette ever seemed like the type of woman who would willingly commit suicide?”

“No,” Ruby had to agree. Jeannette was a lot of things, independent, smart, resourceful, career minded, and ruthless, but not suicidal.

“I don’t know what the deal is between those two,” Buddy continued. “Maybe it’s a momentary gag, a little tiff between an author and his... whatever. Or maybe it’s something deeper and more central to the plot. You know my agent got me a copy of the script before I signed on.”

“And...”

“And originally Jeannette was going to go on the quest with us.”

“What happened?”

“When Minne got pulled from the script, all of a sudden Jeannette said she was only available to do the news desk routine.”

And just between you and me, Buddy had taken that news sort of personally. You know, like an insult, like he wasn’t good enough for Jeannette -- the little stuck up Elf. And it would be about here that Buddy does lose his self-control and shatter the glass of Champa’gne® he was holding -- doing quite the number on his hand.

But as I don’t feel like carrying a little detail like that forward, and they do pack first aid kits on all TVA flights (they haven’t lost a passenger yet, you know), right here is the last you’re going to hear about that. (See, I told you it would make sense, eventually. So if that’s all settled, we can leave that trivial detail behind us, never to be brought up again...)

Anyway, while the stewardess patched Buddy up, Ruby mulled over his words. And when the stewardess was done and they were finally alone again, Ruby noted, “It’s pretty clear from

what you said that the author isn't going to let Jeannette go. She's going to get pulled back into the story."

"That would be my guess. In theory, all of us characters have free will," in story and out, "but the fact that we are having this conversation about Jeannette at all is pretty solid foreshadowing."

"But why?"

"You're approaching it wrong," Buddy replied with annoyance. He was sick of this conversation, this flight... In fact, this whole blasted chapter was taking too long. It seemed like it was never going to end. "You're looking at it from the point of view of a method actor or someone with a walk on role. This is your story." Buddy shook his head, what was he thinking. "This is my story. It's called Minataur Tails. Just trust me, Celaphopod's are lazy. They can barely get out of bed by ten to catch a good wave. If you think that freak's rewriting a scene just because it drifted the wrong way, you don't know him very well."

Ruby considered this, but it was an alien way for her to contemplate her existence as a character.

"Look. We're just character's. It's not our job to resolve plots. Our job is to be likable, so readers will send in letters saying I really liked Buddy! What a Minataur! I sure hope we'll see more of him in the next book."

"You mean like Grt."

Upon hearing his name, Grt looked over at Ruby. It was clear she was deep in a conversation with Buddy, so Grt put his headphones back on and called up front to the cockpit for another barrel roll. The pilots were only too happy to comply as Nellie's complaining retort echoed loudly through the thin bulkhead doors.

"Yes. Exactly. That's flavor text. Readers eat it up. Don't worry about what the flavor does to the plot, that's the author's problem."

"But don't we need resolution?"

"Before he even started the book, the author had some sort of resolution in mind. Isn't that what he's always saying? 'A beginning and an end, from there it's just connecting the dots.'"

Ruby had never heard the author say this and let's face it, I wasn't there or I could have described it better. It's an artistic process full of subtleties and finesse that a mere Minataur could never hope to comprehend.

Buddy snorted in disgust. It was the author's fault he felt miserable. Meddling authors and their personal anti K'fr campaigns, just because they couldn't handle the stuff..

"Don't worry about the plot, the resolution, or anything. Just go to Dizzy Land and have a good time. That's all anyone is expecting from you. When it's time to leave, we'll know. We'll know exactly where to go and what to do."

Ruby shook her head. It couldn't work that way. Wouldn't there be too many loose ends? Unresolved issues of the plot? But then, Ruby also knew that Buddy was right. Loose ends, unresolved issues, she could already hear the Celaphopod saying in that smug way of his, 'That's what sequels are for.' And suddenly, she wondered how many books it would take before she got a satisfactory explanation as to why every Troll she'd ever met thought they would own whatever company they worked for in twenty years.

Yet still, before the scene faded away with her drifting off in her own thoughts, Ruby had one final question for Buddy. "What about when Jeannette tried to make the riders disappear on the news?"

"Oh, that. Jeannette was trying to effect the plot and the nature of another character -- in this case the NAS-gh©uls™. That's a whole 'nother ball of wax. It goes far beyond the scope of flavor text."

Speaking of which (flavor text, that is), Buddy had to fight the sudden urge to hit something or break another glass as he gulped down the rest of the Champa'gne® in his glass as fast as he could. "Notice all the Champa'gne® I'm chugging."

"I have sort of noticed it," Ruby had to agree. There was no doubt about it, as the flight went on, she had grown more and more uncomfortable sitting next to Buddy.

“It’s a major part of my character to go for K’fr, alcohol, basically anything that will get me high. You’re not going to change that. It’s beyond your power. Sure, you can cast a spell so the alcohol won’t work, and you might be able to physically stop me from drinking, but I wouldn’t count on it -- and I wouldn’t try it,” he warned through tightly clenched teeth. “And you definitely can’t make me want to stop drinking.”

Buddy, however, failed to add that wanting to stop drinking was a change that could only come from the inside. He had to want to change himself before he actually would.

What the Gra’gl is this? Buddy thought to himself. Get the @\$% out of my head! When he caught up with that Celaphopod dude, he was going to pound on his face for a few minutes as repayment for putting Sch©lting, worthless, crappy thoughts like that into his head. Oh, and that incident at the security checkpoint! That was all the author’s doing as well! He’d pay! Oh, yeah! He was going to pay!

Buddy growled as he gritting his teeth, clenched his fists, and tried to continue his conversation with Ruby as best he could. “Jeannette was unable to affect the NAS-gh©ul™ because it would have interfered with the NAS-gh©ul™’s freewill. You can’t do that. You, me, Crazy George, all of us major characters have complete and total freedom. It’s all we really have when you get down to it. So, use it. Enjoy it.”

“But what about Jeannette? You said in the original script she was going to go on the quest, but now she wants out. If she has freewill, why would she show up at Dizzy Land?”

“Because freewill only goes so far. At this point, she doesn’t have a choice,” Buddy growled as he snapped his fingers for more Champa’gne®. “Look, it’s simple. It wouldn’t have made any sense if Jeannette could change the nature of the NAS-gh©uls™ by just saying something on the news that she made up on the spur of the moment. But by the same token, the story won’t make any sense, now, if she doesn’t show up at Dizzy Land. There’s just too

much foreshadowing. So, she has to show up. She doesn't have a choice."

Oh, yeah.

That was clear.

Ruby's head was reeling.

Sense? How could Buddy talk about sense? None of it made any sense.

But, no. That wasn't right either. If she thought about it the right way, sort of slant ways, at an angle, all backwards and forwards and upside like looking at it through a mirror, reversed, pulled out, and backwards, then it made a perfect sort of sense... before it became all twisted, distorted, and lost its meaning once again (ever and ever, once again).

It made Ruby's head hurt. She thought she was beginning to understand what had pushed George over the edge and turned him from plain old George into the Crazy George we all know and love so well. It was from looking at reality backwards and at odd angles, so you could get that leverage you needed to squeeze miracles out of a tiny little insignificant piece magical ribbon that looked suspiciously like a bookmark or piece of wrapping lace.

Still, Ruby was confident she had a greater understanding of magic. She just hoped they wouldn't be calling her Crazy Ruby in three books when the series finally ended.

Obviously, Ruby had plenty to think about. I mean, if she was beholden to the author, then could she really have freewill? Or was she stuck like Jeannette? And if Jeannette was bound to the Celaphopod in some way, then how about The Dragon? Did he have freewill. Or was he above it all since he was the one who had commissioned the books in the first place? And then, what did that say about the author? Did he have freewill? He liked to pretend that he did, that this was his creation, that he was above it, controlled it; but was that true? Or would it be more accurate to say that like every else, he given up his own freewill when he had

given it to his characters and creations and allowed them a say in his stories and their existence and taken the commission in the first place?

But then, it really was too much to think about and hold in her head straight (mainly, because that's not the way magic works, something that you hold onto and look at head on and straight).

So for whatever the reason, Ruby shook her head to clear her thoughts, raised the glass of pear juice she had been nursing up to her lips, and looked around the cabin as Buddy chugged -- yet another -- glass of Champa'gne® brand Champa'gne® from the Champa'gne® vortex. Grt punched in the code for an outside loop on his armrest control. And Nellie moaned pathetically from the bulkhead lavatory.

Ruby was suddenly struck by an overwhelming sense of déjà vu. She knew without question that in a moment she would begin to recall her escape from the author in the hopes of finding a clue of her current predicament, but all that would become of it would be a repeat for Buddy of his humiliating experience at the security checkpoint. And then, after that, she would have the same exact conversation with Buddy concerning freewill -- word for word -- that she had just had -- before once again jumping to the beginning of the chapter and starting it all again.

It was an endless loop!

It was a cheap literary device!

And you had to admit, a cheap literary device was just the sort of thing the Celaphopod was likely to use.

But there was nothing Ruby could do about it.

She looked around helplessly. She was on an airplane flying east at three vortexes a second. But magic wasn't allowed In Flight. She could fight it, she knew. But for some reason, she sensed intuitively that Trans Vortex Airlines ran a tight ship. In fact, that might have been their slogan: TVA, We run a tight ship™. The fact of the matter was, her magic wasn't going to work. She'd just have to wait it out.

I mean, sure. One or two readers might actually go back to the beginning of the chapter and read it through one more time (maybe even twice) just to make sure the Time Loop gag was consistent. But eventually, most of them would move on, except for maybe that Hobbling looking kid in Duluth. And when they did, the spell would be broken, Ruby would break free, and the plot would move forward.

In the meantime, what was there to do?

Ruby looked around and waited for the fade out to happen. As she did, she suddenly felt very sympathetic for the other characters around her. If she didn't have any choice but to repeat the chapter, then that meant neither did Buddy or Nellie or Grt.

Grt wouldn't mind, he was having the time of his life.

But Buddy and Nellie, she had to feel sorry for them, their lot, the role they had drawn (or had drawn for them), it wasn't to be envied, not at the moment...

But before she could continue the thought further, Ruby finally did fade away as she had been so sure that she would.

And yeah, well. Ruby might feel some sympathy for Buddy. But the author, he was quite certain now that the choice of casting Buddy for the Minataur lead in this little novella had been a colossal mistake.

I don't need some freethinking, renegade, K'fr'ed up wackoo putting any ideas into Ruby's head that don't belong there.

Freewill?

I think not.

That pretty much says it all.

And don't be thinking you can go and read the next chapter now. I need to keep Ruby occupied while I figure this mess out. So, march your eyeballs right back to the start of this here chapter and give it another looksey.

I don't care how many times you've read it. I'm talking to you, Kid in Duluth.

I'm counting on you, so back to the beginning with you.

10

A Plot Gone Cuckoo

Deep in the heart of an institutional K'fr recovery center, Randall has just been returned to his bed in, you guessed it, the dead of night. They just got finished with him in the therapy room. He will never be the same.

Minne (our friend the Minataur) mulls over the idea of killing Randall as an act of mercy and kindness, but they have been telling him murder is wrong since he checked into this place. They've been telling him lots of things are wrong. For instance using K'fr is wrong. Telling lies is wrong. Hurting other people is wrong. And most especially, killing other people is wrong -- especially, say, killing someone in their sleep just because they may have had some sort of breakthrough experience in therapy, then that would be most definitely wrong.

They kept on saying that last one over and over again as if that was the most important lesson Minne needed to learn while he was here. Especially that Nurse Wretched. Why, just this night before lights out, she had said, "Now we're expecting Randall to have some sort of breakthrough experience in therapy tonight, so don't any of you think about suffocating him with a pillow before tossing this water therapy unit out the window to aid in your escape." It was eerie, Minne thought, especially how she had turned and said the next part directly to him. "This water therapy unit is really heavy. It serves almost no purpose whatsoever and it would take someone really-really strong like an Indian or a Minataur to lift it up let alone throw it through a window, so I don't want you getting any brilliant ideas, Mr. Movie Star."

But that was all in the past, so Minne shakes his head to dissipate the memory, focus his mind, and re-shift the story back into the present tense. Those last two are definitely easier since he checked in to rehab -- focusing his mind and thinking in the now, that is.

Shaking his head again, Minne idly wonders how much K'fr that author guy must use. His thoughts are all over the place. But then, that "Stinking Thinking" is exactly the type of negative self-talk the staff has been urging him to avoid. And anyone could see, it's also the type of slanderous gossip that would get you cut from a series -- if you hadn't already been...

Still, he needed to stay in the now. So, Minne quietly pulls out the letter he received earlier in the day from the Celaphopod and rereads it silently to himself in the dim light of the sleeping ward.

Howdy Minne,

I just wanted to write you a short note to let you know everything is fine. Minataur Tales is really taking off. Buddy is playing the title role to perfection. I know some of us were a little hesitant because he came from the classical stage, but he's made the transition.

No worries. The production is going great.

Right now the crew is headed to Dizzy Land for a first class all expenses paid layover while we work out some chinks in the story. And though that might sound bad, the truth is, we're all hoping we can turn it into one of those joint marketing tie-ins. Can you say residual royalties that go on for ever and ever? Ka-ching!

And then, Nellie. What a team player. She and Buddy have that special onscreen chemistry the critics are always talking about, real presence, real feeling. And talk about a live wire! What a party girl! Nellie and Buddy must be having the time of their lives -- you know, judging from the squeaks and squeals that are emanating from behind the

closed doors of their own private bedroom in suite 50-01 on the top floor of the Future Spa resort (for which the door entry code is 655321, should you ever be in the area). I mean, they must be having a great time. One can only wonder what they're up to. But then, you read the script... and you know Pixies.

Anyway the thing is, all is well. The production is going smoothly... wonderfully, fantastically, really super-super marvelously unbelievably extraordinary superbly terrifically awesomely incredibly magically delightfully grandiosely smashingly supercalifragilistically great. Truthfully, I'm not really sure if all of those are real words, but you get the idea. Things are fantasgamorphically splendid. Once again, not really sure if that last is a real word, but the Rat uses it, so what the hay.

The point is, things are going well. So well, that it looks like we're a shoe in for another sequel. But don't worry, we've got Buddy slated for that one, too. So, you just take your time, relax, and enjoy your recovery. You've earned a vacation, so concentrate on getting better, and let someone else bear the burdens of the spotlight for a while.

Wishing you all the best as you let your cares, your world, your career, and your life drift on by,

Your friend,
Celli

To Fr@ck with this, Minne thought as left the present tense behind and got back with the program -- that's THE Program, mind you -- and fell back into the past-tense drama of THE story where he knew he belonged (and as addicts are often so prone to do).

Ignoring the voices in his head -- that a boy, Minne! -- Minne crumpled the letter from the author into a ball and silently tiptoed over (as only Minataurs can) to where Randall was sleeping.

"Psst. Hey, Randall. Psst. Hey, Randall," Minne whispered as he shook Randall awake.

“Hey, Buddy,” Randall said in a happy, sleepy, blissful sort of way. He liked playing checkers with Minne. They were friends, buds.

Randall was so cheerful. But he had called Minne by that hated name -- That Hated Name! -- it was like Randall wanted to die. If one more person calls me Buddy, I’m going to...

But Minne wrestled control of his emotions mid-thought, cutoff the stinking thinking, and slowly counted to ten.

Randall waited patiently. He could see what Minne was doing. He’d been down this road himself, so he wasn’t surprised when Minne reached ten and said, “I’m breaking out. You want to come with me?”

“No Buddy, I’m good here. I just made some really good progress -- real insight into what I really want, who I really am. For the first time since I can remember, I’m feeling good about myself, as if I’m in control of my own destiny and the universe is on my side backing me up. I really just want to reach out and help. Pay society back.”

It was sad.

It was sick.

It was pathetic.

Randall the Conman -- and the name sort of said it all. Randall, the guy who would cheat at cards, checkers, basketball, anything really, it didn’t matter. He was a born thief. He would cheat anyone, any time, anyplace, anywhere at anything. He was a natural -- one of those blessed few who robbed others for the sheer joy of it.

“I’ve got a score to settle,” Minne went on. “I could really use your help, Randall.”

“Hey that’s great, Buddy,” Randall said as Minne grated his teeth. “So, you’re finally working on your third step... or is that the fourth? Eh, it doesn’t matter. Paying other’s back: I’m proud of you, Buddy.” So, happy to see his friend off, Randall sat up. “Could you hand me that there pillow, Buddy?”

They -- someone, the author, maybe that Nurse Wretched, she was always so cheery and bubbly -- had gotten to Randall. They had destroyed who he was and turned him into something else -- a joke, a farce, nothing more than a bit of comic relief in a throwaway chapter of a throwaway book -- and here he was, mocking him with that hated name.

Minne knew he had to do something, to put an end to... this.

Minne reached for the pillow... slowly. He held it --menacingly -- over Randall's face. And then, he... he... he fluffed it.

Disgusted with himself, the moment, and the scene: Minne stood up. He had to get out of here before they worked their program on him -- and turned him into a clown just as happy and carefree as Randall was.

That wasn't for Minne. He had to work his own program. He couldn't adhere to some simplistic twelve step formula -- that anyone could follow -- and hand his life, will, and destiny over to some Gra'gl loving (or Gra'gl hating, for that matter) higher power.

No! If Minne wanted to get back on top (of the marquee, that is!) with his name shining in the spotlight, he was going to have to blaze new ground and orchestrate his own career recovery path.

The words of Nurse Wretched came back to Minne as he surveyed the badly dented water therapy unit before him. It had always seemed to Minne that the machine served no purpose, but then this must be its purpose -- for hadn't the author explicitly said, there was never anything that was mere flavor text.

Not thinking clearly, and therefore satisfied with that flimsy rationale, Minne bent to the task before him, wrapped his arms around the heavy machine, and with muscles straining, slowly but surely lifted the massive solid-granite unit off the ground. And then, taking a dozen seemingly precarious steps (but well founded in tradition, and with the loving support of a community of like minded brothers and sisters behind him), Minne staggered across

the room. Where, in a celebration of personal empowerment, Minne threw the patently worthless machine out the window. Climbing through the hole he had created, Minne quickly ran across the well-tended institutional gardens before disappeared into the moonlit night as countless others had done before him.

Randall and the rest of the ward cheered Minne on in a spirit of comradeship, open acceptance, and group solidarity.

But in the morning, Nurse Wretched would come in, start her shift, and wonder why no one ever used the front door.

I mean after the first week, wasn't everyone in the program given a key?

(And chapters like that are why they call me the world's greatest two-bit hack of an author -- and don't you forget it.)

11

Sanchez: A Working Gnome
(Fake It Till You Make It)

(Hard at work, busy trying not to get screwed by the Rat, the author was unable to attend the staff party in Dizzy Land. However, not to fear! For the author has pieced together the events that unfolded in Dizzy Land using the latest cutting-edge journalistic techniques for which he has become famous.)

(Or at least, journalistic techniques for which he would have become famous had he ever practiced journalism. Mostly, he just got a debriefing from Ruby and Grt for this next little part.)

(And made up stuff to fill up any holes in their stories.)

(Or whenever they were lying. You see, Ruby kept on insisting she had a great time in Dizzy Land, but what are the odds of that? A vortex designed to cater to a visitor's every need, whim, or desire no matter how small, trivial, or minor. Where's the fun in that? So, you know Ruby is lying when she said she had a great time. She probably felt sorry for the Rat. Here he had spent all this time and effort putting together a theme park and it sucked -- like big time. You can see how she'd feel sympathetic for the maladjusted little fur ball.)

Ruby tried to put on a happy face. She had heard so many wonderful things about Dizzy Land, but now that she was here, it all seemed so extraordinarily disappointing. Over ten thousand square miles of rides, amusements, shows, shops, and exhibits: really, wasn't that going overboard? You just knew the stuff in the back corners, like, just totally blew.

But the paparazzi was following Ruby around taking her picture and she didn't want to seem like an ungracious guest, so she did the best she could to smile, giggle, and laugh as she went on the rides. I'm sure she went on that ride that was based on that big hit movie from, like, ten or twenty years ago when you were a kid and maybe didn't know any better, and then there was that other ride, it was pretty old and rickety; but really, what's the point of taking a trip to Dizzy Land if you're not going to check out the old stuff in the back rows. I mean, it had pretty lights and surrealistic sound effects and in the middle there was that unexpected part that scared Grt and almost caused him to jump out of his seat.

OK. I know. I know. Really crappy descriptions -- even more crappy than usual. Look, I wasn't there. It says so at the beginning of the chapter. That miserable Rat was trying to cheat me and instead of having fun on the roller coasters, I was still reading a two thousand page contract because -- apparently -- children have bedtimes in Duluth. Way to go, mom!

Anyway, the thing is, I wasn't there. And if you think I'm going to pick up a brochure, so I can say nice things about what they've done to Make Believe Land or whatever they're calling that new addition they just opened up (and trust me, they're always opening up some new attraction), then you've got another thing coming. A cross promotional deal is supposed to be a two way street. They are supposed to treat me like Emperor of All the Known Vortexes for two or three months (maybe a solid year), put me up in the presidential suite, give me unlimited access to the park, an open account for room service, and maybe set up some quality one-on-one time with a famous furry female lead -- you know, a little cos-play action, a little wine, a little song, turn the lights down low, and so on.

And in return for all that, I write a line or two in a book that says, "Wow! I never knew life could be so enjoyable. After my next book I'm going to Dizzy Land. Again!"

Well, that might be how it should play out, but when you stiff arm a guy with a strangulation contract, bitter feelings just sort of have a way of seeping into the picture. So if you've seen the photograph of the Rat hanging out on Ruby's shoulder and they look like they're having a wonderful time together, take it from me, it was horrid. A rat? Just think about it. Don't they spread the plague or something?

So, where was I? Oh, yeah.

Ruby had been running herself ragged trying to keep up the charade of happiness and she needed some time alone, so she could curl into a ball and just cry quietly to herself about what a let down Dizzy Land had been.

Unfortunately, she was at the Tram-Tram station and her publicity contract said she had to watch the fireworks, like, again. Truthfully, she was hoping the fireworks would look better from a different vantage point. You see, she'd seen them the night before from the hotel suite and they were so close -- virtually exploding against the walls of the Future Spa tower -- that you couldn't take

it all in. It was just one big, gigantic, bigger than life explosion that just went on for hours, so tonight she thought she'd take a chairlift ride with Grt during the show and see them from afar.

Now, I won't go into how pathetic it is to have to shoot off fireworks every night. I mean, if they really had anything going on in Dizzy Land, fireworks would be extraneous. What are they celebrating anyhow?

How boring it is, I guess.

Anyway, they shoot off over ten thousand rockets every night -- and try to sleep with that racket going on, the explosions echoing off the wall of your hotel suite. I mean, can you imagine the annoyance? Or like, if you had a hangover from sucking down $y=xt+2$ bottles of Champa'gne© brand Champa'gne© from the Champa'gne© vortex (and you do the math, because I can't), then booming fireworks that shook the very walls of your supposedly soundproof bedroom and which filled the night sky with explosive delight would be nothing more than a cruel reminder of how badly you just want to sleep.

But whatever.

Ruby was down in the Tram-Tram station going nowhere fast when she heard the familiar voice of Igor the Troll calling, "Ruby! Hey Ruby! Is that you?" which caused Ruby to pause and look around, because that's what folks typically do when they hear a familiar voice calling their name.

Of course, it didn't take Ruby but a moment to spot Igor in the conductor's chair of the Tram-Tram...

And really, just what the heck is a Tram-Tram anyhow? Why can't we just call a spotlessly clean subway station where the trains are always on time what it is?

"That's enough!"

Apparently, I'm annoying the star.

"Behave Celli, or I'm not going to tell you anymore."

Fine! I can see how it is. Ruby's got a big fat publicity contract with the Rat and she doesn't want to ruin it by...

"I'm warning you, Celli."

OK. Fine. For the sake of everyone, I'm just going to put my critical facilities on hold -- as I suggest you do, as well -- and accept what Ruby has to say at face value. She had a wonderful time at Dizzy Land.

"That's better."

A few gold and people will say anything.

"I'm warning you, Celli."

Fine!

Ruby was happy, elated, and giddy with delight. And what's more, she was impressed by the Tram-Tram's. I mean, who knew riding a commuter train could be so much fun? And then, there was her friend Igor -- the bus driver straight out of TDBQ.

"Hi Igor," Ruby said cheerfully.

"Howsdeedoos, Eegor," Grt said, waiving happily.

"Come on. Jump in," Igor invited them. "I'm just going off duty, so I can take you wherever you want to go."

"We were going to watch the fireworks on the chairlift," Ruby replied.

"I know a better place than that," Igor said conspiratorially as he put the Tram-Tram into gear.

The scenery was wonderful. It was everything you could have ever hoped for in a theme park. (Rubies words, not mine. But then, since I never bothered to look at a brochure, I might as well go with Ruby's description of the ride.) And the area she said she remembered best was the one done up to look like something out of a Nurse Suzy storybook, complete with purple trees growing in isolated stands and long necked multi-eyed creatures with odd appendages walking hither-and-thither, this way and that. Of course, what Ruby liked best about the exhibit was the reassuring simplicity of it all -- which basically means, everything was

painted from head to toe in the same simple pastel color. So, if a Thing-a-Suraous was blue, then it was blue from the tip of its toes to the end of the thing-a-majig on the end of its trunk-a-mazoo. Needless to say, Ruby was in Nurse Suzy Heaven. She'd grown up with the Nurse Suzy books, as had every other kid she knew, and was delighted to see it come to life -- as only they in Dizzy Land seem to be able to do (on account of those strangulation intellectual property rights contracts, I suppose.)

Anyway, Igor even rolled down the windows on the Tram-Tram, so they could hear the lively call of the trumpet birds going 'trumpet-two' and 'honky-honk-honk-at-you'.

It was magical, fantastical, or as I like to say, magistical. And just at the edge of the magistical world of Nurse Suzy, they came to a bridge, which just so happened to be the perfect spot from which to watch the firework display -- mainly because you could see the reflection of the explosions off the surface of Lake Dizzy while at the same time hear the echoes of the explosions as they bounced off the walls of the Future Spa tower.

"This is really nice," Ruby said awestruck.

"Des da bestest seats id da house," Grt agreed.

"The real bestest seats are on top of the Tram-Tram," Igor replied as his eyes lit up. And with just a little encouragement from Ruby, he popped open the access hatch and the trio made their way onto the roof.

Now, this was the best seat in the house. It was fantastic. And best of all, the fireworks would go on for hours. And not only that, but this being Dizzy Land they had every type of firework you could imagine. There were, of course, the old traditional fireworks -- that are so common in your backwater vortexes -- that look like French fries and cloudbursts. But that was just the start. There were also fireworks that would explode into a herd of Pegasus that trampled across the sky, fish that swam through the air, and a dazzling dragon that dove into the lake right next to a cruise boat out for a late night dinner excursion. Ruby had read about that in the brochure. It was a pirate dinner cruise where you

could sign up as either a pirate or a captive. If you were a captive, you had to walk the plank and the cruise ended with a tour of an undersea garden complete with Mermaid escort.

Ah, maybe some other night, Ruby thought as she settled back and relaxed. But then, all of a sudden, out of nowhere, Ruby had an unsettling feeling, as she realized this -- all of this -- was exactly the type of flavor text Buddy had been taking about (nearly two chapters back) on the plane: Tram-Trams, a pirate cruise, and Nurse Suzy.

It was odd. There was something not quite right about that last one, but Ruby couldn't put her finger on it. She knew she had enjoyed the Nurse Suzy books when she was younger. There had been seventeen of the books in all. Odd that. She could remember that there were seventeen books. She was sure of it. She would stake her life on it. But to remember the name of just one those books... or the plot... or anything about them -- the details escaped her completely, as if the extent of the flavor text was the extent of Ruby's knowledge of the world around her.

“You know, you really started messing with my head there, Celli.”

“Me? How could I do that? You were in Dizzy Land. Everyone knows it's a strange, story-book, fantasy land where odd things happen and the truly bizarre and outlandish are everyday occurrences that happen all the time.”

“And everyone, also, knows that you eventually came to some sort of ‘mutual understanding’ with the Rat, so you had access.

“Well, yes. Now that you mention it, this is more or less the where and the when of it all, when I finally managed to wrestle that miserable Rat into something resembling submission. And while I still may not have been legally allowed ‘set one foot in Dizzy Land,’ I had come to a ‘tentative agreement’ with the demonic parasite as to a working relationship vis-a-vie you and the rest of the gang. And since that entails a certain degree of control

over the plot, it would seem that at this juncture, I can -- and I will -- revert to a standard past-tense narrative mode and forget that whole charade about asking you how it all went at Dizzy Land, which has the added advantage of removing any leverage you might have over me that you might wish to use to force me to explain how I managed to confuse you for so long and convince you that you were little more than a figment of your own imagination -- the star of your own story... assuming that's where you were going with this little interruption of yours.

"But you can't. You have to explain it. You at least owe me that."

"Really? Do I?"

"Yes. Yes, you do."

"Um, well then. May I suggest you reread the latest edition of very this book and hope that I've finally managed to get it right. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

"Wait. No. You can't fade me out.

"Ah, but I can and I will..."

(But then, this being a later edition of the book -- much later, in fact -- and since I never really been completely happy with this chapter, let me just say that a truly gifted actress -- or actor -- will fall completely and totally into any role they might be playing; that in short, they become the masters of their own deception. And that by knowing this and by choosing one's role wisely, one can easily become the master of their own destiny.

There!

I think that finally explains it all.

"You're forgetting the part about how all the world's a stage."

Oh, hey Ruby. Didn't see you standing there.

"I've been waiting for you to come around to this spot again."

Have you? Really?

"Yes."

You can do that?

“I am the Lady Ruby.”

But why would you want to?

“Because your explanation still sucks. No one should have to try as hard as I did learn this particular ‘lesson’.

Ouch. That hurts.

You’re a big boy. You’ll get over it.

True. So, now. What’s this, again?

“You missed the part about how all the world’s a stage.”

Did I?

“Yes. If we’re all actors, choosing our roles, then it’s important to realize that this always holds -- as in, all the world’s a stage. If you don’t include that, you’re missing half the lesson... and being very misleading.

Well, OK, then. Are we finally saying, lesson complete?

“Sure. And now on to bigger and better things. You remember the last time we talked? And how you gratuitously faded me away...”

Sorry? What was that? The connection’s getting weak.

Ruby?

Ruby?

Well, you know how it is. The Lady Ruby, all busy-busy-busy these days with coronations and functions of state. And here’s little old me, with a defective crystal ball that hardly holds a charge anymore. Going to have to get that fixed someday.

Oh, well.

In the meantime, I believe we were in the middle of something.

So, without any further delay (and/or explanation)...)

“Some show,” Igor said from out of nowhere, breaking Ruby’s chain of thought (from way back when, while also managing to provide a convenient re-entry point back into the story).

But then, in truth, if you looked at it hard (or really, not hard at all) it did sort of seem almost exactly like the type of thing an

author would have had another character say as a sort of distraction. Like, for instance, as a way of preventing Ruby from going down a thought path (or line of questioning) he didn't want her to pursue... or to simply forget something -- like a dream that fades as soon as you awake.

Ruby thought about ignoring Igor and concentrating on the Nurse Suzy books... and then beyond that or before that, there was, like, something else... something to the side or in the margins. Something... perhaps more important... than this, here, now...

"Wow! Look at those birds?" Igor interjected. "Are they swans? Chickens? No. What are those, Ruby? Are they geese? Pigeons? Crows? Ducks? Pheasants? Whooping cranes? Parrots? Blue jays? Mocking birds? Owls? Ravens?"

It was pointless. Ruby knew the moment had passed. Whatever the thought had been, it had slipped from her fingers. So putting an end to Igor's endless list, Ruby simply noted, "They're peacocks, Igor. They're peacocks."

"Peacocks, right."

"Dees sure es da bestest seats in da housies," Grt said enthusiastically as the next firework went off and turned into a swarm of yellow sparkling bees, which buzzed about madly overhead.

"So, why are we here again, Igor?" Ruby asked. But it seemed sort of off, so she corrected herself, "Why are you here, Igor?"

"You wanted to see fireworks. This really is the best seat in the house." And then, turning to look at Ruby, "You seem a little dizzy, Ruby. Dizzy Land" (that's Dizzy! Land, folks) "can have that effect, you know. Thousands of rides stretching over three vortexes..."

"I am sort of overwhelmed," Ruby had to agree as she uncharacteristically cut Igor off. "I had no idea. Dizzy Land sure is something else, alright. But why are you here, again, Igor? You have your own bus in Rigor Pass. Why are you all of a sudden working a Tram-Tram in Dizzy Land?"

“I’m on vacation.”

“Vacation?”

“Yeah, I’d been working on that bus for twenty years and I finally made it mine, so when my cousin said he wanted to go on vacation, it sort of seemed like a good idea to me as well. So, we swapped. He gets to go on a vacation driving my bus around Rigor Pass and I get to go on vacation driving his Tram-Tram around Dizzy Land.” Igor paused for a moment (perhaps to allow the author the opportunity to remind everyone how hard Trolls work, before continuing). “You got to admit, this is a great vacation destination.”

And after a moment’s reflection, Ruby had to admit. It did make an odd sort of sense. Where else was Igor going to go on vacation? The bottom line was, Troll’s loved their jobs. But something about what Igor had said, though, didn’t seem quite right. And then, she remembered the conversation with Buddy on the plane. “You said it took you twenty years for you to own your bus.”

“Yep, twenty years. Hard to believe really. It went by so fast.”

No. That’s not the way it had gone. Ruby had given Igor the bus as a present at the end of The Dragon Bound Quartet. Being the Consort to The Dragon, she could do that sort of thing. But, Igor hadn’t put in anywhere near twenty years. Or at least, he was saying he still had twenty years to go before she gave him the bus as a present. But then, Ruby wasn’t really that sure about that anymore... really, about anything. She had been feeling a little Dizzy lately. (Get it? I’d hate to be too subtle.)

So anyway, Ruby finally said, “You do remember that I gave you the bus, right Igor? I mean,” she continued not too sure now, “I did give it to you, right?”

Igor had to think about that for a second. He was a Troll, just a simple Troll. His lot was to drive buses, trolleys, covered wagons, and the occasional Tram-Tram. But he had never expected to ever say anything more complicated than, ‘where to’.

And he certainly had never expected to be the character entrusted to deliver major plot turning information at the heart of a story.

Still, Igor could not deny the truth behind what Ruby was saying as he mulled it all over in his simple straightforward Troll way. “Well, now that you mention it. I do remember how you gave me the bus -- funny how I’d forgotten about that until this very moment. It’s sort of embarrassing. But then, I guess, I’d just been having so much fun driving that bus around that I just sort of figured the twenty years had gone by in a snap. Sorry about that Ruby. Didn’t mean to slight you.”

“No. It’s OK. I don’t blame you. I’m sure it’s not your fault.” Indeed, Ruby was pretty sure could feel the Celaphopod’s hand at work in this conversation -- as sure as if he was reaching out with one of his slippery blue mind controlling tentacles. But why was he doing it? Why here? Why now? There had to be a reason for it, some purpose. Obviously, there was something to be learned in-between the chinks of the conversation, but what? Finally, Ruby decided the best course was to simply ask, “Why are we having this conversation, Igor?”

“Because we’re friends, Ruby.”

It was true, they were friends, but that wasn’t why they were having the conversation. Ruby had been minding her own business and then a bit character... And was that even her own thought? Is that how she would put it? No, of course not. Rather, an old friend had shown up. And suddenly she was thinking about Trolls and that twenty year riddle again. And when was the last time she had thought about that? Well, ever since her conversation with Buddy on the plane if she had to be honest about it. But then, that didn’t tell her anything. And then it suddenly hit her and Ruby realized that it was almost (Exactly!) like she was reminding an unseen reader of all the relevant history they might need in order to have a better understanding of the story and follow along. But then, the one thing Ruby was absolutely sure about was that she, herself, didn’t understand this particular scene at all, not one little

bit. So, what was really going on here? And why was she thinking about the Troll Riddle again?

And then, of course, there was nothing to do, but ask Igor once again. “Igor, what’s the deal between Trolls and twenty years?”

And like Igor knew. Might as well ask him how an author could treat an actor like a character to which he had given freewill, and then, somehow, force them to do whatever he wanted -- even in an hostile alien vortex controlled by the evil arch-nemesis Demon Rodentia who he (the author) may or may not have had a mutually beneficial cross-marketing deal worked out with... or at least, with whom he was busy negotiating and hammering out the finer points, thereof.

But rather than saying any of that (mainly because he didn’t know), or responding that he was only a simple Troll and so how could he possibly know, Igor thought about the question for a moment, sort of as if he was considering the ramifications of answering the question or how to word it best. But really, he was just stalling as he looked around shiftily. “I don’t really think I can explain it fully without breaking character.”

“It’s OK. The author can’t get into this vortex,” Ruby assured Igor (which just goes to show that even Ruby can be wrong).

But Igor was not so sure. “You sure?” he asked, because, well, because he wanted to be sure. I mean, Celli could put on a ‘happy go lucky’ face, but let’s just say that if you got on his bad side, he could make a certain Rat look like a cuddly Saturday morning cartoon character. You didn’t want to cross that Celaphopod.

Anyway, sensing Igor’s discomfort, Ruby assured Igor, “I think if Celli could get here, then he’d be here. I mean, wouldn’t you?” And then taking out The Dragon’s Pendant and the source of her authority, she added, “It’s OK. I have The Dragon’s protection; and now, so do you.”

Well, let me tell you. That's about as good as it gets, because even I don't dare cross The Dragon. (Honest Celaphopod!)

But even so (or more simply because he still wasn't convinced that it was so), Igor looked nervously around once final time just to be sure. But what do you know? (And I bet you can't guess.) When Igor was finally satisfied that the coast was clear, he twisted off his head.

Of course, being a costume, the top popped right off. And underneath was a hot and sweaty Gnome, who reached down into Igor's belly -- or at least, where his belly would be if it really was Igor -- and searched around inside the padding until he found what he was looking for. His hand came out holding a water bottle.

Grt stared at him. Then he poked Igor quizzically.

"It's foam rubber," Sanchez the Gnome who plays the character of Igor the Troll in the Dragon Bound portion of Dizzy Land explained -- as if that explained anything. "It's a standard Dizzy character costume."

"Youse no Trolli?" Grt asked in disbelief.

"I can't begin to tell you how much trouble I'd get into if the Rat saw me doing this, but heck, you gave me -- or at least, you gave Igor -- a bus, Ruby. And that means, I'm -- or he's -- a made Troll. It's the least either of us can do."

Ruby looked at the Gnome Sanchez who wore the costume of Igor the troll in the Dragon Bound section of the Dizzy Land Amusement Park (and that should be all the confirmation that anyone should need that me and the Rat did, in fact, eventually work out a deal).

And that's where Ruby said, "I'm confused."

(As is everyone at this juncture, I'm sometimes told -- especially by that editor chap. I won't publish his letter about this, though. I mean, I would, if it was worth publishing. But sometimes he just writes short little notes in the margin of my manuscripts before he returns them that say, 'I'm confused here' or 'This is confusing'. And how am I supposed to work that in? Anyway (a word I use entirely too much, I am also told), back in

the story, Ruby had said she was confused; and so, now it was time for another character to speak.)

“Maybe getting a little Dizzy?” Sanchez asked as (we returned to the action and) he took another long drink of water from his bottle while wiping the sweat from his forehead. It was hot in those outfits. “You’re probably hoping for an explanation.”

“Yes,” Ruby agreed.

“Dis bee gooders,” Grt said hopefully. He was on the edge of his seat. He’d seen a lot of interesting things in Dizzy Land the last couple of days, but this was the first time he’d ever seen anyone take off their head. He gave an exploratory pull to his own head, wondering if it would come off.

“Your head won’t come off Grt.”

Grt seemed a little disappointed.

“Not in this scene, anyhow. You see, Ruby, what you have to keep in mind is that I’m a bit character,” a statement which might sort of tie into something Buddy had been saying a few chapters back. “And as such, anything can happen to me in the moment. Anything. If it’s a gag, and the powers that be think it’s going to work or be funny, it’s going to happen -- whether it makes any sense in the long-term or not.”

Ruby didn’t need to spend a whole lot of time wondering who the powers that be might be. This nonsense had the Celaphopod written all over it, but Sanchez was still talking, so Ruby returned her attention to him. “However, beyond that. Nobody, not me, not you, not The Dragon, not Crazy George, and especially not that Celaphopod dude knows when a gag is going to happen before it actually does,” cause you can’t plan humor -- or at least, what passes for humor in my little world. “Trust me, the Celaphopod had no idea that I’d slip on my lines like I did on account of my being so nervous of working with you or that this would lead to the necessity of explaining that I wasn’t really Igor,” (or leading to the necessity of shooting a retake, which we -- meaning I -- simply don’t do on account of my general principles of laziness... not to mention budgetary restraints.) “Besides, the

truth of the matter is -- or at least how I hear it is -- that Igor turned down the role, that he didn't want to do the bit if it meant going to Dizzy Land. But who in their right mind would turn down a free trip to Dizzy Land?"

Ah, but Ruby had the answer to that. "A Troll who has a business to run." Ruby simply could not imagine Roger taking a day off from his bridge for anything -- no matter the emergency or who wanted to trade bridges with him for a day or a week. His own bridge was just way too important to him. And then all of a sudden, Ruby remembered how much time Roger had taken off from working that very same bridge during the course of The Dragon Bound Quartet so that he could help her and it sort touched her heart (and caused any Trolls in the audience to go 'Awww'.)

One thing was sure, Ruby would have to thank Roger properly for all that the next time she saw him. But for now, she had her own business to attend to. "So, do you have a wire? A script? How are you getting your lines?" Ruby asked suspiciously. "Are you just the author now in some cheap disguise?"

"No, no. That's the wrong line. I'm Igor. OK, fair's fair. I'm Sanchez playing Igor. But if I was anything that made sense, I'd be Igor on vacation -- a vacation in which I covered for my brother in Dizzy Land."

"I thought you said that he was your cousin?"

"Did I say that? Well, no matter. Obviously, it's not important. Perhaps the best way to look at it is, since Igor's on vacation, he can also take a vacation from who he is. Sort of like the reverse of going to a convention and putting on a costume of your favorite character. Since Igor's a character," perhaps someone's favorite character, "when he goes on vacation, he gets to take off his costume and suddenly he becomes me, Sanchez the Gnome who plays the lovable Troll Igor in the Dragon Bound section of the Dizzy Land Amusement Park."

But Ruby wasn't buying it, "It doesn't make a lot of sense. Truthfully, it sort of sounds like you're grasping at straws. You

sure you don't have a wire in there? And Celli's feeding you lines?"

"I wish I did. But I don't. Look, it probably doesn't make any sense because you're looking at it the wrong way," trying to look at it head on. (And trust me, if he had a wire, this all would have been a lot easier and I wouldn't have had to chop his quotations up with extraneous explanations, now would I?)

And Ruby had to admit that was probably true. She had been hearing that a lot lately (looking at things sideways and so on), so she reasoned, maybe there was something to it. But now was not the time for that. Right now, she needed to back up and get to something a little more concrete. "Sanchez? Igor? Whoever you are? Just tell me, what's the story on the trolls and twenty years?"

"I don't know," Sanchez said, which I hope you'll concede wasn't overly helpful. But then, he said, "But I'll tell you what I do know," which on the surface sounds pretty helpful. And then, he started to spill his guts and say everything that he could on the subject of whatever came into his mind, which may or may not have been helpful, you know, depending.

Anyhow, this is what he said.

"The whole universe we occupy is made up of vortexes. In different vortexes, things operate differently and the rules of reality change," which, of course, was so elementary that Ruby knew it backwards and forwards, but what she perhaps didn't know was that, "In this vortex -- now, even if he ever got here -- Igor is just a costumed character played by me, Sanchez the Gnome. I, of course, am happy to have the exposure, but I'm a bit worried about being fired for the break in character, so please don't tell anyone. But then, I don't know that I really have the choice, because I'm supposed to be playing Igor. And he would do just about anything for you, Ruby -- seeing as how you gave him a bus and all. I mean, that's a big deal to a Troll."

"But not such a big deal to you, Sanchez."

“No, not really. What do I want with a bus? And what do I care if you gave one to Igor.”

“So, why go into it?” Ruby asked. “Why break the role? What’s in it for you, Sanchez?”

“Me?” Sanchez asked in disbelief. “I just told you, the exposure. I’m a named character now! I’m not just a Gnome! I’m Sanchez the Gnome!”

“Is that really that important?”

“Yes,” was Sanchez’s simple response. “With any luck, the next time you see me I won’t be wearing this stupid costume. Rather, I’ll be playing myself. You have no idea how lucky you are to be playing yourself.”

But Ruby did...

To some degree...

Sort of...

If you looked at the right way...

But then, you know how teenagers are...

Or were...

“If I wasn’t myself, I don’t know who I would be,” Ruby finally replied in a way she hoped wasn’t going to be taken as some sort of doppelganger horror-story foreshadowing. And then thinking it best to simply move on and not dwell on the possibilities, she said, “OK. Let me see if I’ve got this. You, Sanchez are playing my friend Igor the Troll.”

“Right.”

“And, you Sanchez are motivated to break character because that’s the only way you’ll get any face time as opposed to one of those one line-credit thingies at the end of the book that nobody ever reads.”

“Exactly. Somebody reads the tag line and all they see is, the role of Igor was played by Sanchez, and then everyone thinks Igor’s real name is Sanchez and the real Sanchez, me, is suddenly out of the loop.”

“But by revealing yourself as a separate entity, your true existence can no longer be denied.”

“Exactly!”

“So, why would anyone let you get away with it?” Ruby inquired. “Wouldn’t it be easier to cut this scene? What makes you so sure the Celaphopod will ever include it?”

“Ah, because he’s lazy, everyone knows that.” He even said so himself. “So, he’ll never rewrite this. But more importantly, in preparation for playing this role I read The Dragon Bound Quartet,” an activity I wholeheartedly recommend and support for any aspiring character in any fantasy series anywhere... no matter the genre. “And the thing that just sort of jumped off the page at me as I read the TDBQ was how much the Dragon Bound series aspires to be a guide for working magic in the reader’s lives. And of course, to do that every reader has to have an intrinsic understanding of who they are -- at like, a fundamental level. I mean, no matter who we are, we’re all just characters playing roles on a stage.”

“And sometimes the true character is the character behind the role, the one trapped inside, hoping to break-out and gain a little exposure.”

“Yes! Exactly!” Sanchez had to agree. “It can get a little complicated. But the important thing to remember is that in each moment you get to choose which role you’re going to play and in which story you’re going to play it.”

“Is it really that easy?” Ruby asked doubtfully because, you know, it did sort of seem trite and simplistic -- just like the sort of advice you’d read mid-way through a second rate fantasy novel on account of an author wanting to be taken “seriously” and was tired of being called foolish, simplistic, and dumb -- as if farces can’t be artsy and aren’t intrinsically ten times as difficult as ‘serious fiction’. But tell that to anyone and all they’ll do is laugh, which is OK, I guess, because that is sort of the whole point of a farce.

But whatever.

With a concluding commentary track like that, even Sanchez could see the writing was on the wall and realized it was time to move on, so he picked up Igor’s foam head and said, “I’m just a

small time actor in a two-bit pulp novel. Don't feel the need to take advice from me. But yes, it's really is that easy." And with that, Sanchez put Igor's head back on and resumed the role he was paid to perform.

"Now where were we? Oh, yes, the twenty year thing. It's just a figure of speech."

"Besides, who really knows how long twenty years is for any individual character in a world where time flows differently in different vortexes and reality switches on a dime," Ruby said finishing the thought for the Gnome.

"I don't know about all that. I'm just a simple Troll," remarked the character sitting beside Ruby -- whoever he might be -- as fireworks filled the sky overhead.

And as the grand finale stepping into gear and bursts of color lit up the sky, Ruby could feel her heart pound with the echo of every report. She knew in her heart that whatever Celli might have you believe, the fireworks in Dizzy Land really are fantastic.

Unfortunately, it was also clear from the increasing tempo of the explosions, the show would be over soon. But if that was going to be the case, Ruby hoped the show would end with another one of those dragon fireworks like she had seen earlier. And believe it or not, it did. As if custom delivered just for Ruby, a giant screaming sparkling dragon roared overhead, passing mere inches from the top of the Tram-Tram where they were sitting, and raised a gigantic cloud of steam as it splashed down into the water on the other side.

"Yippies!" Grt exclaimed happily as he turned his attention back to their host. He wanted to try and lift the Troll's head off again, but that seemed sort of rude. So instead, he just looked at the neck real close to see if he could see the seam, but he could not. Those costume guys at Dizzy are good.

"Let me take you back to Future Spa," the Tram-Tram conductor suggested. "It sounds like you need to talk to that robot in your room."

Ruby had no idea where that transition had come from, but she knew the character playing the role of Igor, whoever he was, was probably right. What had the robot said his name was, ABE-1-2-3? With any luck when she returned to the room, no one else would be there and she could have a minute alone with the morbidly depressed guy.

(And yes, once again, it was I who first came up with the idea of a morbidly depressed robot. Those other guys? Hacks, the lot of them. I mean, can't they come up with a single original idea? But then, I suppose I should take it as a sort of compliment, a homage, if you will.)

12 #
ABE-1-2-3

Wouldn't you know it? When Ruby got back to the suite, the robot ABE-1-2-3 was alone at the kitchen table. It wasn't actually too surprising that he was alone right now. This was the time of night that Abe usually spent crying and most other sentient creatures wisely chose to stay away.

But Ruby wasn't the sort to callously allow another thinking being to wallow in their tears, so she walked over to where Abe was. He really could cry. Puddles of tears filled the table and pooled onto the floor. But when Ruby was a few steps away from the metal android, Abe managed pause his crying long enough to blow his nose.

"Sor-Sorry," he managed; and then, he started to balling again and resuming his nightly ritual.

Frankly, Ruby was at a loss for what to do about a crying robot. And when you got right down to it, so was everyone else on the cast. That, in a nutshell, is why no one else was there in the room at the moment. That is, of course, if you discount Buddy snoring on the couch where he had finally found some respite from the fireworks, or the occasional giggle emanating from where Nellie and Steve were supposedly sleeping in one of the bedrooms.

Anyhow, the requisite overview of supporting characters, who will play absolutely no further role in this chapter complete, Ruby felt it best to simply ask the robot point blank, “Is there anything I can do to help you?”

“No,” Abe replied simply as he stood and tried to fight back the tears. But of course, he failed [miserably]. Still, tears or not, abject misery or not, ABE-1-2-3 was a service robot [personal, companion, pleasure], so through exaggerated sniffles he asked, “Would you like some dinner?”

And here it should be noted that dozen upon dozens of pots [pans, kettles, and so forth] were simmering away in the kitchenette. Because along with crying, ABE-1-2-3 liked to cook [Italian: contemporary].

Since Ruby wasn’t answering, at least not as fast as Grt thought a person should answer such an important question, Grt took it upon himself to answer for Ruby, “Yes, please, Meester Abe’s.”

And that was all the encouragement Abe needed. The process of serving food seemed to make him happier and he only needed to blow his nose once or twice as he scooped a heaping helping of spaghetti onto a plate, which he then promptly smothered with a rich and thick garlic sauce.

“That smells good,” Ruby observed.

And once again, that was all the encouragement Abe needed. He immediately proceeded to prepare Ruby a platter of her own before retrieving another bottle of saline from the pantry. After filling up his tear ducts, he joined them at the table where he tried to keep his crying to an absolute [caterwauling] minimum.

The spaghetti really was delicious, as was the garlic bread, the Cesar salad, the mushroom antipasto, and the grape juice [squeezed, fresh, in season].

But through it all, it was exceedingly clear that Abe was going to keep on crying. In fact, he had cried like this the night before (and if truth be told, it was one of the reasons Ruby had

wanted to see the fireworks elsewhere). And he had cried like this every night for the past 226 years [3 months, 4 days, 12 hours, 15 minutes, and 21 seconds, but who's counting].

With that sort of track record behind him, Ruby didn't see how she could possibly help him, but she hated to see him suffer, so she asked, "Why are you crying?"

"A broken heart," Abe responded simply [belying, underlying story, tragic loss]. "Rebecca was the most beautiful woman in the entire world and now she's... g-g-gone f-f-fo-for-forever."

It was too much for Abe. Tears streamed down his face [stainless steel, smooth, formed, cool to the touch] with renewed vigor. So much so, that he had to get up and get yet another bottle of saline from the pantry, so it would be close by [in case, just].

"Tell me the story, Abe," Ruby urged him, "about Rebecca."

"I can't," Abe sobbed as he blew his nose.

"Why can't you?" Ruby asked dumbfoundedly.

"It... it... it hasn't been written yet!" Abe eventually managed.

Now, Ruby might be new at the game of reading between the lines of her own story, but even she could see the obvious resolution for this gag [fanciful twist, pleasing to the senses, maybe insightful].

"Maybe you should just tell me the story, Abe."

"But I can't," Abe insisted as he repeated his earlier entreaty. "It hasn't been written."

"Then why not tell me the story of why you can't tell me the story?" Ruby suggested. And you know, this was exactly the type of thing a clever young aspiring sorceress might say [job, good, Ruby].

"The author, the Celaphopod," Abe started.

"Yes," Ruby said encouragingly, unsurprised at the Celaphopod's involvement.

"After writing The Dragon Bound Quartet, Celli held an open casting call. He was looking for another project, something easy to fill the time. He thought writing a short story or two might be the way to go."

Abe paused, unsure whether he should cry, blow his nose, or continue his story, so Ruby prompted him, “And?”

“And I showed up to the casting call,” which all and all should not be too surprising considering the setup. “The Celaphopod had been working on an angle for a tragic romance. The working title was Another Robot Love Story. You know, that tired old story of how a human gets a robot for l-l-lo-love, r-r-ro-ro-roomance, and com-com-companionship.” But seeing how this memory hit sort of close to home [heart, emotional, circuitry], Abe started to heave convulsively. And it really did seem like no matter how many extra bottles of saline he had packed away, he was going to run out of them before the night was through.

“So, what’s the catch?” Ruby asked, which was sort of cold and uncaring, but seeing as how she leaned over and held the sobbing robot to comfort him, we can forgive her for her abruptness.

Of course, Abe only looked at her like he didn’t understand her question.

“You know,” Ruby prompted, “What’s the twist? Why didn’t the story ever get written? Why are you so sad?”

Abe [robotic, three laws, logical, obedient] decided to work the problem backwards. “I’m sad because the story never got written. And it never got written because the Celaphopod never figure out how to resolve the twist.”

Well, that seemed easy enough to Ruby. “So, what’s the twist,” [the gag, ironic, satirical].

“Here,” Abe said as he took a moment away [vacation, time off] from his crying to open a control box on his chest. “See, all of us robots, but companion robots especially, come with these factory presets. See this control here?” Abe asked as he pointed to a dial with the words Chinese, American, French, Fast Food, and Italian written on it. “This is what type of food I like.” Needless to say, it was set to [Italian: contemporary]. “This one,” he said while indicating another control dial, “makes me like doing housework.” And then he started going down the list, “Cooking,

meteorology, science fiction stories, moonlit walks in the rain, and country line dancing. But these over here, these are the real killers. This one makes me loyal to my sweet R-R-R-Rebecca. And this one causes me to be sad whenever she's not around." And it seemed like a long shot, but Abe took a moment to look around for Rebecca. Unsurprisingly, Rebecca was nowhere to be seen, for she had died 226-odd years ago as biological's are want to do. (Of course, "want" might be the wrong word there, so feel free to change it as you desire.)

Abe, of course, not really concerned with the semantics of the thing, fell [collapsed, descended, helplessly] into a spasmodic fit of crying, which wracked him to the very bolts of his chassis core [poetic, albeit, pretentious].

"Is that it?" Ruby asked suspiciously. It didn't really seem like much of a story to her. No wonder it never got written [critic, everyone, is].

"That's the set up," Abe explained. "I'm just a bit character," a [no one, expendable]. "I went to a few meetings with the Celaphopod. His people talked to my people. The factory presents [traits, my] were set. And then, the story was put on ice and never got written. I don't know why." At which point, Abe started balling again with renewed vigor, which at this point you wouldn't think would be physically possible. "It's just so awful. I'm so sad," [miserable, depressed, forlorn], "and the tragic part," [part, tragic, really], "is that if the short story had ever gotten written, I wouldn't be sad anymore."

"Why is that?" Ruby asked hopefully. With any luck this would be it the [twist, flop], the reason she was having this conversation in the first place.

"Like I said, the story never got written, so I don't know the middle part, but I knew the resolution before I signed on. You see that dial there?" Abe asked hopefully, which is quite the trick for a robot who had lost all hope a long time ago. "The sadness one? At the end of the story, someone who cares for me turns the dial," [switch, flicks], "from sad to happy."

“Like this?” Ruby asked sort of rhetorically as she flicked the proverbial switch.

“Yes!” Abe replied enthusiastically with a sudden unexplained joy, well, I suppose only unexplained if you haven’t been following the story. But if you have, Abe’s joy should be, like, sort of fully explained.

“There’s another one, here,” Abe said helpfully as he indicated the offending dial. It was set to [loyalty, undying] which was just sort of thoughtless, cruel, and needlessly oppressive.

Ruby didn’t hesitate to reset that one as well to [freewill]. And having said that, guess what the moral of this chapter is? (Hint: it has something to do with your heart’s desire being there for the taking, just the flip of a mental mind-switch away.)

Of course, having waited 226 years [3 months, 4 days, 12 hours, 47 minutes, and 16 seconds, but who’s counting] for someone to hit those first two switches, ABE-1-2-3 wasn’t about to waste any time answering some question [rhetorical, obviously] from the guy who had arguably gotten him into this mess in the first place -- author’s and their unfinished manuscripts!

But now was not the time for regrets! Abe had wasted too much time on that already. Quickly, for he had been thinking about this for a long-long time [226 years, yada-yada], Abe started whizzing dials around, flipping switches, pulling out governor chips, and disabling control circuitry like reprogramming ancient circuit boards was going out of style.

It was a full ten minutes of [happy, healthy, blissful, and don’t really know how many seconds or care all that much at all how much time it takes] before Abe settled down enough to give Ruby a hug, “Thank you, so very much.”

But it was a still quite a bit longer than that before Abe was able to stop dancing, sit down, and hold a meaningful conversation [celebration, manic, pent up, centuries, released, unexpectedly, suddenly, all at once].

The next morning, Ruby awoke to find Abe sitting down at the kitchen table humming happily away as he downloaded the latest and greatest programs, subroutines, and dance moves for himself from the network.

“So, did we go over everything we were supposed to cover last night?” Ruby asked as she fixed herself a bowl of oatmeal [raisins, brown sugar, cream, just a touch of].

Abe nodded absentmindedly. His concentration was firmly focused on the incoming stream of data. Meteorology: how he loathed the subject [despised, hated]. Of course, he hardly knew why anymore. He was almost done replacing the subject with something useful: two hundred years worth of seedy pop culture and trivia.

“Um, nothing else you need to tell me?” Ruby asked again, a little more directly this time. Somehow, she felt sure that Abe hadn’t told her everything she was meant to learn in this scene [clue, not complete, it’s not over yet].

“Turn a dial, flick a switch: it’s as easy as that,” Abe said offhandedly, but then he remembered the favor Ruby had done for him, so he gave her his undivided attention for a moment [a second, single, and not one micron more].

(Eh, what do you want? If you don’t know, you don’t know. Author [clueless, micron, measure, not time].)

Abe turned towards Ruby and said, “I’m sure you’re sick of hearing it by now, but here it goes all the same. I’m just a two bit character with nothing more than a walk on role in a cheap pulp novel, so don’t take my advice if you don’t want to, but here it is all the same. If you want to be a wizard? A master of your own destiny? Then it might be helpful to remember that you are the only one who can control your feelings, your actions, and your responses. If you’re waiting for some outside force to change your life, you might have to wait a long-long-long time before it happens.”

And then, Abe stopped talking as he started to groove with the latest musical hit from Disgruntled Thrall something called

Push & Shove or maybe that was just the type of music that it was [reference, story, other -- marketing, cross, it starts at home].

No matter, really. Ruby was certain that she had heard all that she had been meant to hear, so in an effort to close the scene on an even happier note [sappy, predictable], she proceeded to dance with Abe as she ate her breakfast and rocked the house.

“Da Meester Lincoln gettee down,” Grt remarked good naturedly as he joined in the fun.

“Oh, there is one other thing,” Abe said as he handed Ruby the current issue of Digital Current between dance moves [the funky chicken, hot potato, etc.]. “It’s got an interview in it from the Celaphopod.” And then after doing the robot [like only, robot can], ABE-1-2-3 added, “You might want to get a subscription. They’re running the Minataur Tails as a serial, you know, printing up each chapter as it gets written.”

And you tell me, how handy is that?

13 #
Digital Current

(Dragon Bound Publishing is pleased to announce our new synergistic relationship with Digital Current.)

Digital Current the premiere source of SF/Fantasy news, literature, and entertainment is happy to bring you the exclusive serialized version of the Celaphopod’s latest story, Minataur Tales. To kick off our coverage of this epic quest, we thought it might be meaningful to spend a few minutes with the world’s greatest author (despite what the folks at Dizzy might believe) and get the inside scoop on what we can expect in the chapters to come.

Digital Current: Are you surprised by the success of Minataur Tales and the Dragon Bound series?

Celaphopod: No. When you're the best, you're the best. There's no point in being surprised at the natural flow of the universe.

DC: You're not very modest.

C: I haven't found that it pays very well.

DC: Speaking of which, any changes to your lifestyle, since the publication of The Dragon Bound Quartet -- aside from the expected fame, fortune, riches, and glory?

C: No, not really. I'm still the same simple, Happy Go Lucky Celaphopod I've always been. Give me a warm beach, something to eat, and a glass of hot chocolate, and I'm satisfied.

DC: How is the current book going?

C: The reader response has been very supportive, and of course by supportive, I mean that hardly a week goes by without someone mailing me their keys. Granted getting keys in the mail isn't as useful as getting an actual car, but now when I travel I carry this big ring of keys around. Sooner or later I'm going to find one of those cars that those keys belong to, and when I do... well, let's just say it will be a hard call deciding which is worth more, getting a new car or the look on the fan's face when I drive away in their ride.

DC: Any hint on upcoming plot twists that you can give us?

C: Well, I will say that just last night I couldn't sleep, so I went for a long moonlit walk down by the ocean. It's very soothing; the crashing waves, the stars. You can see the Milky Way from where I live. Anyway, I'm walking along and plot lines start coming to me. Usually I only work a chapter or two ahead, but I've got some twists lined up now that I'm hoping will flow through the rest of the story. Anyway, what I'm really saying to my fans is, if you know where the book is going at this point, then I'm really impressed because I didn't figure it out until last night.

DC: How does that mesh with a beginning and an end, from there it's just connecting the dots?

C: I think it's safe to view extra twists as just a few more dots on the board.

DC: Any hints to our readers as to specific events, locales, or twists?

C: I'm not very good at keeping secrets. It's one of the reasons I tend to work only one chapter ahead. If I come up with a joke or a twist, I usually use it up right away. I'm not good at holding back. So, maybe I'm wrong about how far in advance I have it figured out. But about hints. No. No hints right now. Not as such. What I would like to do is take a minute and discuss philosophy in general.

DC: You must have at least one little itchy-bitsy little hint you could throw out to our readers?

C: No, no hints. But, I will go into the general structure of the story. In The Dragon Bound Quartet there were four books, and four books are planned for Minataur Tails, as well. In the first book of The Dragon Bound Quartet, Ruby encountered the object of the quest. In the second, she learned some magic. In the third, she explored The Dragon's domain to learn anything she could about The Dragon, his world, and her quest. And in the fourth book, she solved the riddle. And more or less, the same layout is planned for the Minataur Tales with a little more emphasis planned for some after quest clean up.

DC: As we end the second book, would you like to give the readers a recap of any magic lessons Ruby may have learned?

C: In The Dragon Bound Quartet a process to work magic was revealed to Ruby by Crazy George. First, you visualize a goal. Then you figure out the steps needed to accomplish the goal. And then, you do them. And as Crazy George likes to say, there's really nothing magic about it. But that's probably just a crazy wizard talking, trying to keep the competition down. Of course, that's all old news. In Minataur Tales we're looking more at the nature of goals themselves. Is Ruby willing to go blindly wherever the plot takes her? Or is she going to step to the plate and forge her own destiny? I mean, letting someone else do the driving and just going along for a ride can be fun, but then you're stuck wherever the driver lets you off. If you're not in the driver's seat, you might

find the end of the ride is a bad neighborhood -- poverty, divorce, or the NAS-gh©uls™ destroying your land, killing your family, and ruining everything you've worked the whole series to create. Um, if I can make a surfing analogy?

DC: Feel free. This is your interview.

C: If you're out in the ocean surfing, waiting for a wave, you've got to decide what type of wave you're looking for. Are you just going to take the next wave that comes along? Or maybe you want something bigger, something better? If you know you want something bigger or better, it helps to visualize what you're after and then work the steps of magic.

DC: How is this different from the process of working magic in the first book?

C: Maybe I'm going about it the wrong way. Everyone is a fictional character, me, Ruby, the reader, even the folks at DC.

DC: I've always had my suspicions about my co-workers... But all joking aside, I'm not sure I understand what you mean?

C: The concept of a fictional character doesn't stop at the pages of a book. Somewhere, someone is reading these words, and that person doesn't exist anymore than I do.

DC: I don't think very many readers are going to believe you.

C: That's OK. They don't have to. It doesn't change the fact that everyone and everything is a fiction. Nothing is real. The only thing you ever really get to decide is which fiction you are going to believe in. I mean, you can hunker down on your surfboard in the ocean and decide to take the first wave, the second wave, or the next fifty-footer. Or you can work a little magic and the next thing you know you're surfing on Jupiter weaving around Hu'ats and Balloon Heads.

DC: So, you're saying surfing with you is not for the meek of heart.

C: Yeah, but also that everything is a fiction. And there's no sense getting caught up in the specifics. I mean, it's not like it's a unique philosophy I created. Buddhists, Nihilists, even some

Existentialists deconstruct reality this way. And the reason the schema is so popular is because, once you accept the initial premise as Truth -- that Truth doesn't exist -- you are free to choose whatever Truth, Fiction, Lie, or Reality you wish to choose. I mean, that's some power -- creating your own reality. Of course, even once you've created your reality, it sort of helps to remember how to deconstruct it back down into the lie that everyone else seems to believe, so you don't get lost and carried away. That's actually one of the reasons why a person might want to put some effort into studying algebra. It's not really because algebra is intrinsically important, but rather because everyone else seems intent on believing that algebra is important, and that does make algebra important -- if nothing else, as a skill to fall back on should it turn out that the fiction you chose for yourself is a little hard to believe in. I mean, fictions have a way of turning out to be nothing more than, ah, fictions. But really, I don't go for that sort of negative thinking.

DC: Um. OK. Not sure I followed all that, but I think we've taken up enough of your time. Any last words?

C: Yeah, this is Ruby's story. She's the hero. I just get the royalty checks. If anyone is going to solve this mess of a plot line, it's going to be her. I don't want her to read this interview and get the impression that everything is worked out and solved and that the story will resolve itself without any input from her. The Dragon and me go way back. Superior firepower, crushing your opponents under the heels of your boots, listening to the lamentations of the women...

DC: We're a popular press.

C: Gotcha. You know that painting that was stolen from my house, The Eyes of Desolation. It's a self portrait that The Dragon did years ago. It shows him surveying a field of battle strewn with the bodies of the fallen. It's a magical painting, so after you look at it for a while, The Dragon's eyes begin to bore right into your soul. You get the feeling that you are the sole survivor on the battlefield and that The Dragon has just noticed you hiding among

the carnage and the fallen. The Dragon's reaction isn't one of sympathy or concern, but one of murderous intent. As one stares at the painting, they get the impression that it is only a matter of time before the visage of The Dragon will find a way to leap through the canvas and kill the viewer. In other words, at the bottom of our hearts, both of us -- The Dragon and me -- are both very old school. Before Ruby came along, every obstacle we encountered was resolved with anger, violence, hate, and whenever possible, superior firepower, and I mean everything -- from a border dispute to late royalty checks from a publisher who chooses to insist that Minataur Tails is only one book. Ruby shouldn't think I'm going to resolve the plot for her. I'm in there with the other characters mixing it up. In a few chapters Ruby is going to find that her whole world is threatened, everything she holds dear is on the brink of destruction, hand delivered to the NAS-gh©uls™ by yours truly. If she can't figure out a satisfactory solution -- a happy ending -- maybe she doesn't deserve to be the Consort, and maybe she doesn't deserve to have her own series.

DC: That sounds pretty harsh.

C: Don't turn your back on the ocean, dude.

Digital Current would like to thank the Celaphopod for his time and to wish Ruby the best of luck in her quest. We're in your corner Ruby. But seeing as how he's not an altogether bad guy (he's just maybe not an altogether good guy), the author has made special arrangements for his contributor's copy of Digital Current to be delivered directly to your back pocket should you ever find the need to reference previous portions of the story. We recommended reading the chapter entitled, A Plot Gone Cuckoo, to avoid any unpleasant surprises.

Note: Digital Current subscribers not used to our serialization policy will be happy to learn that the story thus far has been inserted into back issues of Digital Current at the rate of one chapter per issue. Please contact subscriptions should you need to

order back issues, extend your subscription post temporally, or wish to place an advance order for the Minataur Tails Omnibus.

14 #
The M-Team

“I pity the Minataur who uses K’fr,” Minne growls as he glares savagely into the eye of the camera and pounds his fist into his hand. After getting up from the weight machine where he had been working out, Minne stretches his legs ever so briefly before hopping onto the treadmill.

As Minne starts to jog, Carl’s voice calls from off screen over the intercom, “Are you ready, Minne?”

“I’m ready,” Minne sneers.

“OK. From the top then. Three, two, one, and action.”

“Hi there,” Minne says once again straight into the camera lens. “I’m Minne the Minataur. You might know me from Arthur Dumcraven’s best selling book, Minne the Minataur Adventures, or my more recent work on stage and screen.”

The view cuts to another camera angle as Minne gets off the treadmill, grabs a towel, and shows off his, um, impressive physique as he walks towards the free weights. Sitting down, he offhandedly does 100lb curls as he continues with the drug rehabilitation infomercial. “Or you may remember me from the Alphabet Book of Mythical Creatures. Minne the Minataur, I’m nestled right between Oliver the Orphan Orc and Paul the Persnicity Pegasus.” Minne shakes his head as if recalling the moment. “We were all pretty blasted when we did that one, but then K’fr messes with your critical thinking that way. One moment you’re a college educated thespian and the next moment you can’t remember the alphabet, where you live, or that the person you’re hitting is someone you care about, like your best friend or your mom.”

Picking up a heavier weight -- the ones that say 500lbs on them -- Minne does fifteen bench presses in rapid succession before he turns to the camera again and continues, "I'm not proud of those days or that most folks now know me from my numerous appearances on the tabloid covers and my long struggle with K'fr." He shakes his head again. "I thought I was stronger than K'fr -- bigger, badder -- but K'fr is stronger than me and it's stronger than you. Doing K'fr is like tiptoeing up to a sleeping dragon and punching him in the face with nothing more than your bare hands. That dragon will destroy you, kill your family, and obliterate everything you worked your whole life for. Stay away from K'fr and let sleeping dragons lie."

"That's a wrap," Carl's voice calls over the intercom. "You deviated a little from the script..."

"GRRR!" Minne replies decisively. He's never really been a big fan of critics.

"But we like that," Carl quickly amends. "It shows truth and honesty, feelings and integrity."

As Minne ducks into the shower, Carl calls after him, "We've got the teleprompters cued up for the next spot, so whenever you're ready."

"Just count it off," Minne snarls.

And what's a stage hand to do, but do as he is instructed. "That's three, two, one, and action, Minne."

Minne walks out of the shower with one towel wrapped around his waist, while he uses another to dry off his horns. "Hi there. I'm Minne the Minataur," Minne says as he introduces himself again and sits down at one of those fancy dressing tables surrounded by lights and mirrors and stuff. Once seated, he starts to put on his trademark silver arm bracers, necklaces, and rings -- and they're like big rings, like really-really big rings -- I mean, like really-really big-big rings with sharp edges and a lot of mass behind them.

Minne clenches his fist as he explains, "I'm getting ready to do a fight scene in a book. I'm going to be the physical embodiment of a metaphor -- a literary allusion, if you will -- as I pound the living crap out of my arch-nemesis Buddy and explain to him in no uncertain terms that using K'fr does not pay! Trust me. I know this."

Minne turns and a second camera catches him gleefully smacking his fist into his waiting palm as tests the fit of his rings. "I don't have to tell you doing K'fr is a bad idea. You already know that. What I'm here to talk to you about today is another problem in our media saturated society: violence in books, movies, and songs. Violence is not the way to solve your problems. In a few minutes, it will look like I'm pounding the crap out of that stinking, role stealing, poor excuse for a Minataur named Buddy. After the first dozen punches, the beating I'll be giving him might even start to look a little gratuitous and over the top. But trust me, Buddy deserves everything he's going to get, that dirty, rotten, no good, two timing, girlfriend stealing, non-union scab of a..."

"Cut! Cut! Cut!" Carl yells frantically. "This isn't the time to air your personal grievances against Buddy. We're doing a public awareness spot to offset the violence in the next chapter. We need this. You need this. Without a warning in place advising children not to reenact the next chapter at home, it'll never get written. So, just control your temper for 30 seconds and follow the script."

Moments later, Minne is taking it from the top, walking out of the shower, showing off his manly form, and toweling off again. "Hi, there. I'm Minne the Minataur. In a moment it's going to look like I'm beating Buddy to a bloody pulp. Rest assured, it won't really be happening. We're both professionals doing a well choreographed dance. It will only look like Buddy is getting hurt. I'll be pulling my punches. The sounds of broken ribs will be done off screen with slap-boards courtesy of Carl, and the blood will

simply be the result of tomato juice packets strategically placed under Buddy's clothing."

As before, Minne sits down at the dressing room table and proceeds to put on those big-big -- like really big-big-big -- face pounding rings. The kind of rings that would be considered weapons if the next chapter was going to be taking place in a vortex that outlawed weapons. Fortunately for us -- I guess, meaning everyone but Buddy -- Dizzy the Rat doesn't share The Dragon's or Ruby's aversion to weaponry.

But we were in the middle of a commercial, so we should probably just focus on that for now. So, without further asides or comments on the size of those humungous rings, let's follow along as Minne flexes his fingers, sneers at the camera, and reads right off the teleprompter because, you know, he's as anxious as anyone to get this show on the road and start working on the next chapter. "Don't try this at home kids. Every year thousands of children get hurt reenacting scenes from their favorite movies, books, and popular songs. Violence is not the answer. It only makes your problems worse."

"And that's a cut," Carl announces. "I hate these public service spots they make us do."

Minne looks up at Carl in the control booth as he cracks his knuckles, flexes his fingers unconsciously, and counts to ten before responding, "And I hate it when comedians try to diminish the impact of a serious message. Would you like me to explain to you, like personally, Carl, why violence is always wrong and never the appropriate response?"

"No-no-no-no. No need for that, Minne. I think you've explained it already," a squeamish Cobalt [Carl, Cowardly, the] replies fearfully. "I'm... I'm happy being an off screen character. Really, I am."

"Just be glad you're not Buddy, then," Minne says as he crashes his fist into the dressing room mirror. "As for me, I hope the star is ready for his big scene."

Man that's a great chapter -- especially that last little bit. There's more in there than meets the eye, you know, which is typically the case when you're dealing with reflected images.

And having said that, did you notice the implied recurring theme -- i.e. the motif -- of the Minataur's hand intersecting shattered glass? My linguistic arts teacher would be so proud, you know, now that I've like, pointed it out to her. She never really was the brightest. But then maybe you already noticed how the book wasn't dedicated to any of my teachers -- sort of odd, how few books are.

15

The Big (Fight) Scene

Ruby spent the next day reading back issues of Digital Current. And she was really, really, really impressed, I mean like really impressed by the author's really extensive use of vocabulary and other really cool tricks of the writer's trade. "Really cool," she couldn't help but saying in a really believable way.

Sorry. I really -- and I mean, really -- had to get that out of my system. Ruby spent the next day reading the story of her adventures thus far -- i.e. the serialized version of Minataur Tails as published in Digital Current. Grt spent the day cooking with Abe in the kitchen. Abe still loved cooking, he hadn't flipped that switch, but he had changed the flavor selector from Italian to Any. He was anxious to try something new. "Two hundred years of pasta," and where only yesterday he would have said, it's enough to make you cry, today he only laughed. "So what do you call this dish, Grt?"

"Et da Lami Chowsees."

"I'm not finding anything on the net under that name."

"I just showsees youse hows to makee eets, you no needs to lookees et ups," Grt said indignantly.

Lami Chowsees -- whatever it's real name -- is really good stuff and if I had the slightest idea of what it was called or how it was spelled it, I might have had someone else say the word instead of Grt. Rest assured, it's delicious and it's not I-talian.

Anyway, on to bigger and better things. Sometime in the middle of the night, the big screen TV overlooking the conversation pit in middle of the Future Spa suite had begun to flash:

Mt. D©©m News
Exclusive Report
An Interview with the NAS-gh©uls™
Tonight at 10:00PM

So, knowing the next development in the plot wouldn't take place until later that evening, the rest of the gang had decided to enjoy Dizzy Land for perhaps the final time. Everybody, that is, except for Buddy who spent his day sleeping on the couch, like again. When he finally woke up late in the afternoon, just before sunset, he was in a foul mood. He got room service to send up a pot of coffee, but the caffeine didn't have any effect on him thanks to Ruby's silver ring. And as such, the vile black brew didn't do a thing for his hangover. He hadn't bothered to shower in days, and he looked like crap, so Ruby was staying in the kitchen and doing her best to avoid him.

Words cannot express how relieved she was when the gang finally returned from Dizzy Land Amusement Park -- a place with so much to do, you couldn't possibly hope to do it all in one lifetime, much less a day.

But Buddy wasn't interested in cross promotion. He was looking for a fight and he didn't waste any time. "Where's my K'fr?" he demanded of Crazy George the moment the wizard stepped into the scene.

But Crazy George was calm and cool, as if he had been in countless showdowns over the years, which if you knew Crazy George would not surprise you in the least. You see, George was the type of guy, who when challenged, would simply produce a ribbon of manna and casually rolled it around in his fingers, as he was doing now. “It’s good to see you up and about, Buddy.”

Buddy started to close the distance towards George as he repeated his demand, “Where’s my K’fr?”

George held the manna slightly higher so Buddy might have a chance to come to his senses and thereby avoid the dangerous confrontation he was provoking, while Steve, Nellie, and Jeannette who had entered the suite with George drifted into the background so as to give the pair whatever room they might need. And maybe it was the subtle scattering of forces or maybe Buddy finally noticed the manna George was holding or maybe it was the way the crazy wizard calmly retorted, “I don’t owe you anything,” that caused Buddy to stop his advance. But whatever it was, Buddy didn’t let up on the verbal attack.

“You owe me a saddlebag full of K’fr, wizard.”

“No Buddy, I don’t. The deal was simple. I got the saddlebag, which I must say, I was a little disappointed to discover was empty,” seeing as how K’fr doesn’t exist in the Seven Realms, “and instead of M©ther G©©se, you got to go to Dizzy Land.” George indicated the room with a sweep of his manna holding hand. “A top floor suite and you’re complaining?”

“You didn’t have anything to do with this. I’m not paying for something you didn’t do.”

“Buddy, friend, pal, how do you know I didn’t arrange all of this?” And although Buddy would have disputed the point, George held up his finger to silence the angry Minataur. “The deal wasn’t that I undergo hardship, it was simply that you got here. And you’re here.”

“You were also supposed to share the K’fr, get me high,” Buddy insisted.

“You’re fifty stories up, Buddy,” George said calmly as the length of magical ribbon in his hands disappeared along with the wall of glass behind Buddy overlooking Dizzy Land. A gentle breeze blew through the suite, carrying with it dim sounds of music and laughter from the park below. “If you’re not high enough, Buddy, let me know.”

“You’re a cheat. You’re a crook.”

“You’re lucky you weren’t carrying ten kilos of K’fr when you went through that security checkpoint.”

Trust a wizard to bring some extraneous thing like that into an argument. But it was enough to make Buddy suddenly realize he wasn’t going to get anywhere with the cocky wizard. “I need a cigarette.”

“Not while I’m in this room,” Jeannette spoke up.

“I’m pretty sure this is a no smoking room,” Ruby added, which might not have been the smartest thing to do, calling attention to herself, that is.

Taking her words as his cue, Buddy turned on Ruby. “You’re the cause of this,” he growled while slowly advancing on her. “Everything was going fine until you showed up.”

“That would be smart,” Jeannette spoke up again. Something about the deriding sarcastic tone in her voice caused Buddy to halt in his tracks. “You think The Dragon is just going to overlook a direct attack on his Consort.”

“Think of the reward if we stopped him,” Crazy George added as his eyes lit up and he produced another strip of manna, you know, just in case.

Buddy glared at them, “You’re a bunch of backstabbers -- all of you.”

And at this dramatic juncture, would be when Minne walked into the room. “Hi-ya, Buh-dee,” he said spitting out the words like so much toxic waste.

Buddy snorted as he turned. He saw red. “This is my role!” he growled, but he wasn’t waiting for a response. He charged

straight across the suite, jumping over chairs, tables, couches, and whatever else was in his way. And when he got near enough to Minne, Buddy launched himself into the air for a flying tackle.

Unsurprisingly, Minne stepped out of the way and let Buddy slam against the wall. While Buddy was dazed from the impact, Minne kneeled over him and started hitting Buddy in the face -- like repeatedly.

Needless to say, Carl was doing his magic with the clapboard off screen, while Buddy had the packets of tomato juice in his hands, but he was too shocked to use them. Despite his public service announcement, Minne was not pulling his blows -- not one little bit. He laid into Buddy. He kept on hitting Buddy till his arms got tired and I think, if we made anything clear last chapter, Minne was a strong Minataur. This took a while -- like a long while.

And you probably can't help but remembering those really big-big rings from the previous chapter, as well. Well, those really big-big rings really dug up Buddy's face. Like I said, if Dizzy Land was a vortex that outlawed weapons, Minne would never have been able to wear them here. I mean, the only reason Minne was wearing rings in the first place was to accentuate the damage his punches did to Buddy's face because the simple fact is, Minne hated Buddy -- still does. Don't let anything in this book convince you otherwise. Beating the crap out of Buddy was something Minne had wanted to do for a long-long time -- at least from the second chapter, anyhow. Besides, beating the crap out of Buddy was good therapy.

Minne paused for a moment to consider this last thought. Yes, this really was good therapy. Really, it was. Minne took his time about it as he punched Buddy like really-really hard in the face as he concentrated on the really good feelings, which surged through him as he did so. It felt good. This definitely was therapeutic. It was just like decimating a personification of K'fr and that was something Minne had wanted to do for a long time.

Of course, all good things must eventually come to an end. And it would be about here that Nellie remembered, she had a speaking role in this scene, and so she screamed as loud as she could. It sort of broke the pleasing -- if tediously repetitive -- pattern Minne's fist had been making as it smacked into Buddy's face.

"Stop him! He's going to kill Buddy!" Nellie screamed. Of course, that wasn't very likely, but what did Nellie know.

Desperate to do anything, Nellie tried to fly towards the combatants, but Jeannette grabbed her. Not appreciating the interference, Nellie started to kick and bite, but Jeannette held tightly onto the Pixie all the same as she explained, "It's their fight. You have to let them work this out by themselves."

"Buddy!" Nellie yelled once more, before she started to sob uncontrollably.

Throwing a break in there to sort of soften the monotony of it all, we will rejoin the action when Minne is almost done rearranging Buddy's face.

And yep, I think I timed it just about right.

Minne stood up, and kicked Buddy a few times as the sound of breaking ribs filled the suite.

Finally finished -- or at least, for now -- Minne walked over to where Jeannette was. "We need to get out of here."

But Jeannette wasn't so sure. Stalling for time, she let go of Nellie who immediately flew over to where Buddy was crumpled on the floor to cry over Buddy's badly bruised and battered body.

"I'm leaving," Minne repeated. "Stay if you want to, but if you're in the same room as the Celaphopod when he starts his broadcast, it will nullify your restraining order."

It was true. There was no way the author could do a scene with Jeannette around without drawing her in -- or being drawn towards her. It was a compulsion.

And as flimsy as that explanation might be, it was enough for Jeannette. She started with Minne towards the door.

But Ruby cried out to them from the kitchen. "Wait! What about the quest?" And let's face it, being more concerned about a quest than a companion does seem sort of out of character for Ruby, but it is what she said.

Buddy, for his part, struggled to raise his head off the ground and confront his attacker. "You were supposed to pull your punches."

As he was sort of in the vicinity -- well, not more than a few dozen steps away -- Minne took the opportunity to walk back over to where Buddy was and kick him in the ribs again -- no doubt, really-really hard, while breaking a few more bones in the process. "Don't you every read anything? I don't pull my punches. It adds realism," Minne explained as he kicked Buddy yet again breaking another rib and bursting a packet of tomato juice in the process -- quite by accident, I assure you.

"The quest!" Ruby cried again.

And it really is strange the effect K'fr has on the friends and acquaintances of those who use K'fr. I mean, you can lay money on it. Once someone starts doing K'fr, their friends stop caring about them. So in the end, it's probably not that surprising that Ruby was more concerned about the quest than Buddy. Besides, she had sort of expected Minne to replace Buddy for the rest of the adventure. Wasn't that what the author had been leading up to with that whole A Plot Gone Cuckoo chapter? So the fight hadn't surprised Ruby, nor had the victor, but Minne walking out the door afterwards did. "What about the role, the story, the quest?" Ruby asked again.

"What?" Minne responded as he idly kicked Buddy.

"The role? Isn't this fight about who get the role in this book?"

"No," Minne answered as he continued to kick Buddy in a lazy sort of offhanded way.

"Why then?"

Minne kicked Buddy before he answered this time just to liven up the flavor text a little. “Wasn’t it obvious? We had this fight planned. It was staged.”

“But why?”

Minne kicked Buddy. “To throw the author off.”

It didn’t make any sense -- not to me anyhow, so I guess it worked.

A moment of silence passed while everyone tried to figure out what Minne meant, but then nobody could, or if they did, they certainly didn’t tell me.

Making the best possible use of this unforeseen pause in the narrative, Buddy took the opportunity to spit-up some blood. “No more questions,” Buddy whispered. “Please.”

“Can’t you see, every time you ask a question Minne kicks Buddy in the ribs?” Nellie cried out.

Eh, a question is a question. Close enough, Minne thought, so he kicked Buddy again.

“I’m going,” Jeannette said. Displays of gratuitous violence sickened her.

Ah, sweet, sweet, really sweet Jeannette.

And in deference to her wishes, Minne didn’t even bother to give Buddy a final farewell kick before he trotted off after his beloved sweetheart.

“But the quest?” Ruby asked. “Buddy won’t be able to do anything for weeks.”

“28 days,” Minne agreed slowing down at the door. And since he wasn’t kicking Buddy anymore, Jeannette waited for him to explain.

“28 days?” Ruby prodded, asking for more clarification.

“Buddy’s medical benefits will cover him for 28 days. On the 27th day you’ll wonder how he’ll ever recover, but just like magic on the 28th day he’ll be fine. No worries. Happens all the time in your better HMOs.”

Minne had turned to leave, but this time Jeannette stood in the doorway blocking his way. “Tell her. Tell her,” she said again as Minne paused in indecision.

“Sound check. Sound check,” the Celaphopod called out from the TV screen. Tell her, I think not. Ruby would find out what to do on her own. She had freewill, after all. And she was a clever girl. Besides, if she didn’t figure it out, well, sometimes the good guy -- or gal as the case may be in this particular instance -- loses. It wouldn’t be the end of the world if she didn’t solve the quest. Well, maybe it would be the end of the world. But really, that just sounds melodramatic. Oh, Oh, they killed my family, ruined my crops, and destroyed everything I’ve worked my whole life for. Isn’t that overreacting just a bit? In this case, no. No, it’s not. But it gives Ruby a reason to take the quest seriously and it adds that all important element of reader suspense.

Sadly, Jeannette had darted out the door as soon as she had heard the author’s voice, so there wouldn’t be any of that special love chemistry thing happening in the next chapter. The sparks always fly whenever we’re together, if you know what I mean.

Being sort of whipped, Minne quickly followed after Jeannette, but as he did, he called out a final word of advice.

“Algebra. Study your algebra, Ruby.”

And first of all, that’s more than one word. It’s like five. And secondly, what’s the point of me going through all the hassle of butting in with a sound check if Minne is going to tell Ruby to study her algebra anyway?

I’ve got to tell you, I’m not overly disappointed that Minne didn’t hang around. You help a guy break out of rehab and how does he repay you?

Well, I don’t know, because I still have no idea what that fight was all about.

Jeannette on the other hand, I was sorry to see go. It wouldn’t be as much fun without Jeannette around, but the author was a professional...

Don’t be making that face. He is too a professional.

Look, just leave your personal opinion out of this. When they call you up last minute to replace Jeannette Stevens to do a special report on the NAS-gh©uls™ -- because she is nowhere to be found, mind you -- then you can talk to me about professionalism. In the meantime, just accept it. The author was a professional. More importantly, he had chosen some really-really odd material for his pre-show sound check.

“Sound check. Sound check.”

“If Buddy has 10 broken ribs, how fast will each rib have to heal for Buddy to be healthy in 28 days?”

“If Ruby has 17 chapters of algebra to learn, how many chapters of algebra does Ruby have to learn per day?”

“If you assume the maximum rate of learning algebra is one chapter per day, what is the maximum number of free days Ruby will have in Dizzy Land?”

“If breaking one of Buddy’s remaining ribs meant you wouldn’t have to learn a chapter of algebra, how many times would you kick Buddy, if every time you kicked Buddy you would break one rib? How about if every time you kicked Buddy you would break two ribs?”

“If the author’s fine for possession of K’fr is reduced by 10% percent for every public service announcement he makes, how much has his fine been reduced?”

“But much more importantly, how on Gra’gl’s green earth is learning algebra going to help Ruby vanquish the NAS-gh©uls™?”

I’m hoping at least one of these questions will be answered in The NAS-gh©uls™ -- book three of Minataur Tails, the exciting sequel to The Dragon Bound Quartet.

But first, please stay tuned for the following special news report.

Here Now the News

The Celaphopod sits alone behind the news desk. His co-anchor -- the lovely Jeannette Stevens -- is nowhere to be seen. He's a bit nervous. This is the first time he's had to anchor the news by himself and it's a pivotal chapter in the series. Sure, they're all pivotal chapters, but some pivot more than others. This is one of those more pivoting kind. He knows he is getting distracted. It's that red light shining in his face.

"You're live," Carl says.

"Huh?"

"Live! Live! You've been sitting there with dead air for half a minute now."

The author looks through his notes. He makes a mental note to start writing notes, so he has notes to look through. "Hey Carl, have you ever wanted to co-anchor the news?"

No, Carl had not. And if by some twist of fate, had he wanted to become an on air personality, he would definitely not wish to begin his broadcast career with this particular newscast. The Celaphopod alone and at the helm -- Carl doesn't need to consult his gut instincts to let him know this particular broadcast is going to be a train wreck, it's written all over the place -- like say, here for instance.

Still, Carl is a professional. And it is his job to prevent that sort of thing. "Celli, you've got a satellite feed lined up. Why don't you go to that?"

It's a good idea, so without further ado, the blue-screen behind the Celaphopod begins to project a scene straight out of some cheap Imperial Roman gladiator movie in which both Brad the Zombie and Jim the Werewolf are tied to wooden crucifixes, suspended high in the air. Of course, since they are still wearing their orange reporter jackets, you know nothing bad has happened to them (not yet, at least), even if below the pair, down on the ground, the four NAS-gh©uls™ toss dice for their clothes -- killing time, as it were.

“I think we have some other business to take care of first,” the Celaphopod notes as he clears his throat and begins anew.

“Thank you for joining us for this special edition of the Mt. D©©m News. I’m Celli the Happy Go Lucky Celaphopod and tonight on Today’s D©©m we’ll be conducting an exclusive interview with the Nasty-Nasty-Ghouls, better known as the NAS-gh©uls™. But first, we have two other stories to bring you.”

The author turns to face the camera as he continues, “As many of you know, JRRRR Snuff ‘n Puff’s widow is a bitter old hag -- bitter that she is old; bitter that she is a hag; bitter at the success of the Dragon Bound series; and most of all, bitter that I may have used one of her late husband’s creations without paying the appropriate royalties. Hmm,” the Celaphopod wonders aloud, “I wonder if I’m royalty, because I get royalties.” And like the train wreck previously predicted, the Celaphopod’s train of thought flows smoothly along... quietly uninterrupted. Where is the gentle cry from your sweet beloved Elvin co-host -- your point, get to you’re point -- when you need it? But then, Jeannette is off trotting around -- Gra’gl knows where -- with some Minataur...

“Dead air, Celli. It’s a bad thing,” Carl’s advises as he breaks into the Celaphopod’s reverie.

“Right! Right!” the Celaphopod agrees frantically as he shuffles some blank paper around meaninglessly. “The important thing is that JRRRRR’s widow has decided to add another R to JRRRRRR’s name and that her lawsuit is going surprisingly well. I’m having the darndest time finding a lawyer who is willing to argue my case against Grog. He’s 10’7” and weighs over a quarter ton, you know. Anyhow, because things aren’t going that well for me on the legal front, we may not be able to finish the series. She’s managed to file an injunction against the publishing, marketing, and distribution of this very book. Still, I have a trick or two left up my sleeve. And without going into the legal subtleties of the case, let’s just say I know this guy who knows this guy who just so happens to work as a clerk at the Rigor Pass

Municipal Courthouse. The point is, although her injunction has stalled out for the time being, in a year or two somebody might figure out a way to walk the injunction through the quagmire of a maze we in the Seven Realms like to call a legal system. Basically what I'm saying is, it's touch and go, and the series might be pulled at any moment -- absolutely any moment. Some of you may be thinking, 'but I'm safe. I've got the story in book form.' Well, I wouldn't be too sure if I were you. Those legal people are viscous. They're not above coming out to wherever you are and stripping the ink off the very pages of the tome you hold. I say this not to scare you or to induce you to read the rest of the book as rapidly as possible just so you tell your friends, 'I couldn't put it down,' just because you never knew when the injunction might go through. Rather I warn you, so that if by some quirk of fate, some, all, or maybe just the pages from here on out suddenly turn blank, then you know it wasn't my or the publisher's fault. It was the fault of a bitter-bitter copyright holding hag of a widow and her 10'7" thug of a lawyer. You know, he's a monster, and the way he's sending me threatening letters... he's stalking me, really. And it's to the point where I'm having difficulty sleeping. I can't concentrate. And food doesn't taste as sweet and savory as it used to. But then, that's all covered in my extensive counter complaint."

The first story over, the Celaphopod puts on a grim face before looking around sort of distractedly until he locates the appropriate camera to stare into as he relates the next news story. It really is distracting the way they choreograph these news segments. Look left. Look right. Then you got to frown and look grim.

"Our second story concerns Minne the Minataur, star of stage and screen." An old stock photo of Minne appears behind Celli on the blue-screen. Minne's face is covered with a delightful pattern of scars and bruises that even several layers of bandages can't seem to hide. When you get right down to it, Minne's picture

looks an awful lot like the photograph of Buddy that will be gracing the cover of your better tabloids for the next few weeks.

“Since the series might fall apart at any moment -- and because I can’t keep a secret -- we have a late breaking news story. Minne the Minataur is actually Buddy. Or would it be more appropriate to say Buddy and Minne are one and the same?”

Back in Future Spa Towers, Buddy looks up from the kitchen counter where Nellie is stitching up his face.

“That’s right Buddy. The stories Minne has been telling you about him being a time traveling counterpart of yourself are true. After Minne, who was Buddy (not is), finished working on Minataur Tails, he booked a vacation with Timmy’s Time Traveling Tours where an unfortunate mishap left Minne stranded in time. Living in the past, he is only now catching back up with himself. I only tell you this to resolve any questions you might have should the series suddenly end and to sort of explain the rationale behind the big fight scene while it is still fresh in everyone’s mind.”

Footage of Minne gratuitously kicking Buddy whilst he is down on the ground rolls in the background as the Celaphopod continues, “Sadly, it is a time honored tradition for clients in rehab to beat themselves up about their addictions and past failures. Metaphorically speaking, beating yourself up is not against the law and there is not much that can be done about it. We can only hope that both Buddy and Minne realize that before you can get better, the first person you have to forgive is yourself.

“And that brings us to our lead story, the NAS-gh©uls™. But first, a few words from our sponsors...”

On screen, a commercial spot rolls. Ruby and Grt are running through the Dizzy Land Amusement Park laughing, giggling, singing, and having the time of their lives -- and doing their best to sell merchandize. Grt is wearing the latest boys wear running suit from Nifty Brands, while Ruby has on her Martingale boots. And wouldn’t you know it, that green dress Ruby is always

wearing is now being sold at Crumbarrel -- with or without real emerald embroidery as your pocketbook allows.

While down in the conversation pit, Steve (the Ranger) asks Ruby "Are you getting any hints from any of this so far?"

"No," Ruby replies. "I know I'll be spending the next 28 days nursing Buddy back to health and studying algebra, but past that..." Ruby pauses to think for a moment, and then adds, "Well, after that, I suppose I'll have to go take an algebra test at the bridge to prove I really studied. But then after that, I'm at a loss. What do you think, George?"

"I don't know if I'd go rushing off to that bridge, Ruby," Crazy George considers as he thinks things through out loud. "Sure you could take the test right away, you could even do it while Buddy is recovering, but if you'll remember what your math teacher said..."

"Mr. Thwartbridge," Ruby offers.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. The important thing is that Mr. Algebra said, and I quote, 'If you ever find yourself up next to a thorny problem, you might want to take a shortcut.' Flat out, you're going to get a free ride past some obstacle when you take the test -- assuming you pass, of course. So, there are really two things to consider. First, you know that the Celaphopod is going to railroad you until you take the test and cross the bridge, so he can cross it off that checklist of his that passes as plot-outline. But secondly, and perhaps more importantly, you don't just want to give away your free ride until you're actually up against some 'thorny problem.' If I were you, I'd hang onto that bridge gag until I knew how I was going to use it to my advantage. Until you take that test, you'll always have an ace in the hole."

Ruby knows it will be a difficult decision to make. But then in a flash, she also knows the best course of action is to simply cross that bridge when she comes to it.

Huh, Ruby thinks to herself, maybe this plotline stuff isn't so hard, after all.

Isn't so hard! Isn't so hard!
Oh, don't be tempting fate, missy!
If you don't find the current quest challenging enough, why
don't we up the ante a little?
Oh, just a wee little bit!

17 #
Today's D©©m
Bringing You the Gl©©my News First

As the newscast resumes, it is clear that a few changes have been made to the set -- not to mention, the location of the shoot. On the desolate plain where the NAS-gh©uls™ have been camping out, soft comfortable easy chairs have been installed. Though, a fat lot of good that does Brad the Zombie and Jim the Werewolf who are still strapped to their crucifixes high in the air.

But really, who cares about the extras? The important thing is that the Celaphopod is sitting in one of those super comfortable chairs and sipping on a cup of hot chocolate. On either side of the Celaphopod -- in comfortable chairs and with steaming hot mugs of cocoa of their own -- are the NAS-gh©uls™.

“Welcome back to Today's D©©m. I'm your host Celli and joining us today for our special feature report are the four NAS-gh©uls™ and their captives: Brad the Zombie and Jim the Werewolf. How you doing up there Brad?”

“Y'rg, they didn't hono'rg our white fla'rg of truce.”

“O-ow-hoooo! They tricked us,” Jim adds.

“Go figure. Evil horsemen not honoring a flag of truce,” Celli shakes his head as he addresses the camera. “Now who in their right mind would go interview a NAS-gh©uls™ with nothing for protection but a white flag and an orange reporter's vest? I don't know where these bit characters get these reckless ideas. But that's not what we are here to discuss.”

As the Celaphopod says this, the view pulls back wide revealing a smoking barren landscape. “This is the work of the

Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse turned renegade. Or as we like to call them, the NAS-gh©uls™. Would you care to introduce yourselves?”

On cue, a close up of the red faced NAS-gh©ul™ fills the screen as he says his name, “I’m Slaughter.”

“Death,” the white faced NAS-gh©uls™ offers.

“Desolation,” the black faced rider mutters.

And lastly the pale faced rider chirps in happily, “I’m Pestilence, but I prefer to go by Benny. Really, Charley, Anton, Vince, don’t you think it would be more friendly just to use our first names.”

“I thought we killed you,” counters Death, a.k.a. Anton.

“Yeah,” Slaughter agrees. “We dumped over a thousand rounds into you.”

“Really guys. We’re undead. How do you kill the undead? And besides, I’m Pestilence. You can’t cure cancer or end malaria with a thousand bullets.”

“You should be able to do something with that much ammunition,” Desolation suggests.

“Well, you sure hurt my feeling, fellas. I thought we were friends,” Pestilence replies sulkily, before quickly recovering. “Look, I’m happy to let bygones be bygones. We’re the four horsemen. It wouldn’t be the same without any one of us.”

“It would be a lot grimmer,” Desolation suggests.

It’s not clear whether that would be a good thing or a bad thing until Slaughter adds that it would also be, “More respectable.”

“Well, you can’t get rid of me, so you’re just going to have to accept me for who I am.”

“It’s the sickness,” Death explains. “Before they go, they get delirious. The brain stops functioning. Some of them even welcome me. It’s not the same as on the field of battle.”

“You may have a point there,” Slaughter agrees. “They’re always running and screaming from me, but not Pestilence.”

“He’s got it easy,” Desolation agrees with those empty vacant eyes of his.

But, “as copyright free -- and therefore convenient -- as the four horsemen would be, that’s not who you are,” Celli points out.

“We like to keep our options open,” Vince and/or Desolation explains. “I’m not above a little Desolation,”

“Let’s just keep to the script.”

“O-Key Dough-key. Can do,” Benny happily reassures Celli.

“So keeping to the script then, what can you tell us about yourselves?”

“Precious little,” Desolation states as he takes on the role of spokes-Ghoul.

“OK,” the Celaphopod replies evenly as he draws a breath and tries to keep his ever growing frustration in check. “I’ve got some questions written down here. Just answer them truthfully.”

“Are you saying we might lie? I’m Desolation. I’m an honorable personification of the ills of the world.”

“No. You are Vince and you are one of the NAS-gh©uls™. Just stay with the script.”

“Right. Vince. NAS-gh©ul™.”

“So, ah, first question. Who are you?”

“Is this a trick? Or are you just stupid?”

“Just answer the question. We’re doing one of those interview things.”

“I’m Vince. I’m a NAS-gh©ul™, but if you read my list of credits, I’ve also played Desolation in a number of productions.”

“NAS-gh©ul™,” Celli corrects. “Let’s just keep it simple and stay with NAS-gh©ul™ for now. So once again, what are you?”

“Fine. I’m a NAS-gh©ul™,” Vince answers peevishly.

“Why don’t you just hand me the questions and I’ll answer them? It’ll be easier that way.”

It does seem like a good idea -- or at least, an easier way to conduct the interview -- so Celli hands Desolation his bent and

battered note card (not one of those crisp and clean ones you usually see TV interviewers holding) and Desolation starts to go down the list.

“Who are we? We’re NAS-gh©uls™. What are we? Is that even a different question? We’re NAS-gh©uls™.”

“I think he wants to know what NAS-gh©uls™ are,” Benny suggests helpfully.

“Read a book,” Slaughter retorts.

“Follow the script,” the author insists.

“Fine, we’re undead kings. There’s the royal blood tie-in you need in order to explain how we got a diplomatic exemption to the Weapons Ban.

“That’s, um, very thorough, Vince. But actually, you’re Dukes,” the Celaphopod notes.

“Kings, Dukes, whatever. Is there even a difference? Or more importantly, does anyone care?” Vince glares at the Celaphopod through vacant eyes -- some trick that, glaring without eyes -- before continuing. “Let’s see. What’s next? Where?” He looks at the Celaphopod as he shakes his head in pity. “We’re here. When? Now. How?”

“Now that’s a good question,” Death jumps in. “How? Magic! Death Magic! That’s how.”

“Or Slaughter Magic.”

“What’s the difference?”

“I think Slaughter Magic is a subset of Death Magic,” Benny says, trying to help out.

“Are you saying I’m subservient to him?”

“It is what it is. You can hardly Slaughter someone without killing them. You’re clearly a vassal of mine,” Death observes.

“No. It’s the four horsemen. It doesn’t say one of the horsemen is a vassal to the other.”

“Doesn’t have to. It’s implied by our names.”

“Back to the questions if we can,” the author interjects.

“Maybe answer the big one. Why?”

“I don’t think we have to answer that,” Desolation replies defiantly.

“It’s OK,” Benny assures them. “The Big Guy gave us a prepared statement.”

“That’s right,” Death agrees as he suddenly remembers and pulls out a sheet of paper. “Ahem. I refuse to answer on the basis anything I say may weaken the plot, be a premature revelation of privileged information, or otherwise impede the narrative flow.”

“That’s great guys,” the Celaphopod remarks, “but those are author’s rights. They have nothing to do with characters rights,” bit or otherwise. “Benny you said something about a Big Guy?”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Y’rg, I hea’rg you,” comes the voice from Brad the Zombie, still busy being crucified, just in case you didn’t recognize his voice or trademark ‘Y’rg’.

“You’re mistaken,” Benny insists.

“O-ow-hoooo! You did too mention a Big Guy.” It really wasn’t very comfortable up on those crucifixes and the sooner this scene was over, the sooner Jim could go home and take a nice long nap.

“Fine,” Desolation says spitting out the word like a petulant teenager. “Bones sent us.”

“Bones?”

“Bones.”

“That guy from Sp@ce Tr#k?” Celli asks.

“No, you idiot, that guy who used to hang out with The Dragon.”

“Oh, that Bones, The Dragon’s second in command. What ever happened to him?”

“Lost in obscurity. He’s kind of bitter about that. He sent us back to the Realms to mix it up.”

After a pause that seems really long, because you know how some folks like to put down the book at these breaks -- wander off, fix a sandwich, and so forth. So anyway, after the Celaphopod is

sure every is back who's coming back, and he has stalled just about as long as he can to give himself a few extra moments to make sure he has all his ducks in a row -- painfully hard to do unless some sort of adhesive or mechanical fastener is involved -- the Celaphopod finally asks, sort of anticlimactically at this point, "So, what do we do now?"

Taking that as his cue, Slaughter stands up, walks over to where his horse is waiting, and unsheathes a really, really, really big sword. "We kill the lot of you and continue rampaging through the vortexes."

"You're under a white flag," the Celaphopod reminds him.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" When you get right down to it, Slaughter's laugh is sort of disconcerting -- especially when you consider that he's a living personification of genocide, mass extinction, and inter-tribal rivalry. Anyway, after he's done having himself a good chuckle and wiped a tear from his eye, he remarks, "That's rich." And then -- comedic interlude over -- he hefts his really big-big-big sword and gets right down to business. "OK. Which one of you lot wants to go first?"

"Um, we are under a white flag guys," Benny suddenly remarks as he needlessly reminds his companion of what they already know.

Slaughter regards Benny and shakes his head mournfully. "You've changed Pestilence."

"It's just wrong, guys," Benny insists.

"That's right," the Celaphopod agrees. "It's wrong. And if you kill me, it's going to be rather hard to complete the series. I mean, sometimes you can piece a story together from the author's notes, but in this particular case, trust me, it's just not going to happen."

"Whatever, I say we Desolate the lot of them."

"Or kill."

"Or Slaughter. I think if they're in captivity, killing or desolating them is just Slaughter by another name."

"O-ow-hoooo! I'm too young to die."

“Y’rg. What about the bound’rgs of ou’rg undead brotherhood’rg?”

“Right. So it’s the Zombie first,” Desolation decides not understanding a word he’s just said.

“Yrg!”

“There’s not going to be any killing of characters,” bit or otherwise, “in this chapter. This is the end of the second book and we’re pretty much right at the word count, so we have to wrap this up.”

“We’re OK with overtime,” Death assures the Celaphopod.

“I like my work,” Slaughter agrees.

“Just think of us as Trolls,” Desolation suggests. “We love our jobs. Death, Slaughter, Desolation -- especially Desolation. We’re happy to work 24/7.”

“Nope, not going to do it,” Celli insists.

“You’re just being lazy now,” Death pouts.

“If you’d bothered to read the script, and it’s obvious from this chapter that you haven’t, then you’d know that this is the end of the line for you guys.”

“But we have a white flag?”

“Ha! Ha! Ha! That’s rich,” the Celaphopod chuckles as he wipes a tear from his eye.

“Hey, that’s not fair.”

“You’re stealing my line.”

“You guys have trashed four vortexes.” No more. No less. If it ever appeared like more (or less, I like to keep my bases covered), I assure you, it was done with smoke and mirrors -- and/or the sloppy writing techniques for which I have become world famous and amazingly rich. But enough about me, let’s get back to the story. “Before you guys go any further, we need to give Ruby a little time to solve this here dilemma.”

“That sounds fair,” Benny agrees.

“What are you? Some kind of commie? You’re Pestilence. Get some backbone.”

“No, no. I’ve got an idea,” Pestilence insists as he draws the other NAS-gh©uls™ about him into a huddle. They argue for a few moments, hit each other good-naturedly, and get into a sort of brawl, but when the comedic effects of this appear to be wearing thin, they quickly reach an agreement.

After the lot of them are back on their feet and dusted off, Desolation says, having been duly elected to take on the role of spokes-Ghoul again, “OK. We’ll take a break and lay off the Desolation. We’ll honor the white flag for... What? 25,000? 30,000 words? Something like that, but if we don’t get the signal from Bones by then to lay off, we start leveling vortexes again.”

“Y’rg, and you’rg let the Zombie go’rg.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. The Zombie and the Werewolf can go.”

“O-ow-hoooo!”

“But we want to wait it out someplace nice and comfortable.”

“Like the rooftop suite at Future Spa in the heart of Dizzy Land -- the universe’s greatest theme park?” the Celaphopod suggests, eagerly hoping to double up on the royalties.

“Nice. We hadn’t thought of that. But no. Ever since that bombing run with the jet fighter, we’ve all been hankering for some pancakes. We can’t seem to get them out of our minds.”

“It’s the vanilla,” Benny points out.

“Seems fair enough,” Celli agrees as he snaps his fingers -- and don’t both The Dragon and Crazy George wish they could snap their fingers like I can. I started it all you know. Nobody can snap their fingers like me. But you know how it goes, you snap your fingers once and the next thing you know, everybody is doing it -- copycats. Should have trademarked the stupid thing: Sn@p™ try it today.

Anyway, monetary concerns aside and as if by magic -- because basically it is -- the Four Horsemen of the NAS-gh©ul™ disappear, as Celli -- the host of Today’s D©©m -- turns towards the camera and proceeds to bring both the chapter and the latest book in the Minataur Tails series to a close.

“That’s right, folks. Thanks to valiant efforts of Celli the Happy Go Lucky Celaphopod, the Seven Realms are safe for the next 30,000 words. That will give Ruby until the end of Book 3 to contact Bones -- whoever, whatever, or where ever he is -- and convince him to call off the rampage. In the meantime, the NAS-gh©uls™ will hang out with Rachel and Roger, Ruby’s mom and step father. And if Ruby hasn’t convinced Bones to end his rampage into The Dragon’s domain by the time the NAS-gh©ul™ get sick of eating pancakes, her parents will be at ground zero when the vortex leveling resumes.”

Pleased with himself, the Celaphopod turns to Camera #2 and remarks, “Yet another disaster has been narrowly averted by the award winning author of the Dragon Bound series. So please, join us in the next installment of the Dragon Bound series, as Ruby tries to save her family.”

Will Ruby succeed?

Is algebra really that important?

No, I mean really? Is it?

And where is my wallet? I was expecting it to turn up somewhere in the story by now.

End Book II