

The NAS-gh©uls™ - Book III

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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Book III - The NAS-gh©uls™

Author's Note:

Upon the 20,000th rereading (or thereabouts), some of what follows stopped making sense to me from a strictly logical (head-on) totally sane and sober perspective. Personally, I blame it on all the K'fr that I was doing when I first wrote this. (Well, the stuff had to go somewhere when it disappeared from the story.) And I might have done a wee-little bit of Drip. (The less said about that the better.) And then there was more than just a wee-bit of what we'll just call unregistered and thoroughly untested magic lying about at the time. (It is, after all, basically how we get things done around here. Things -- now and then -- being pretty much everything.) And then there's my editor...

So, um. Yeah. Forget everything else, especially that part about how I might have indulged in a bit of recreational K'fr use, and let's all just face facts. It was all Eddy's fault.

No it wasn't. It was the K'fr.
Eddy the Editing Editor

Yes -- or no, or whatever -- it was, too, your fault.

No, it most decidedly was not. (Eddy, still.)

Well, if I agree it wasn't your fault. Then it's only fair you agree it wasn't my fault. So, whose fault was it? I mean, we got to blame all that split-fictional-personality stuff that seeped into the story on someone?

I say we blame the Rat, his evil residual and bad literary style must have mucked up the works. (Eddie.)

Ah, that's brilliant. I guess that's why we pay you the big bucks.

Can I get that in writing?

Oh, right. Never mind.

Just did.

Eddy the -- Counting His Coins All the Way to the Bank --
Editing Editor

Anyhow, so there you are, on account of the Rat and his conniving cross-vortex genre-bending story telling influences, not everything that follows (or precedes) regarding actors, characters, performances, roles, and whatnot, strictly makes sense from all angles... or perhaps any angle.

There's nothing else to say, really.

It is what it is.

Some lines -- plot lines in this particular case -- are so bent, they can never be straightened no matter how hard you pound on them. And once one realizes that, there is really nothing else to do but enjoy the ride. And at this point, since I'll never be able to explain it any better than that, that's exactly what I going to assume Ruby and the rest were doing all those many long years ago -- just playing along, like the pros they are.

Appendix C

And now a word from the Celaphopod

I must humbly acknowledge that I was too confident -- i.e. overly cocky -- during my Digital Current's interview. Upon review, I find that I don't have the slightest idea where the side stories are headed, much less the main plot. I would like to blame this on my character's going renegade, but that would not be

entirely accurate (please see preceding Author's Note). You see, I adhere to the Professional Fantasy Writers Guild Code of Ethics (once again, please see preceding Author's Note), which states very clearly:

All characters, major or minor, are to be imbued with freewill and in no instance are to be forced, coerced, or railroaded into performing acts contrary to their nature by either the author or agents directly under control of the author.

So although I would like to blame the characters for going renegade, since they have been imbued with freewill from the start, being renegade is part and parcel of the their very being.

I must admit, though, that I didn't have this problem when writing The Dragon Bound Quartet, but that might be because at that time the characters were new to the industry, happy to have the work, and still busy coming to grips with where their careers were going to take them. (Or maybe it had something to do with a saddlebag full of K'fr sitting in props, which was no longer required... or that thing Eddy said about the rat.) But whatever the reason, I am having more difficulties than usual with the characters (big and small) whilst writing this book.

For example, I'm now almost absolutely certain that it was Crazy George who stole my wallet -- either when he moved out or when I had to squeeze past him in the doorway at dear, sweet, lovable Jeannette's apartment. I'm not totally sure which. I know I had originally said that I thought I had lost it at Con-in-my-Head, but the credit card bills have started rolling in and the charges are for -- more or less -- exactly the kind of stuff Crazy George would buy: 347 Bloody Mary's at the Sky Bar in Dizzy Land, a shopping spree at MagicCo -- don't think I don't recognize the items on the list -- and a year's supply of meal vouchers at Lucky's Tavern. Sure, it could have been anyone. But we all know it was George. Look, he may even have had a good reason for it. Originally, we

didn't think the Dizzy folks would go for a joint marketing gig, but we still wanted to do a layover there; so in a sense, taking my wallet was good proactive plot support by a minor (very-very minor) secondary character. You know, so if the need arose, Crazy George could pay for accommodations with my credit cards. But in another sense, it's grand theft larceny and credit card fraud. But seeing as how I only have to pay the first fifty on the bill, I'm not really that upset. I mean, let's face it. In the end, we did work out a joint marketing deal with Dizzy and the type of money the Rat pays to have his park featured in a story is unreal (like literally). So even if I have to pay every last one of those credit card bills, I'll still be in positive territory when all is said and done. But don't be thinking I'm going to let George sleep on my couch anymore. And I still want my comics back. All the same, it is sort of hard to keep a grudge about money when you're silly with the stuff.

And I guess I'm sounding a little happy and forgiving right now. Want to know why? Well, it may be hard to believe, but way back in the day, Bo Peep went to law school. She really didn't want to do it -- not her muse -- but it was a family tradition and with her size and all... Well, let's just say she used to be very, very, very -- quite amazingly -- good arguing at the bar, the club, the mace, or whatever the personal weapon of choice happened to be. I mean, when you've got a lawyer standing tall at 18'7³/₄" and weighing a ton plus in your corner, the arguments put forth by a little pipsqueak of an attorney like Grog don't seem as convincing as they might -- at one time -- have appeared. In short, what I am saying is: that Puffy RR Stuff 'n Stuff widow dropped her complaint; and so, I'm feeling pretty footloose and carefree at the moment.

“Celaphopod? Is that you? Celaphopod?” The haunting voice of Ruby calls out from somewhere beyond the narrator's rant.

What? Hey, wait! You can't do that. This is the appendix. It's not even a proper part of the book. This space is sacrosanct. It's sacred. It's mine and mine alone.

But Ruby has plans of her own and chooses to ignore the Celaphopod's publisher given right -- mind you -- to control the destiny of his own book.

"Celaphopod? Celaphopod? I think this is the correct frequency, Abe. See if you can get a picture."

This is the type of renegade character stuff I've been talking to you about. I didn't use to have to put up with this type of crap. This is the appendix for Gra'gl's sake! This is that little moment in time when I, the author, take a few minutes to converse with my readers -- my adoring fans, as it were -- in a heart to heart, one on one manner, and let them know what's happening behind the scenes. Let them know that I now have enough keys (and cars as well, since some of my better fans took the hint,), but I keep on snapping surfboards. So if you're in the mood to send something, I could use a new long board -- and not one of those cheap polyurethane or epoxy numbers -- koa wood, if you please.

But like I said, this is Ruby's second book. And it would appear that she's getting a little uppity and has other plans for this space.

"Celaphopod? Is that you? It sounds like the Celaphopod, but we're still not getting a picture, Abe."

"I could send a command array down into his computer and force an interaction," Abe helpfully suggests.

WHAT!!!

"Stay out of my computer! No need to do that," the Celaphopod replies hastily. "Apparently, I was just finishing up whatever it was I had to say. It's not like setting up a little foreshadowing for the upcoming plot or trying to tie up a few loose ends is important or anything," Celli notes petulantly as a picture of the Celaphopod appears on the TV screen in the conversation pit in the rooftop suite of Future Spa, which is -- detailed noted readers will remember -- where we last saw Ruby and the rest of

the gang (and where this whole Psycho Split Personality Psuedo Fictional Character Disorder thing probably started, I'm thinking).

And I should, also, perhaps, note that the windows have never been repaired; and as, such a gentle tropical breeze blows through the rooms. But then, George is like that. He's the sort of guy who'd turn a small-time (not even two-bit like himself) character into a frog for a joke, and then never -- like ever -- remember to turn the character back. Or for a case in point closer to home, he's the kind of guy who would make the windows in the hotel suite in which you were staying disappear and then forget to do anything about them.

"I didn't forget," Crazy George retorts as he causes the TV screen to be cut into a split view. So next to the Celaphopod (on TV, at least), George can be seen lazing back in an easy chair on some undisclosed, unnamed beach (for safety's sake, I suppose) as he eats an apple, drinks a foamy glass of root beer, and leafs casually through what was only moments ago a rare, valuable, carefully archived, boarded and sleeved, signed copy of Cosmic Surfer #1. "It never rains in Dizzy Land, the sun is always shining, and the breeze is near perfect. Why would you want windows?" George asks distractedly as he sort of juggles the apple, the priceless collectible comic book, and the glass of soda he is drinking with the net result being that he stains the pages, tears the cover, and in general reduces the rating number of the highly prized aforementioned Cosmic Surfer #1 from a GEM-99.93 to a CRAP[total]-02.00.

Unfazed by the calamity unfolding before her, Ruby adds, "I like it without the windows"

"I can take a moonlit walk late at night and never leave the apartment," Abe accents his agreement.

"Those are my comics!" the Celaphopod points out, as he artfully returns the conversation back to the important point.

"Oh? You want them back?" George asks as he uses the (formerly) near priceless Cosmic Surfer #1 as a drink coaster and

sets his dripping glass of foaming root beer along with the half eaten apple on top of it.

“What are you doing?” the Celaphopod shrieks as he clutches at his chest.

“Georges ne-gogogo-ch’eating,” Grt happily supplies. Hadn’t The Dragon done something similar to this with Buddy earlier?

“OK. Fine. Negotiating. I get it. What? What do you want?”

“Fame, fortune, happiness,” responds George. And let’s face it, if that’s all you’re asking for in life, they might as well call you Crazy. “But what I would really like is a marriage that lasted more than two paragraphs,” he eventually concedes.

“Then don’t marry Succubus. They’re demons,” the Celaphopod replies, perhaps abruptly, but probably with the most reasonable advice there is to give on the subject of marrying demons.

“I don’t need your lip, writer boy,” George counters (like really nastily). And then, the Crazy, Insane, Out of Control, Needs to be Committed For the Protection of Himself and Others Wizard reminds Ruby, “You know, this connection wouldn’t have gone through without a little help from me. Abe knows his electronics to be sure, but if you’re going to patch a TV through to a megalomaniac author’s introductory narrative, you need magic, not technology.”

Ruby knew this, of course. It was to this end that she had spent the last hour feeding a near endless stream of manna into the TV receiver as Abe had tirelessly assisted her. But alas, she had gotten nowhere. Nowhere, that is, until George had turned the author’s attention to the problem by destroying his beloved, mint in the sleeve, unbelievably valuable signed, sealed, and notarized copy of Cosmic Surfer #1 -- complete with certificate of authenticity, mind you, as if a first edition Cosmic Surfer didn’t speak for itself. And in light of all of this, what did the kindhearted Ruby Firehaven star of the Dragon Bound series have to say?

“Thanks for your help, George.”

“Not a problem. Just remember this should I ever need your assistance.”

And then, there is dead air.

Nothing but dead air.

Ruby being the smart sort doesn't want to commit to owing Crazy George anything. I mean, look what he does to people he owes.

“My comics, then?” the Celaphopod says, once again, trying to keep this conversation focused on the import things in life.

“Sure, sure, just a little misunderstanding,” George responds as the Celaphopod's belongings are returned to him -- along with a bonus apple core, a rotting banana peel, a spilled glass of root beer, and (apparently) whatever other trash George had lying around at the moment.

Understandably, the Celaphopod is distraught and takes a moment to survey the damage George -- Crazy, Insane, Reckless, Out of Control George -- has done to his belongings. Oh, here's something that catches his eye. Not realizing the Seven Realms Postal Service would not mail a letter with Territory Era postage stamps that JUST SO HAPPENED to already be cancelled, George had pasted these near priceless treasures -- artifacts, really -- onto an envelope. While for their part, the good folks down at the Mt. D©©m Mail Center had helpfully stamped Not Valid For Postage on the valuable collectables before returning the letter to the sender. You got to wonder, though, whether this will utterly destroyed the value of the stamps or will make them even rarer collectables. I mean, who would send used stamps through the mail again. They're double cancellations split temporally by over a hundred years. You don't see many of those lying about.

Unconcerned with this particular philatelic inquiry...

(Yeah, and I bet you'd like to know what philatelic means. Well, look it up. I had to. This is reading folks. It's not supposed to be fun -- or easy -- so get with the program.)

Anyhow, unconcerned with the Celaphopod's postage stamp dilemma -- and therefore indicative of how truly out of whack her priorities really are -- Ruby's voice breaks weakly into the author's mind once again as she informs him, "I'm ready to continue with the story, now."

"What? Yeah. Whatever."

Oh, what's this? Not content with his masterful work on the Territory Era postage stamps, the Celaphopod has just noticed that George used his entire collection of mint, unused Depression Era stamps to reseal his comics. And need I mention it, but during a depression, money tends to be tight, so there's not a lot of unused depression era stamps lying about! They're kind of valuable.

But wait! Oh, joy! It only gets better. Not only did George fail to lay the comics flat before resealing them -- bending pages and creasing covers in the process -- but he also felt the need to store various food products along with the comics: potato chips, pretzels, a candy bar, oh, and here's a good one, an ice cream bar. Too bad the comics weren't stored in a freezer.

Now, if you'll excuse me for a moment, I think I'm going to find a quiet place to cry.

"Before that, I want to make sure my mom is doing OK."

Not really listening to Ruby, because it's pretty clear at this point that she's not following along with the important narrative details being conveyed in the appendix, the Celaphopod dismissively informs Ruby, "Listen, I've got to tell you. I'm a little preoccupied right now."

But then, in a sudden burst of inspiration, the Celaphopod turns his attention towards Crazy George and sort of whispers all dangerous and psychotic like, "You are going to fix this George. Right now. Or you are going to be sorry."

"Is that a threat?"

"No. It's a statement of fact. I see a new plotline forming in my head even as we speak, one that involves the FCI," the Fantasy Crime Investigators, don't you know. "I'll have them go after you for excessive crimes against the narrative. Can you see it? 'Cause

I know I can. The most wanted list, a chase scene through the vortexes, and then the book ends with you in a pink prison jumpsuit biding your time until the sequel -- if there ever is a sequel, that is, after this fiasco.”

“Fine. Fine. Whatever,” George replies sullenly as he finds a strip of manna, Sn@ps™ his fingers like the trademark stealing copycat that he is, and returns the Celaphopod’s cliff-side bungalow to the condition it was before George showed up all those many long months ago. The casual observer might not notice the difference, or might believe the place had just been ransacked, but the author can tell. It feels like home. Once again, the Celaphopod is sitting before his computer, slightly crookedly as the wallet in his back pocket raises the one side of his body several inches higher than the other. He keeps all his important paperwork in that wallet, you know, from out of date phone numbers, three year old grocery lists, to those all important story notes. There is nothing like an overstuffed wallet to make you feel complete, whole, and magnanimous.

So magnanimous in fact -- or delirious with joy from having his possessions finally returned -- the Celaphopod decides to let George off with a gentle reprimand. “Just run along now, Georgie. Disappear from the story. Go play with your bag of K’fr or something. I don’t want to see or hear from you until you’ve got something constructive to add to the narrative.”

“You’re not going to let him keep the K’fr?” Ruby asks with abhorrence.

“Hey, you owe me,” George responds angrily.

“That’s why I’m doing you this favor. Celli, George isn’t royalty. There is no reason to let him keep the K’fr. It’s the only stray K’fr in the entire narrative. Just make it disappear.”

And really, when you get right down to it, this little video chat hasn’t gone at all the way George had intended, so before it gets any worse, George decides to cut the connection.

No longer concerned about the video uplink (if for no other reason than it's almost the end of the chapter), Ruby takes out a strip of manna as she informs George, wherever he may be, "Like you said, George, I owe you the favor, so don't try to fight it. The K'fr is gone."

And it is with these words, and a little puff of smoke for effect, both the strip of manna she is holding and George's saddlebag full of K'fr (wherever it might be) disappear from the narrative, like forever (and back into props where it belongs).

Meanwhile, snug at home as the sun sets over the horizon, a Celaphopod sits back and enjoys the delightfully ineffectual protests of a K'fr crossed wizard as his wails of grief echo off the canyon walls all the way till the end of the chapter.

"Not my K'fr. I earned that. Noooooooooooooo!!!"

(And then, the Celaphopod might have lit up. But honestly, after all these years, through the smoke and haze, I can hardly remember anymore. But either way and all the same, I'm just going to say this one last time and then let it go. Ruby is real. She's not a character. She knows this. I know this. Everyone else in the story knows this (and they're all real, too, even if they moonlight by playing characters in a book). Anyway, best I can figure is that the whole 'Fictional Character Ruby' thing is just a metaphor that got out of hand... perhaps with the aid of a little unregistered magic... errant K'fr use... and/or the residual influence of a copyright hoarding Rat. So as they say, 'nuff said. And if after that, things still don't make any sense, well then, maybe you're not looking at them the right way, you know, from the right perspective. And, no. That's not an endorsement of Wild Wick'n Magic, illegal drugs, and/or entering into a contract with a Demonic Rat. Just say no -- to all three. That's what I say... now. And it's most definitely what I should have said back then. Of course, if I did, this here story might have never gotten written... But don't mind that. Just say no. That's the important thing... unless it would make more sense to say yes... or I'm asking... or

The Dragon is asking. I mean, because if The Dragon is asking, you really should just say yes and not even think about the question... of course, I guess if he wanted you to say no, then that's what you should say... not no to the no, but yes to the no, if that makes sense... I mean, because he doesn't really like folks saying no... unless that's exactly what he wants you to say, which is tricky. I mean, how do you know if he's looking for a no or a yes? And he could word it weird so you'd think you should say no, but really, the right answer is yes, so you're all like, "Yes... er, no. I mean, could you repeat the question please." And then, he's all in your face and like, 'No.'" And then, what do you do? Say no to his no? You can't do that? Or shouldn't. I mean, it's like exactly the sort of thing that you only do once in your life, like ever, end of story, period. So, I guess what I'm saying is you have to be careful about what you say to The Dragon vis-a-vie that whole Yes/No thing, because he's tricky That Dragon... tricky like a, er... a dragon, I guess. And, no. I'm not back on the K'fr. Just say no, that's what I say, like now. Definitely, no. Unless I'm talking to The Dragon, and then it's a yes, unless he wants a no, which is hard to tell some days. And truthfully, for the most, I just close my eyes and guess, and pray to Gra'gl that I've chosen correctly vis-a-vie that whole Yes/No, No to the Yes, Yes to the No, mixed up Yes/No Dragon thing.

But anyway, if that wasn't too terribly clear, I advocate saying no to the K'fr, because look what happens to your stories if you don't... say no... which sort of sounds like a yes, which is the last thing you want to say when K'fr is involved. Just trust me on this.)

Appendix C-1 You Can't Keep a Good Rant Down

Now I had some important stuff to go over here...

But Ruby won't give the Celaphopod's a moment's peace and cuts into his rant -- right from the start -- as she points out, "We

were going to swing by the cottage and make sure my mom is doing alright.”

Can I have a moment?

“No.”

(Clearly I don't pack as much punch as a dragon...)

What do you mean, No?

“I mean, no. If you start going off on your random thoughts, you'll eat up precious words, I'll get older for no discernable purpose, and the plot will go nowhere. So, no.”

Don't you have some homework to do or something?

“I finished it. It only took a week. It turns out algebra isn't that hard, after all. Saving my friends, family, and all the known vortexes gave me the motivation I needed to hunker down and get the job done.”

Still, we have some plot elements to go over.

“Abe, do you have his computer hacked yet?”

The TV screen in the rooftop Future Spa suite flickers momentarily and then the author face is split screened with a power point slide, much like you might see at one of your better book signings or lectures, which I suppose, is just another way of saying, I don't do it at mine. But hey, it's a nifty idea, isn't it?

Anyway, superimposed over a graphic of a torn and ripped piece of notebook paper is the following list:

Free Will, Renegade Characters
Little Bo Peep, Puffy's Lawsuit
George, Ransoms Author's Stuff, Wallet
Buddy, Second Chance
Ruby & Grt, Mail routine
HI IQ, Algebra Characters

“You've already gone over half this stuff,” Ruby remarks dismissively. “So, what's the thing about Buddy and his second chance?”

As we all know, Minne and Buddy are ostensibly the same character. After this book, Buddy will take a little time off from work for a time travel excursion -- it's the latest thing -- and during the trip he will experience a temporal abnormality. Now originally, or at least as of the interview in Digital Current, Buddy and Minne were supposed to wind back and forth for the rest of the book. And then at the very end, it was to be revealed that Buddy and Minne are the same character.

“But?”

But I can't keep a secret and word is readers are pretty darn smart. They always figure out the twist endings early. And so really, what's the point? I mean, you either have to lie to the readers, not give them any clues, or they know the twist ending like way ahead of time, so the twist winds up falling flat on its face.

“And?”

And after the fight, Minne took off. Indicating that no matter how hard I work at a plot, no one is going to follow the script anyway -- least of all you, I might add.

“I learned something during The Dragon Bound Quartet.”

That's a relief to hear.

“As you'll recall, originally you had it slated for that first quest to take four years.”

Yep, that was the plan.

“But, I didn't see the need waste that much of my life on that quest, and I don't intend to spend a whole lot of time on this quest either.”

But your friends, your family, and all the known vortexes?

“I'm going to rescue the world. That's what I do. I'm the Lady Ruby, but I'm not going to spend the second half of Minataur Tails fooling around with random encounters just so you can get the word count that you need.”

It can be more than that.

“Exactly. In your interview you said the four part structure of The Dragon Bound Quartet was to introduce a riddle, have a magic lesson, explore the world, and then resolve the riddle.”

Those weren't my exact words.

"But it is what you meant. Well, I'm happy to explore the world, but only if it has a greater point and meaning. That means, we're going to focus on another magic lesson in the coming pages."

We are?

"Yes, we are."

What magic lesson?

"I don't know, but that's what we're going to do. So right now, we're going to finish up with your agenda and then delve right back into the thick of the story, which starts at home, making sure my mom is doing fine."

OK. I can live with that.

"Then it's agreed, so let's wrap it up. Say what you need to say to clear your plot points and then let's move on."

So you want me to do this fast?

"I'm guessing your readers are a lot smarter than you are and that they'll be able to keep up no matter how fast you think you're going."

Well, that just hurts.

"OK, fair enough. Let's just assume the readers are every bit as smart as you are, so if your explanations make sense to you, then they'll understand."

Fair enough. I'll be as quick as I can, and if everything's not as clear as it should be, I'm sure someone will write me a letter.

"See, there you go. That's the spirit. Just jump right into the thick of it," Ruby remarks as she senses the cue for the first item on the Celaphopod's agenda. "You see the thing is, Celli likes to go on about how much mail he gets, but the truth of the matter is I get more mail than he does and Grt here gets more than everybody else in the series combined."

"Grt wins again," Grt says happily as he opens up another fan letter, signs his name to a personalized eight by ten glossy photo, and mails off a response.

Oh, that's just mean.

“Grt justee mailers da letters?”

No, it’s not that. That mail gag is a good bit and you just whizzed through it. You didn’t even stretch it out to a hundred words. You’re killing me.

“You’ll get over it. What was your next item?”

I wanted to talk about the difficulties inherent in writing about characters who are sometimes smarter than you are.

(pause)

No comment?

“I’m nice, kind, and considerate, it says so in my bio. If you have any shortcomings, it’s not my place to dwell on them.”

Grt on the other hand is always good for a gag, “Eet musty bees da biggie problems for yous-e, meester. Eberybodies smarter den you.”

Thank you Grt. No harm. No foul. I know you’re just following the script and trying to help out.

“Grt helpees,” Grt sings as he nods his agreement and slits open another fan letter.

Grt,

You’re my favorite character in the Dragon Bound franchise, and I sleep with your plush doll every night.

However, the reason for my letter is that I heard on the grapevine that you were going to be putting out another children’s book entitled Grt’s Guide to Eating Peas. When do you think this exciting new title will hit the shelves.

Your adoring fan,

Brandy

“Grt’s guiders to eating da peas? Dis somes kinders sickee jokes, meester? Da peasers be da horribles!”

Relax, Grt. The title is supposed to be ironic. The conceptual idea is a how to guide on how not to eat peas. Maybe you should just send Brandy a spoonful of peas as an example.

“Dat juster be da meaners. Grt no wishers da peasers on da nobodiers. I’d juster senders her da pictures of da Grt.”

“Clearly, we’re wandering,” Ruby states as she endeavors to keep the Celaphopod on track. “Are we done with the high IQ bit, then?”

Not yet. Somewhere, somehow, I just want to put it out to the readers that -- perhaps unsurprisingly -- I’ve played a few role playing games in my time, and the characters I like to play are always high IQ spell lobbers. Now in your typically RPG game, you’re trying to solve problems, puzzles, tests, and riddles, but I always figured the character I was playing was always much smarter than I, as a player, was, am, or could ever hope to possibly be. So, wouldn’t it make a lot more sense to somehow put the onus of solving any puzzle or a riddle on my character rather than on me the player? I mean, you don’t have a player playing one of those fighter type swinging a sword to see how good he is at it, so why have the players who are playing wizards solving puzzles and riddles? The in game character should be doing it. You know, roll a die to see if your character can figure out the riddle of the sphinx, which door to open, lever to pull, and so on.

“So, what does this have to do with the narrative, or anything for that matter?”

The point is, how do you write about characters who are smarter than you -- like The Dragon -- or who now know more algebra than you, like you do now, Ruby?

“Um, is this just some sort of long winded way of asking for help on the algebra problems sprinkled throughout the story without actually asking for help? Because if you need help, I will be more than happy to help you.”

I’ll take that as a promise. And no cheating or magic, I’d know.

“It’s a promise, so are we done now? If we are, the first stop is the cottage?”

No, not quite yet. One last thing. I don’t know if Minne is coming back into the story (or Jeannette either, for that matter), so

I just wanted to point out again that the characters -- all of the characters -- have freewill. Buddy doesn't have to follow the path that Minne took. Both Buddy and Minne have the same childhood, but at the point of the fight their histories diverge. Minne was never beaten up by his future self, because he hadn't gone to the future yet. And, hopefully Buddy won't beat up someone in the future, because if he's got any brains at all, he won't book that time travel excursion.

"Grt headies goes roundi-round," Grt complains as he sways back and forth dizzily.

"And, that's color text," Ruby says triumphantly. "That means you're done, and you're just killing time and filling space."

True, the Celaphopod would have to grudgingly agree. I suppose my introductory rant is almost complete.

"So can we look in on my mom, now?"

One final tidbit -- even shorter than that last thing -- I'm going to need to add somewhere just so I feel the story is complete and right here makes as much sense as anywhere. Buddy was born with the name Minne. He goes by the name Buddy, because when he first showed up at the Earth vortex, that's what everyone called him.

"Hey, Buddy."

"What's up, Buddy?"

"Where are you going, Buddy?"

"Buddy, can you spare a dime?"

And that sort of thing. Of course, after the success of Minataur Tails, he started using his real name -- Minne -- again, because everyone knows Minataur's names start with an M.

I mean when you think about it, Buddy is a much better name for a bee -- the type of honey bee that might star in the little known short story: One Wild Season at the Lamplight Café: The story of Buddy the Bee and Marla the Moth.

"You're Shameless," (another short story of mine), Ruby notes with a playful smile.

Hey, cross promotion starts at home. Speaking of which...

1

Interrupt My Rant will You?

Rachel is in the cottage. She is washing the dirty dishes leftover from the pancakes she has just gotten done cooking. For Rachel, it is still the same Saturday morning from when Ruby left on her quest long ago. Time flows differently in different vortexes -- don't you know -- and Earth is one of the slowest moving vortexes around. This can be either a good thing or bad thing depending on how you look at it.

For instance, I personally find it very helpful that no time has passed for Rachel since last we saw her, because this means I don't have to go on about what Rachel's been doing since Ruby left. And perhaps more importantly, when the NAS-gh©uls™ show up hungry for pancakes she can't say, "I don't know where I put the recipe," just because she is sick and tired of slaving over a hot stove. How many batches of flapjacks does a storybook mother have to make anyway? It's not like she didn't already use up all the flour and other ingredients in the house. And did anybody say, "I'll help," or, "Please, let me do the dishes?" No. They had not. They just left, going on exciting quests, leaving the mess for her.

But Rachel will get over that, or at least I'm hoping she will get over that, because she's got a lot more pancake cooking in her future. Anyway, before I got sidetracked onto those golden delicious flapjacks, yet again, I was talking about the passage of time in the Earth vortex. It's generally slower on Earth than other places, and this in itself goes a long way towards explaining why almost all Humans feel at one point or another that life is passing them by. The reason it feels this way is simply because it is. On the plus side, even though Humans don't live as long as Trolls, Elves, Gnomes, or Depth Fiends, because Humans dwell on one of the slowest moving vortexes around, several Elf generations can come and go in a single Human lifetime. And if you travel to one of the really far outlying vortexes, entire eons -- epics if you will --

can take place in the time it takes even the fastest of Earth based readers to get through the shortest of books.

Anyway, as we've dawdled about, Rachel has finally finished with the dishes. And is it just me? Or does it seem like this has taken her ages? Anyway, done with the dishes, Rachel walks out of the cottage, stretches her back, and rejoices in the sensation of the sun on her face and the wind in her hair. It feels simply divine, glorious even. And better than that, the rest of the day is hers to enjoy, to do with as she desires. She had been hoping to enjoy some light fiction, but since the Garg novels have not been getting positive reviews lately (something about the slapdash -- almost offhand -- way in which they've been written), Rachel has instead decided to watch the first episode of the Targor movie series, aptly entitled: Targor I: The Beginning. Her daughter -- Ruby is the girl's name, in case you've forgotten -- had gotten Rachel the complete boxed set of the Targor movies for her birthday last month. And since rumors are circulating that Targor has actually survived the last episode (despite all indications to the contrary), Rachel wants to review the Targor saga from the start so she will understand the intricate plot and back references that the Targor series is famous for, so she is ready when the inevitable sequel comes out (the 14th in the series).

Anyway, as we all know, Ruby, Grt, Buddy, Nellie, and Abe are watching this chapter on the big screen TV in their suite atop Future Spa in Dizzy Land and some of them -- I'm hoping, hint-hint -- will also read it later when it is published by Digital Current, so I just want to take a second to let Ruby know, her mother's birthday is exactly three months after her own -- to the day -- and this is the last time I've got her covered. I'm happy you're going with that whole freewill thing Ruby, but with it comes some responsibility, like birthday presents for you mom; and when's the last time you gave Grandma and Grandpa a call?

OK.

So like, that was some background to help everyone catch up to speed as we open the first real chapter of the third book, The NAS-gh©uls™, of Minataur Tails, which just so happens to also be the third -- or is it eleventh? -- book in the Dragon Bound series. I suppose it depends on how you keep track, which probably further depends on whether you are paying or receiving royalties.

Anyway, so there it is.

Is everybody straight with where we are? The cottage under the bridge.

And have I mention the motorcycles roaring in the distance yet? No? Well then, maybe I should.

As Rachel is standing out front stretching, she hears the roar of a pack of approaching motorcycles, which are coming down the gorge and headed straight for the cottage.

The inclusion of motorcycles in the story might come as a surprise to some, so maybe I should explain where they came from. You see, we had a staff meeting last night and by we, of course, I mean I. It's similar to the imperial WE my girlfriend uses when she's talking to waiters. "We've decided to split a herb salad and have the ug-ug fish with blah sauce." Then she's, of course, understandable horrified and scandalized when she asks me how the food is and I say, "It's everything I ever wanted in a blah sauce, and that ug-ug fish is aptly named." Well, let's just say, that's the type of comment that invariably leads to, "Maybe we'd be happier sleeping on the couch tonight." And then a person might say, "Maybe we would," mainly because they're an idiot, but also because they know disagreeing with her can be as dangerous as disagreeing with a dragon.

Anyway, we don't really like sleeping on the couch. We find it uncomfortable. So, we decided to take a midnight walk on the beach and this is when we realized everyone would be happier if the NAS-gh©uls™ showed up on motorcycles -- big H©©gs with loud exhausts.

Anybody who has read the first book in the series, The Dragon Bound Quartet, and really, at this point I am not only going

to assume that you've read it, but that you've purchased multiple copies: one to keep on your nightstand by your bed, the other on the coffee table, one for the beach, one for you back pocket, and another dozen or so in the hall closet to replace any of the other copies should they get damaged and so you always have a few copies on hand ready to give away as gifts. And while we are on the subject, just on general principles alone you should get fresh paperbacks at least once a month, so they smell crisp and clean and have that new book feel to them. Anyhow, a person with that many copies of The Dragon Bound Quartet lying around doesn't need to be told that Roger -- Rachel's boyfriend and Ruby's Troll of a step-father -- owns a motorcycle -- presently up on blocks -- and that he used to ride with a gang of ne'er-do-wells called: the Zone Riders.

Of course, until now no Zone Rider has ever showed up in any of the stories, but Rachel has heard about them and she knows she is supposed to be hospitable to them should they show up -- not that she wouldn't be nice anyway, but that she should go out of her way to be extra special nice and, say, make pancakes for them if that's what they wanted. I mean, who knows what sort of weird vow Roger swore to keep when he joined the club or how psychotic some of the members of the Zone Riders might be, especially when you consider the scary names some of them have chosen for themselves -- names like like Death, Slaughter, Desolation... and Benny. Tell me, what sort of self-respecting motorcycle ganger-banger calls himself Benny, anyway? Sounds pretty scary if you ask me, sort of like, maybe, he's the most mentally unstable of the lot.

And it's not like I want to be launching into an anti-motorcycle crusade, here. I mean, I'm sure there are plenty of respectable Elves and Goblins who merely ride on the weekends and in all other ways are upstanding members of society. In fact, it is widely held that only two percent of riders cause any problems whatsoever, so I'm not going to go into the fact that in the Russell Mountain Community Hospital's emergency room they refer to

motorcycles as “donor cycles.” (You’re a smart reader. You figure it out.) And I’m also not going to point out that some clubs actually take great pride in being that two percent that causes all the trouble. But what I am going to point out is that these particular motorcycle riders, who are by no means representative of the motorcycle riders in general, or H©©g riders in particular, are the physical embodiment of Death in all of its incarnations -- i.e. they are the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse -- and they sort of take their death and destruction -- not to mention pancakes -- seriously.

I guess what I’m saying is, Rachel isn’t really too worried about four motorcyclists riding through the gully towards the cottage -- even if only one of them is actually using the footpath and the rest sort of slalom through the trees. And even after they stop and introduce themselves as Desolation, Slaughter, Death, and Benny, and proceed to demand pancakes as if that were their rightful due, she is really more worried about what other secrets might be lurking in Roger’s past than any concern for her personal safety.

And having said all of that, I think I need to back up a little. Last night at that meeting that we had -- and again by we, I mean I -- it was decided that not only would the riders show up on motorcycles, but that they would alter their appearances, as well. You know, since the NAS-gh©ul™’s copyright battle (and that thing about leveling vortexes) had been all over the news, it would be impossible for them to keep a low profile otherwise.

Now, there was some bickering about what each of them would look like, and who had grabbed which costume first, but in the end they straightened it all out and they all were quite happy with how they looked and with each other -- except for Benny, that is. They didn’t think Benny’s outfit was very becoming of the Four Horsemen Riding Club at all, so I’ll start with his description first.

And yeah, big description sequence coming up, you can thank Eddy the Editing Editor and his never ending harassment and letter writing campaign for that -- and the fact that you can't double up on the action figures by selling cheesy variants unless you actually have cheesy variants in the story to sell. It's the only reason Garg started wearing clothing, you know. Everybody had the classic Garg action figure with Cave-Man Action Grip™ (complete with leopard print toga, simulated oaken club, and multipurpose tool -- a.k.a. a rock), so sales were sort of flat-lining. And what did those guys in marketing dream up to remedy the situation? They sent Garg off to Ve'kahn, made him a Captain in an elite Airborne fighting unit (and please remember, this is a Cro-Magnon we're talking about), dressed him up in fatigues, and when the matching doll hit the shelves, suddenly everybody had to have it. Sales hit an all time high, and the rest is marketing (and/or fanboy) history.

So really, when I say nothing is flavor text, you got to keep in mind that nothing is flavor text and it's all there for a reason -- to put a few coins in my pocket if nothing else.

So, where were we?

Ah yeah, descriptions.

Benny had always wanted to be a Wood Elf and so that's what he got polymorphed into -- cute little buggers, them Wood Elves, so sprightly and dainty. And being fully aware of the dangers inherent in riding, he wore a full body abrasion suit complete with crash helmet and neck support, all of which was snazzily accented by a red racing stripe on the front and back. He also wore a Four Horseman Riding Club patch on his left shoulder, and another patch on his right that said Live to Ride, Ride to Live.

In the words of Desolation, Benny was a "Disgrace. You call yourself a representation of the apocalypse?"

But Benny didn't care. He was happy.

Being more traditionally minded, Death opted for the shirtless hairy Troll look. His back was covered by a single tattoo,

which read DEATH in big black letters and it sort of looked like he had sat in the corner and done the artwork himself. Beyond the tattoo, he wore leather pants and one of those pointy Kaiser helmets, so if he ever got into a crash, there would already be something close by to pierce his skull.

“You look good,” Slaughter remarked. He had chosen the body of a Depth Fiend. Now, the only reason Slaughter got to be a Depth Fiend at all is because he had gotten first choice. And to be honest, there had been some complaining from the others, but we had drawn lots and fair is fair, so after much whining and pouting, Death and Desolation had accepted it.

Now, in case you don't know, Depth Fiend's have thick hides and there's not exactly a lot going on upstairs, so there really isn't much sense in wearing a helmet. And you know, now that I think about it, I don't think I've ever given the slightest hint of what a Depth Fiend looks like anywhere in the series. And while it is incredibly tempting to simply end the description right there, I won't. Depth Fiends are big, tall, hardly fit on a H©©g at all, demon looking things that are blood red. They also don't tend to go in for clothes, so Slaughter snapped a pair of riding goggles over his eyes and called his costume complete. And although he looked incredibly stupid, we were all too scared of Slaughter to say anything.

The last on the list would be Desolation. And I must say, I was most impressed with his choice. He went as a regular ole Human -- regarded by some as the most terrifying creature in all the universe. But that was just the start. He had also paid carefully attention to the subtleties of his costume. He wore nothing but cutoff shorts. He didn't even have on any shoes. So if he like laid his motorcycle out at 100mph, there would be absolutely nothing left of him, just a long red streak of desolation on the pavement. Now that's attention to detail. Way to go Desolation. If we were having a costume contest, he would have won.

Anyway, long story short, these are the motorcyclists that pull to a stop in front of Rachel and the cottage (not to mention the action figures you can expect to see in the toy section before long).

Since Roger has gone back to work, Rachel is all alone in the middle of the forest. And three of these four riders can only be described as the two percent of the two percent of the two percent who give riding a bad name.

It would be here, without a preamble of any sort that Desolation demands, "Pancakes."

"Pancakes! Now!" Slaughter agrees enthusiastically as he gets into character -- Depth Fiends not being known for their restraint.

Meanwhile, Death looks around hopefully as he adds, "Or do we need to kill something first? Maybe a rabbit, a squirrel, or a chipmunk?"

"You're too late," Rachel remarks nonplussed, but then she sort of considers that maybe being plussed would be more appropriate and that denying a Depth Fiend anything is not exactly the wisest course of action -- if one values the continuation of their existence, that is -- so she quickly corrects herself, "What I mean to say is, I don't have any ingredients." And then after looking them over, Rachel asks hesitatingly, "What club are you guys with anyway?"

"We're the Four Horsemen," Benny supplies helpfully as he gets off his motorcycle and points to his patch.

"Should I know you?" Rachel asks.

"I should hope so," Slaughter the Depth Fiends growls like only a Depth Fiend can.

"Are you guys affiliated with the Zone Riders?" Rachel inquires again as she begins to wonder how much she should be concerned.

"No. The Four Horsemen," Benny replies happily and easily. He doesn't mind repeating himself. One way or another, he's about to get some of those wonderful pancakes. He's so delighted at the prospect -- and since he really hates to see anyone worried or

afraid -- he takes it upon himself to inform Rachel, "We're under a flag of truce."

It doesn't really explain a lot to Rachel. And when you get right down to it, it doesn't really sound that reassuring, because a flag of truce sort of implies a war and/or a break therein, doesn't it? And then there is Benny himself. He's sort of psychotically happy -- you know, in a dangerously deranged sort of way that only a newly minted New Age Do Gooder can usually pull off. Which is all just a long winded way of saying, Rachel is starting to get a little worried.

Slaughter only adds to her concern as he growls, "Pancakes!" and reminds her and everyone involved, "There's no truce without pancakes!"

"But I don't have the ingredients," Rachel replies meekly as she says the first thing that comes into her head.

"PANCAKES!!! NOW!!!" Slaughter the Depth Fiend reiterates, being just about at the end of his rope, patience, and conversational ability.

Things could get ugly.

But then, in the distance, another motorcycle can be heard. Or more specifically, it sounds like someone is trying to kick start a motorcycle down by the river.

"Of all the stupid," a voice can be heard to cry in frustration. Followed by the sound of Put-Put, which is more or less the sound that a motorcycle makes when it has been flooded and is not going to be kicking over and starting anytime soon.

Put-Put.

Put-Put.

Put-Put.

"WORK! You infernal machine!"

Put-Put.

Put-Put.

"Of all the..."

Put-Put.

“I’m not the comedic relief in this sketch!” the voice cries despairingly. This is followed by a few more choice words, some colorful epitaphs, the musical sound of metal clanking on metal (perhaps a wrench banging against a motor clutch housing), said metal hitting metal again (perhaps as said wrench was thrown, subsequently bouncing off of the recalcitrant clutch housing), and then finally hitting someone in the leg.

“Ouch!”

“ARGH!!!”

Put-Put.

Put-Put.

“Fine, I give up.”

“Who’s that?” Death asks nervously, as the sound of crunching leaves and breaking twigs signals the approach of a very, very, very, very, very, very.... very, very angry motorcyclist -- or would be motorcyclist as the case may be.

“I don’t know,” Rachel responds truthfully.

“We’re under a truce here,” the Depth Fiend reminds everyone. And is it just me? Or is it odd the way one’s vocabulary, understanding, and sense of fair play sort of expands to cover more and more territory as the situation they -- like, personally -- find themselves in seems to be getting worse and worse.

“You know, you should have thought about that before you started to intimidate...” but Benny’s voice trails off as he realizes he doesn’t know the name of the person they are demanding pancakes from.

“Rachel,” Ruby’s mom helpfully supplies.

“But we’re still going to get pancakes, right?” Desolation asks hungrily as he stands there shivering in his shorts. “Is it just me? Or is it a little cold here?”

Finally, the flavor text is used up, and the bit characters are out of witty repartee.

“No, we could go on,” Slaughter offers.

“Yeah, it’s by the word, right?” Death suggests as he tries to horn in and grab a piece of the action. But unfortunately, it was a one shot gag that had already been used during the Today’s D©©m interview. The death riders won’t be getting to play that game again.

“Why not?” Benny whines.

“Don’t whine,” Slaughter warns him. “The world’s record for holding a Depth Fiend’s form without going ballistic is 31 days. It’s only been ten hours, but I’m already feeling the strain, so don’t push your luck, Pestilence.”

But of course, this is all just filler and padding -- killing time, as it were -- until a tired, winded, and out of breath Trent staggers up the hill and into view. “I don’t know how I got tagged for walking up that hill. What is that? A 90% grade? Oh, and this whole being tired thing,” Trent remarks between breaths. “I’m The Dragon. How did that happen?”

“Hi Trent,” Rachel says as she walks towards him -- and away from her visitors. “You really look out of shape. You should get more exercise.”

“I’m hoping it will pass by the end of the chapter,” Trent replies as he leans against a tree and gasps for breath. “What is it with this author? I’m The Dragon. I don’t get winded.”

“Whatever,” Slaughter remarks. “Can we get on with the pancakes then?” He was a Depth Fiend after all. If this Human couldn’t even climb a hill, he wasn’t going to be much of a threat.

“You’re going to have to go shopping,” Trent explains weakly. “I think I’m just going to wait it out here. Maybe slip my feet into the manna pool.” And since that does sort of seem like a good idea, he walks over to the spring and plops down heavily, swinging his feet into the water without even taking off his boots.

“Shopping?” Slaughter asks in disbelief.

“She’s out of ingredients,” Trent remarks from where he is lying on his back gasping for breath. “You want pancakes? Then you’re going to have to go shopping. Why don’t you make a list Rachel. Me, I’m just going to lie here and catch my breath.”

2 #
Live to Ride -- Ride to Live
or is it
Live to Shop -- Shop to Live
or maybe it's
Live to Sell -- Sell to Live

The chapter opens with a bit of excitement as the members of the Four Horseman Riding Club take to their bikes, roar out of the gorge, and up onto Roger's Bridge as they head into Rigor Pass. On the way, they zoom past the conveniently placed Corner Mart (on a street corner near you) and in a flurry race past a Mega-Mega Super Mart (all the food you could ever want in one handy-dandy location), because for the pancakes they have in mind only the best of ingredients will do. As such, they are headed to Paul's House of Pancake Ingredients -- which recently opened in downtown Rigor Pass, don't you know. As you might imagine, Paul's House of Pancake Ingredients stocks a full compliment of ingredients for all your pancake making needs. Whether you're looking for traditional pancakes with maple syrup, blueberry pancakes with a decadent poha berry topping, or something a little more exotic from a far off dimension, if they make pancakes out of it somewhere, they have it at Paul's.

Ruby, however, seems to have a thing against the Celaphopod earning a living, so she chooses this moment to break into the author's well crafted narrative to ask, sort of extraneously "What's up with The Dragon?"

The Dragon probably needs some nourishment, the Celaphopod glibly informs her. He probably didn't start his day with a good breakfast. It's the most important meal of the day, you know. And what better way to do breakfast right than with ingredients from Paul's House of Pancake Ingredients!

"I'm guessing you worked a deal out with Paul?"

That's right! Just mention the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse and you'll get a full ten percent off your purchase at Paul's House of Pancake Ingredients, now at their new convenient location in downtown Rigor Pass.

"Does this have anything to do with the story?"

An author's relentless pursuit of cross-promotional marketing opportunities and derivative royalties: that, my friend, is the story.

On the big screen TV where Ruby and the others are watching the drama unfold, the Four Horseman Riding Club can be seen pulling up in front of Paul's House of Pancake Ingredients where a big crowd has gathered to meet the NAS-gh©uls™ in person, maybe get a t-shirt signed, and taste some of those wonderful pancakes they've been hearing about.

It's a big to-do, so the NFAA (the National Field Artillery Association) has come in force to show their support for the Four Horsemen and their valiant efforts towards repealing the Weapons Ban while an equal number of protesters have gathered to air their grievances against the Four Horsemen, who as you may recall, have recently obliterated four complete vortexes. Some of these anti-NAS-gh©ul™ crazies can even be seen carrying signs, which read:

Bring Back the Sm©rks™

We Love You Tr©ll-Tr©lls™

And, so on. Like I said, crazies.

Meanwhile, Paul -- a shrewd businessman and proprietor of Paul's House of Pancake Ingredients --- greets the Four Horsemen as they arrive, noting, "I thought you were going to look like ghost riders. You know, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse."

"Change of plan," Death -- the hairy troll -- explains.

"You've got a problem," Slaughter growls. And let's face it, he probably only has a few more scenes in him before he loses it completely, so I wouldn't be pushing him too hard.

"OK. That's it," Ruby says as she tries to interrupt the Celaphopod once again, but he wisely ignores her.

Whose book does she think this is anyway? I mean, we still have that bit to do where -- as part of the promotional deal -- Slaughter says, "We've Slaughtered our prices."

But Ruby is not one to be ignored, so she mockingly takes over and notes, "And Death probably says something equally witty like, 'We're death on the competition'"

Um, so you can see where this bit is headed?

"Yes."

Not wishing to expand on the gag any further, Ruby reiterates her earlier inquiry, "So, why was The Dragon tired?"

I think it was a momentary thing, but you never know.

"Is he going to be all right?"

Yeah, I expect so. I don't think his getting sick is a plot element if that's what you're asking. It's just one of those things. The import thing is that he's back on the farm, guarding the home front as it were. If the NAS-gh©uls™ decide to do something, er, uncouth, he'll be right there. He's not going to let a few loose canons like the NAS-gh©uls™ run amuck right in the heart of his territory -- or at his favorite consort's country retreat.

OK. So anyhow, now that I've done the bit I promised for Paul...

"It's not really what we agreed to," Paul points out from where he is on the TV screen.

I'm surrounded by complainers. In the entire history of fantasy literature there has never -- like ever -- been a bigger crowd turnout for the grand opening of a pancake ingredient store, like never-ever-ever-ever. So it didn't turn out how you were expected, Paul. You sound like Buddy whining to Crazy George. The media is there to cover the protestors. You've got the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse -- the most important foreign dignitaries to visit the Seven Realms in years -- right there on the podium next to you, and you're complaining about my end of the deal? Get with the program! This is as good as crossover marketing gets. And quite frankly, if that's the attitude you're going to take, I don't think we

need to feature Paul and his House of Pancake Ingredients in this story anymore -- except to say that when I'm feeling a little down because the plot isn't going the way I expected, or every two-bit character I meet is all whiney and complainy because things didn't turn out exactly the way they had anticipated, well then, I hop on over to Paul's House of Pancake Ingredients to whip up some comfort food.

"I hope you're done," Ruby notes with exasperation.

Yeah. OK. I'm done. Your mom's fine. The Dragon was in on the meeting last night and he decided it would be best if he showed up at the homestead and kept an eye on the NAS-gh©uls™. And as to him being tired, I don't really know what that's all about. Maybe he's coming down with a cold. Maybe The Dragon and the land are one and the wave of destruction, which the horsemen carved through the Realms, isn't doing him any favors.

Or maybe the real point is, right about here the story is cutting to you, Ruby.

Live!

Atop the Future Spa tower in the luxurious Dizzy Land Resort Amusement Park.

It's all you!

And just in case that wasn't clear, Carl the Courteous Cobalt counts it down off screen, "We're going to you live, Ruby, in three, two, one, and... Action!"

3

A Little Gem of a Chapter

Ruby wasn't really expecting to have her fate thrust into her hands, so... suddenly.

Whatever.

Deal with it, Missy.

Ruby watched on helplessly as her life ticked into the future and the word count rolled on.

Yeah, that's right.

Suddenly, Miss Know It All realized it was a whole lot easier to watch it happen and criticize others for their mistakes than it was to control one's own destiny, but it was too late for that now. All she could do now was look on the good old days when someone else controlled her every action with nostalgia. Isn't that right, Ruby?

Ignoring the Celaphopod, which had sort of gotten easier to do as the story progressed (and his -- perhaps not so -- secret K'fr addiction had gotten out of hand, causing all sorts of cognitive conflicts with the plot, story, and good ol' common sense), Ruby Sn@pped™ her fingers -- as opposed to doing something original, like say, wiggling her nose -- and without delay Ruby jumped into the game, changed the tense back (or forth?) to the present and left the past behind.

“You still like cooking don't you, Abe?” Ruby asks -- without wasting a moment in thought.

“Cooking, cleaning, moonlit walks by the beach...”

“Would you mind cooking those pancakes for my mother when the NAS-gh©uls™ finish their appearance at the pancake house?” And then thinking it through and realizing everything will go smoother if she simply humors the Celaphopod, she adds, “When they are done with their appearance at the gala grand opening of Paul's House of Pancake Ingredients located conveniently in the heart of downtown Rigor Pass, that is.”

Abe considers the offer as he looks around the hotel room -- the same hotel room he's been stuck in for the last 226-odd years. “It would be nice to get out of here,” he has to agree. “See someplace new for a change.”

“Excellent,” Ruby notes triumphantly as she takes out a piece of manna and folds it into a small square. Handing the square to

Abe she explains, “This is a return ticket. If you ever want to come back here, wherever you are just rip this ticket in half and it will bring you right back here to the top of Future Spa.”

Standing up quickly so as to not waste any time, Ruby gives Abe a great big squeeze of a hug as she says goodbye. “I’ve enjoyed your company immensely, Abe, and all your cooking. You should think about opening a restaurant or something.”

“Dat Abee he da goods cookers,” Grt agrees enthusiastically.

“Thank you, but I’m sure I’ll see you again, won’t I?” Abe replies hopefully.

“We hope so too, but you never know,” and with that, Ruby twiddles another strand of manna about in her hand and as the strand of manna disappears, so does Abe.

I must say that was very thoughtful of Ruby -- the entire arrangement.

I wonder what she’ll do next.

And guess what, there is no need to stand around and wonder, because without wasting a moment, Ruby is on to the next item on her agenda. “You can track through the vortexes, right Buddy?”

Of course, there is one little problem that Ruby has overlooked. From where he lays on the couch, Buddy moans pitifully from the pain of:

$Y = \text{broken ribs, where } Y \text{ equals the greater of:}$

$Y = 10 \text{ for } X < 28 \text{ or}$

$Y = 10(28 - X) / 28$

And, X is the number of days since Buddy was brutally attacked by Minne.

(Problem 3-3a courtesy of Ruby Firehaven)

Meanwhile, in a desperate attempt to avoid being squeezed out of the scene or the series in general, Nellie tries to ease

Buddy's suffering by adjusting his icepack and flying off to get $Y=X^2$ tablets of aspirin.

Ruby for her part, immediately realizes that she shouldn't have listened to the Celaphopod when she constructed the algebra problem nor made it an either or function. But hindsight is 20/20. Of course, that's all pretty extraneous at this point. Whether Buddy has 10, 7.5, or even just .357 broken ribs, he won't be in any condition to travel until they are all healed, which means, we can listen to him moan for another three weeks or until somebody, meaning Ruby, does something about it.

And while Ruby is trying to figure out how to solve this particular dilemma, let me give you some insight into her thought process. You see, for all the talk about Ruby being used to the Others and having grown up -- for the most part -- after the barriers had fallen, the fact still remains that when push comes to shove (and probably when shove comes to push, as well), Ruby thinks like a mundane and not like the wizard she is, which is really just another way of saying that although this is a painfully easy problem to solve, for the moment it has stumped Ruby. I mean, great job on that whole Abe/mom thing, Ruby -- kudos -- but until Buddy is able to do anything more than cry in pain for more aspirin, it looks like the quest is on hold.

And rather than go into the logistics of playing nursemaid to a badly beaten Minataur, the Celaphopod instead decides that it would be more fun at this juncture -- at least for him -- to share some random thoughts.

See, in that other book -- the one you have a dozen copies of in your closet... And while we're on the subject, isn't the copy on the coffee table getting a little dusty? You could dust it off, but why not just toss it in the trash and replace it with a brand new copy? Maybe two? That way if company comes over and one guest is reading the first book, the second can have a copy all to themselves. Obviously, if you're having a big party, you should plan accordingly. Anyhow, in that other book -- destined to

become a classic -- Ruby and Crazy George went shopping at a place called MagicCo, which as the name suggests, is a store that sells magical items and accessories. It's one of those warehouse stores. They sell Eye of Newt by the five pound bag, have twelve packs of magical wands; and a 101 piece adventurer starter set complete with rope, spikes, and the ever handy ten foot pole that they sell at MagicCo for the unbelievable price of three coppers -- as a sort of loss leader. And most interestingly relevant of all, MagicCo sells magical healing potions by the caseload. Which is all just a long winded way of saying, sooner or later Ruby will probably remember this, and then she'll be able to scoot off to MagicCo and buy some healing potions. Or if she's really on the ball, she'll be able to order some up from room service. Or if she's really-really on the ball, once her clever little mind alights on the obvious solution, she can just take a strip of manna and turn it into a magical healing potion and bypass the middleman. Of course, if you -- or she -- were to really stop and think about it, you might reason that if she could do all of this with a strip of manna, she could probably just heal Buddy directly. But where's the fun in that? My guess is, we'll be going to MagicCo before long.

True, I don't really know that for sure. It's just a hunch, so before I whip out my marketing deal with MagicCo and see if it's up to date, let's jump ahead and see what Ruby decides.

And in the end, it's not what I would have done at all.

Ruby sends Nellie down to Future Spa's concierge's desk. And moments later, Nellie returns with a Medical Service Bot. Making a big to do about it -- perhaps hoping that if it takes long enough, I'll break down and give it a name besides MSB -- the Bot waives its snaky appendages around, flashes its lights, and makes a sort of pleasant buzzing sound with its speaker port. Then a slot opens in the Bot's midriff and out rolls a blue healing potion. Like I said, the obvious solution.

The folks at Dizzy don't even charge for this service -- seems as though they don't like the publicity that is frequently attached to

a major celebrity getting hurt in their vortex. And you'll also be happy to note, they don't charge for the gratuitous lecture about being kinder to yourself in the future either. But then, it has been my experience that self righteous words of advice are insanely easy to come by from both the healing and law enforcement professions.

"No really? Going 487mph in a school zone is a bad idea? But officer Larry does it all the time?" At which point they usually say, "Looks like we've got ourselves a comedian here," which is true, but I don't really think that's a good reason to whip out the Billy clubs.

Like I said though, Ruby has been getting better and better at ignoring the Celaphopod's asides. So, she is dealing with her own concerns when she asks the Bot hopefully, "Is there anything you can do about his K'fr addiction?"

But haven't we already been over this?

It should come as no surprise when the Bot replies sort of condescendingly, "Sadly, no. That particular decision has to come from within."

Anyhow, once Buddy drinks the potion, he's as good as new. And if you stop to think about it, it really hasn't taken Buddy very long to get back into shape for the quest -- certainly not the 28 days the Celaphopod had budgeted for the healing process in his revised and amended plot outline. I mean, it's got to be obvious that all of this freewill thinking stuff has thrown one giant monkey wrench after another into my carefully crafted plot -- or at least, after I mention it, it should be obvious.

I mean, well ahead of schedule, and only seven thousand words after Buddy's and Minne's big fight, the adventuring party is all set to go, but to go where? And how to get there?

Of course, Ruby thinks she already has the where part figured out. She isn't thrilled about the whole concept, but she knows deep in her heart that it's the best place to discover something

about Bones. She's going to have to go back to the Citadel -- The Dragon's old base of command.

The only real question, then, is how to get there. The first idea that pops into her head is Igor. He's probably still on vacation. She's sure she could find him, and he'd take her anywhere, but it just doesn't sound like, well, an adventure. The second option is for Buddy to track for her. Just like they'd planned, Buddy could start tracking through the vortexes from Etcetera Center, or even their room. But somehow, Ruby is certain that if she lets Buddy lead the adventure, they will get lost. It's an odd feeling, sort of like a hunch or a premonition, but it's enough of a warning for Ruby. The more she thinks about it, the more she is certain: if Buddy does the tracking, they'll be blown off course and in no time she will find herself in Mother Goose Land or trapped in a Fable by Aesop. It's not like Buddy would get lost on purpose, and it's not like the Celaphopod would have it in for her specifically, but Ruby feels that it is destined to happen if Buddy leads the way -- probably some after/side effect of a K'fr addiction and/or the Celaphopod's need to pad the story.

Ruby also knows she could just retrace the route she had previously taken to get to the Citadel in The Dragon Bound Quartet, but even Ruby -- yes, even Ruby -- realizes that she couldn't keep reader interest at an acceptable level if she simply retraced her steps from a previous book in the series. So moving on, the next option Ruby considers is teleportation. It's quick, so readers won't get bored, and it is Crazy George's favorite way to travel. He just Sn@ps™ his fingers and then, poof, he's wherever he wants to be. But that's Crazy George's style, and not her own. And if there is one thing Ruby is certain of, it's that she needs to develop her own style.

"Hmm, let's see," Ruby says half out loud. "If I could travel anyway I wanted, it would definitely be by taking another ride on The Dragon, but he's occupied protecting my mom."

Silently -- lest The Dragon overhear and become jealous -- Ruby wonders if there are any other dragons about? If there were, could she call one to her? Would it be friendly?

And then, as she is going down this line of thought, Ruby hits upon what has to be the ideal solution.

“How would you like to be much bigger Grt, say the size of The Dragon?” Ruby suddenly asks of her waist high companion.

“Roarrs!” Grt says as he shakes his arms about. “Grt bees whatever sizes da Rubies wanters.”

It is settled then. Well, sort of.

Enlarging a creature isn't as easy as it sounds. I mean, making them bigger is easy, but it's hard not to stretch one part more than the rest. So it takes Ruby a while to stretch Grt carefully, first this way and then that -- more or less in the same way that The Dragon had done a long time ago, only in reverse -- something that occurred during Ruby's last visit to the Citadel, coincidentally enough. There's probably a magic lesson in there somewhere concerning synchronicity, but I will leave the details of that for you to figure out on your own as I am coming down with a headache just thinking about it. Though I will mention that with any luck this particular magic lesson will be covered in greater detail in an upcoming volume entitled The K'fr Road: To Ve'kahn and Back Again, the exiting standalone Dragon Bound adventure expected to be nestled comfortably in the enviable marketing position between books II & III of the main story arc. Of course, most folks are just calling it Dragon Bound III, so if you thought the numbering system was complicated before...

Anyway, if all goes as planned, The K'fr Road: To Ve'kahn and Back Again will be a landmark event and it will mark the first time Garg, Targor, and Bruce Brilliant have ever appeared together in the same production! Let's keep our fingers crossed.

Meanwhile, back in the hotel room -- oblivious to the concerns of cross, back, and future promotion -- Ruby is quite pleased with her work on Grt. He is huge and fills the entire suite.

But you can never be too careful, so before they all hop on board, Ruby makes each of them, including Grt, a return ticket like she had made for Abe -- you know, just in case. She figures -- correctly, I might add -- that ripping the ticket will work like a parachute, only better. For the rest of the adventure, anytime any one of them is in any danger, all they will have to do is rip the ticket and they will be safely and instantaneously teleported back to the suite atop Future Spa. So, not only do they not have to worry about falling off of Grt, but if they should become surrounded by Depth Fiends, trapped in M©ther G©©se Land, or need to beat a hasty retreat for any reason, alone or together, they will be able to escape.

And when you get right down to it, it's a darn good idea. Of course, another good idea might have been to ask Grt if he knew the way to the Citadel before he filled up the entire suite, but still, better late than never, so Ruby asks this now. "Grt, do you know how to get to the Citadel?"

"Yeppies," Grt replies in the affirmative as he puts on a pair of high altitude aviator goggles, "Grt has da mappies."

From there it's just a bit of boring logistics as they all climb onto Grt's back and he jumps out the window. But before we get to that point, you remember a few lines back when Ruby asked Grt if he knew the way to the Citadel? Well, a better, and perhaps more important series of questions to ask at that particular juncture might have been worded along the lines of, "Are you going to be able to carry all of us on your back, Grt? Or are we just going to go plummeting to the ground like a bag of bricks?"

4

Zeppelin's of Lead & Other Ill-Conceived Atrocities of Heavy
Metal Fame

a.k.a.

A Short Commuter Flight

Have you ever seen any of that turn of the century footage of those crazy fools who strap themselves into all manner of wacky winged contraptions and then have themselves pushed off the edge of a cliff in the hopes that they would be the first to fly? Well if you have, then you've got a pretty good idea of what Grt and the gang looked like as they went plummeting down the side of Future Spa tower -- located in the heart of Dizzy Land. That's fifty stories of freefall, folks. In the black and white footage I've seen of those early pre-flight pioneers, they always crash and burn. There is not even the slightest pretense of buoyancy, lift, or flight. They just plummet like rocks. There is a lesson to be learned in that. If you're going to try to fly for the first time -- or at least, to try to fly in a new form with three passengers on your back as is the case with Grt -- you should probably start at ground level. That's just a little helpful advice from me the author to my reading public, so as to insure that they'll be alive to buy the next book in the series.

Now as we all probably know, Ruby and the gang didn't crash. I won't pretend to try and draw out the suspense. Grt pulls out of the dive while he still has three or four feet to spare, but knowing how close it was, I would like to point out that Nellie was the only one who had taken the safety measures seriously and so was the only one who had held onto her ticket the entire way down. She would have torn it up too, had she not been too terrified to move. So there you have it, the best laid plans of Rats and Celaphopods, and so on.

Of course, what's the oddest thing about all this is that Nellie is also the only one besides Grt who has wings, so all she ever had to do was flap her wings and fly away, but blind terror has a way of immobilizing even the fiercest of hearts -- and cute as she may be, Nellie is far from fierce.

Anyway, once they got going, it was comfortable riding on Grt's back and the in flight movie wasn't so bad. They had all seen it before, of course, except for Nellie, but she didn't see it this time

either. She spent the entire trip in the lavatory again. That first drop had been too much for her.

Being on Grt's back and not in a plane, there wasn't any food or beverage service, but for the most part it was a lot like being on a TVA flight -- except of course instead of punching in barrel rolls, side weaves, and outside loops on his armrest, Grt simply pretended he was a copilot calling in requests to himself before he did any maneuvers.

"We needsa da barrelly roll," Grt would say, and then he'd turn his head a little to the side, as if to answer himself, and say, "Okees, Dokees," before doing said barrel roll.

Oh, by the way, I don't know if I've said this before, but at the risk of repeating myself, it bears mentioning that in all these flight scenes, Ruby loves the barrel rolls and what not. How can you not love pulling six g's, while flying upside down with the wind in your face? So whenever Ruby got bored or was feeling playful, she would call in a command to Grt, as well. "We need some more sideways tailspin action, Grt," she'd say.

To which Grt would invariably answer, "Okees, Dokees, Rubies," and then do whatever stomach lurching maneuver Ruby had just requested of him.

Buddy didn't mind this, at all. He enjoyed a good thrill ride (like say Dizzy Land's newest roller coaster sensation: The Dragon), and he was on the happy side of a healing potion, so he was feeling no pain. And as a sort of public service announcement, I suppose I should also take a moment to point out that many of your upper level fighter types have serious healing potion dependencies (in much the same way that many of your more successful authors have nursed a serious K'fr addiction in their past, or so I am told). Anyway, all I'm saying is you have to be careful. One moment it's a life saving medication prescribed by a Medical Bot (your editor, whatever) and the next it's a gaming (writing) crutch, so you got to be careful.

And since it does look like he's on board for the The K'fr Road: To Ve'kahn and Back Again story, I should probably get in

the habit of saying something nice about Garg every once in a while, so let me put it out there: I've always respected how Garg takes the time to heal naturally. Take Garg 13: The Snake Pits of Hoar for example: Garg gets bitten by a rattler in Chapter 2, and come Chapter 47 he's still limping around. That's follow through. That's attention to detail. That's artistic integrity. And that's the way for an author (not me) to get even with a character for asking -- and getting -- a whopping 50% of the net. I mean, that's why you have to nail your characters down with an ironclad lifetime contract from the very first word -- none of this "we'll do twelve stories and see how it goes" tiddlywinks. You do that, and they just might jump series on you and switch to a whole new mythology.

Anyhow, I seem to have gone astray. Imagine that.

To put us back on track, let me just note that prior to my mental divergence, I had been checking in with the characters one by one and letting you know what each of them were up to. Having briefly expounded upon Grt, Ruby, and Buddy, it is now Nellie's turn. She'd probably be just as happy if I skipped her, because she's still puking her tiny little guts out, but unfortunately that's not an option. Besides, she should have planned ahead and taken some anti-motion-sickness pills. I mean, she was right there in the same room as a medical Bot only pages -- only mere moments -- ago when doing something like that would not only have been convenient in terms of the story arc but also highly logical in terms of her own personal survival and welfare. Of course, if you ask her, she'll tell you, she didn't know she was going to be taking a ride on Grt. But really, what kind of an excuse is that? If you're going to spend your time carousing around the vortexes with a bunch of renegade characters, it only makes sense to expect the worst, so you should maybe pack a day bag or something for emergencies -- or what we in the adventuring industry like to call unexpected contingencies. Anyhow, bottom line, if you're prone to motion sickness, it just makes sense to pack a few anti-nausea pills, drink a potion, buy a ring, or something.

And really, why stop there? While you're at it, you might as well pack a few healing potions, a couple of strips of manna, a candy bar, and whatever else you can get someone to pay you to carry, mention, or use. Which is really just another way of saying:

THIS SPACE IS FOR RENT!!!

Make me an offer.

I mean, they teach this stuff in Marketing 101. Every character worth their salt (as in worth their sal-ary, i.e. their paycheck) should have a day bag, purse, or even just a pocket -- if nothing else -- full of odds and ends. Then when the opportunity presents itself, they can simply reach in there and mysteriously produce... Gimlet's Amazing Leatherworking Tool™: you know, for your next leatherworking contingency.

Anyhow, minus any forethought to marketing, this is basically what Ruby has going on with her trans-dimensional bags, because as we all know, Ruby's not really on the advertising bandwagon yet. But other than that, she's loaded for bear. I mean, talk about overkill. For Gra'gl's sake, Ruby is even lugging around her algebra book -- just incase she feels the need to do some homework for extra credit -- or she comes up against a thorny trig problem. I guess what I'm saying is, it's sort of hard to feel sorry for Nellie if she's not going to put forth the effort and take a little proactive action on her own behalf.

Take a pill. Get a sponsor. For Gra'gl's sake, maybe do both.

Anyway, enough of that. Grt wasn't lying when he said he knew the way to the Citadel: second star to the right and straight on till dawn. And is it just me, or do those directions have an oddly familiar ring to them? Oh, now I know what it is. That's the same route The Dragon takes no matter where he is going. I guess it's sort of like how around the next corner will get you to pretty much wherever you want to go in Rigor Pass.

So, second star to the right and straight on till dawn, and before they knew it (or just a little before dawn), our band of

intrepid adventurers were preparing to land on the balcony of Katrinita's apartment. Now, that might seem sort of difficult at first, but she had a big balcony -- like a real big balcony -- like a really, really big balcony... super big-big. The Dragon used to live in this very same apartment and he used to come and go by jumping off the back ledge, so there was plenty of room for a landing. In fact, the entire living quarters were really nothing more than a stone walled landing-bay tricked out to look all medieval like with iron banded doors, flaming torches on the walls, and stuff like that. But really, rather than describing the ambience, I should probably be reminding you that the Citadel was The Dragon's old base of command, you know, back in the good old days when The Dragon was a bit of a psychotic despot and his rule could only be described as, well, er, draconian.

5

The Book Club

When Grt and the gang came into sight, Katrinita was, of course, hosting the weekly meeting of her book club. But before I get to Grt and his fabulous landing, I'm just going to let you guess, which book do you think they were reading? No fair looking at the appendix in The Dragon Bound Quartet (where the whole book club thing is mentioned). I mean, if you can't guess at this point, I'm not saying. But one thing I will say, if the book in question is good enough for Katrinita's book club, then it should be good enough for yours.

Anyway, you would think the residents of the Citadel would be used to seeing dragons, seeing as how it was the headquarters of The Dragon's old rule and all, but The Dragon had liked to keep a low profile. He hadn't been seen here much more than on Earth, Rigor Pass, or anywhere else, which is to say only a select handful of individuals had actually seen him over the course of the last thousand years before Ruby came along -- and that's, like, anywhere.

The point is, even the members of Katrinita's book club found it hard to keep focused on the discussion at hand when they saw Grt flying in from the distance, which is saying a lot considering how riveting of a book The Dragon Bound Quartet is. Anyhow, I don't know if I've mentioned this elsewhere, so please bear with me if I'm repeating myself, but Grt is brown whereas The Dragon is black, but other than that Grt looked an awful lot like The Dragon. Which probably isn't that important of a detail, but it gave the dozen or so girls in Katrinita's room a little more time to figure out how they wanted to respond: you know, as in ho-hum not another dragon, or WOW! LOOK AT THE DRAGON! The reason for this indecision being simple enough, none of them wanted to let on that this was as close to a dragon -- let alone The Dragon -- as any of them had ever been -- except for Katrinita, that is.

The girls still hadn't decided how to respond, which I suppose accounts for why they sort of stood there speechless, as Grt flew in for a landing. It was smooth and level, and when you get down to it, pretty darn amazing. He even managed to change back into his normal three foot size just at the right time. If he'd messed up on that one, things could have gotten ugly, but we are talking about Grt here, and so there wasn't really much chance of a mishap.

Even if he had to say so himself, the landing was perfect, and since no else seemed inclined to remark on his superior performance, Grt decided to congratulate himself on a job well done, "Gooders jobs Grt."

Taking the hint, Ruby and the rest quickly echoed the sentiment, "That was a wonderful landing, Grt."

"Thankees. Gladders youse noticers."

And that pretty much handled the congratulations.

As the adventurers dusted themselves off, they surveyed the room. But then, I've pretty much already told you all there is to tell you about Katrinita's apartment. It wasn't that much different

from the Future Spa suite. Sure, Katrinita's place was done up in a medieval motif and was harsh and sparsely adorned. But like Future Spa the room was large, much larger than one might expect to find in a medieval castle/fortress, even one carved out of the side of a cliff. I mean, she had a balcony a good 120' wide. So really, when Grt changed back to his small size, he was really just showing off.

"Grt's doer da gooders jobs. Eberbodies sayers so. So layers off da Grt."

OK. Fair enough. Didn't mean to harass the little guy.

"Youse bes carefully, Meester. Grt get biggers agains and he'd stompers youse. He'd know'd da ways nowers."

Let's just move on. Grt did a wonderful job flying and everybody was proud of him.

"Tankees, Meester."

And as to Katrinita's apartment, the only thing left to say about it is that it was located in the cliff/tower/mountain that comprised the Citadel. Stretching out on the ground below were the adobe buildings of Cliff City, and above was the swirling orange-red sky of the Citadel. Some say staring at that sky is reminiscent of gazing into The Dragon's eyes, but having done neither, I couldn't say -- except to note, both are rumored to be quite hypnotic, and not altogether unromantic.

By the way, this would be an ideal place for a hotel commercial. I don't have any particular chain in mind, so if anyone is interested, just let either my agent or me know. Anyhow, should we ever get a lodging sponsor, the hotel segment might just go something like this:

"Just because the suite at Future Spa and Katrinita's apartment are both extremely pleasant don't be led to believe that all hotel rooms are as luxurious," the voice over begins as an exterior view of Future Spa gives way to a glimpse of its award winning DNA Wash Facility and Cranial Spa.

This is then replaced by a ground level view of the Citadel. Creative use of filters and a fisheye-lens give the towering structure a gothic appearance as Grt is seen once again coming in for a landing.

“Grt getters da royaltiers?”

Yes, if we ever get a sponsor.

Anyhow, once the exterior view is done, the scene cuts to the inside of Katrinita’s spacious suite, where even now the girls from Katrinita’s book club are exchanging introductions with the members of Ruby’s party.

And as exciting as it would be to expand upon:

“Ruby, Buddy, Nellie, and Grt, this is Meadow. Meadow, this is Ruby, Buddy, Nellie, and Grt.”

“Ruby, Buddy, Nellie, and Grt, this is Priscilla de la Rouge Princess to the Ninth Court, Countess of the Outer Banks, Emissary....”

Like, I said, as exciting as that would be, maybe we’d all be happier if we cut back to the commercial. Having shown what luxury accommodations look like (i.e. Future Spa and Katrinita’s apartment), it’s now time to see how the other half lives. As such, the scene cuts to the rusted out trailers behind the Dungeon Edge Café -- the ones the Pixies working girls used to use. Maybe Nellie will tell you about it sometime.

But this segment isn’t about Nellie. Rather, it’s about a group of weary non-descript adventurers who even now are staggering into view. They have obviously just finished a very lucrative “job”, seeing as how they are heavily weighted down with gold, jewels, and other miscellaneous magical items. And after splitting up the loot, they are looking forward to a good night’s sleep. So, they watch in eager anticipation as a dirty one-eyed Ogre pries open the door to their abode for the evening: a badly dented, rusted out trailer whose broken windows have been nailed shut with scrap lumber. Inside, the place isn’t any better. Rats crawl around not bothering to hide. Dirty dishes are piled high in the sink and the straw mattress moves on its own volition. It’s clear housekeeping

hasn't seen the inside of this 'suite' in years. While behind the nightstand, there's a gaping hole in the wall. I mean, even a newbie would be able to surmise that the proprietor had worked out a deal with the local thieving guild and that our adventures could expect 'visitors' sometime during the night.

Happily -- for our adventurers, at least -- the scene changes yet again. The camera focuses in on a bright, clean, well-illuminated sign. It could be your sign, or it could be your competitor's sign. You decide. I like to think that my agent is a reasonable guy.

Whatever your hotel chain decides, rest assured that the gang of deliriously happy adventurers is now shown standing inside a comfortable hotel lobby. The atmosphere is safe, clean, and friendly. A helpful clerk, maybe a Cobalt -- I hear tell they are courteous -- checks them in and offers to help them with their luggage.

"Not that bag? Of course, sir. I understand. Perhaps I could help carry this cumbersome chest of coppers to your room for you or secure the services of a moneychanger?"

And then, the scene changes one final time to find the adventurers as they enjoy their warm, dry safe, room -- complete with fresh linen, complementary shampoo, and cable TV. The fighter and holy-warrior dude are bouncing on the beds. The thief is checking the dresser drawers -- first for traps and then for any loot the previous occupants may have left behind -- but all he finds is the Gra'gl's Codex that the Hideons have placed there for his edification. Being a thief, he slyly looks both ways before pocketing the tome. And then, the camera slowly winds its way around the luxurious room until it gets to the spacious bathroom where the wizard can be seen taking a bath. "A little privacy," he says before swinging the door closed. And on that cue the narrator resumes with his voice over, "A little privacy, someplace warm, dry, safe, and well lit to bind your wounds, split your treasure, and rest before your next adventure. You can count on that at Sweet Suites," or whatever name you want us to use. We're flexible. The

point is, in the second printing, or third, or whenever you're ready, we can sit down with your marketing department and hammer out the exact details of this segment to meet your publicity requirements, because at Dragon Bound Publishing, we're there for you.

Speaking of marketing, there is a tremendous controversy these days about placing the Gra'gl's Codex's in hotel rooms. I know the Hideons give those books to you for free, but it's a Codex for Gra'gl's sake. Only he -- whose name cannot be spoken, i.e. Gra'gl -- knows what's in there. Besides, why put a boring old Codex -- that you know is just going to make whoever reads it go insane -- into hotel rooms when you can put an exciting fantasy quest in there instead -- say a book like The Dragon Bound Quartet, just as a for instance. And really, when you get right down to it, what could a weary adventurer want more than to relax with the zany madcap adventures of Ruby, Grt, and the whole gang? And now for a limited time only, if you order a thousand or more copies of The Dragon Bound Quartet we can give you a bulk order discount and knock a copper or two off the regular retail price. It's just our way of saying thanks and working with you, our customer.

Um, excuse me. I think I see Ruby tapping her feet.

"If you're done," Ruby says in way that makes it clear she is not asking a question but rather indicating that it is time to move on. But in truth, I, personally, would be happy to just hang around this scene a while longer. You never know, maybe we'll get some takers on the hotel gag, but noticing the way Ruby is glaring, I suppose I would have to admit, she's probably right. We should move on.

Speaking of which, where did that gaggle of giggling girls get off to? I was planning on signing their copies of The Dragon Bound Quarter for them, and you know, maybe get a phone number or two.

"You missed your chance. They left."

Outside of Ruby and the gang, only Katrinita remains.

“Katrinita wasn’t able to tell me much about Bones,” Ruby continues. “She’s read a little about him in the library. He’s supposed to get his name from how he looks, on account of how he’s some sort of skeleton or something. She says we should head off to the library.”

To see if they have a copy of The Dragon Bound Quartet and take it off the shelves? I say this only as a public service announcement. Reading books from the library is only slightly safer than reading Gra’gl’s Codex in a seedy hotel room. Who knows what sort of vile contamination and unsavory ideas those books might introduce to your vulnerable mind? No! New books -- and escapist fantasy fiction of a fanciful nature in particular -- are the only way to go.

“The library!” Ruby says a little testily as she breaks into the Celaphopod’s reverie.

Wait a second here. You’ve shoed Katrinita’s crew of cute coed confederates away and then pumped Katrinita for all the information she’s worth. Truthfully, I don’t see why you need my involvement. Libraries are dangerous places. They give me the heebie-jeebies. Can’t you just run off and do that scene by yourself?

“No. You haven’t written about the library yet, so it doesn’t exist.”

Now that is just patently crazy. Katrinita goes there all the time.

“Then she can show us the way. Come on, Katrinita.”

6

The Library
Mu-ha-ha!

As we all know, from reading the last chapter if not from first-hand experience, libraries are incredibly dangerous places. Books are filled with that thing called knowledge and once you get

a little taste of it, you can never go back. It's addictive. Knowledge might be the only thing more addictive than K'fr itself.

Sure, I'm just being sarcastic you say, but hear me out. If you can never have too much knowledge, then that means you never have enough. And if you add to that the fact that that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, then...

"Then, we can all see why you, as much as anybody, find knowledge to be so terrifying and dangerous."

Just a word to the wise.

"Or the not so wise. So, which way is it?" Ruby asked Katrinita.

"It's at the bottom -- on street level."

Which means, they had to go the entire length of the Citadel from top to bottom, because you know, Katrinita lives on the top floor. Or at least, I'm guessing it's the top floor. I mean, if there's anything located above hers -- secret alchemist labs, treasure rooms, maybe a private suite for The Dragon whenever he's in town complete with a rooftop landing pad, and that sort of thing -- well then, I certainly don't know anything about it. Anyway, having gone around... and around... and around... and around... all the way down through the Citadel on those narrow spiraling staircases, which they always seem to want to put in these faux-postmodern medieval structures, it shouldn't be too surprising that Nellie got sick.

"I didn't sign up for this," Nellie complained. "How is it that I spend the entire story upchucking?"

Lack of sponsorship is my guess, but what do I know. I mean, if Nellie had been eating a Risqué candy bar:

Peanut buttery nugget...

Raspberry chiffon...

Slathered on top of a light, airy, crispy vanilla wafer...

That is drenched in chocolate...

Well, if she had been eating one of those, I could hardly have her puking in the next scene, now could I?

But then, she wasn't eating one of those, so I can.

Grt on the other hand liked going down the winding staircases. Of course, as they passed others groups, Grt couldn't help but notice that folks in the Citadel weren't too friendly, but that didn't stop Grt from smiling and saying, "Howdy Dooes," to everyone he met, because Grt's a friendly type drag-goon.

Buddy, on the other hand, preferred to match the glares he encountered with glares of his own. With his size and his fury, Buddy would have gone far in the subtle game of social dominance which ruled the Citadel. Folks here respected power -- physical, mental, and magical -- and little else.

Which is to say, the Citadel is not a happy place. It is -- even now -- a place of struggle and death. It is the sort of place that would have chewed Katrinita up and spit out her mangled remains had she not, for some unfathomable reason, curried the favor of The Dragon. Neither Katrinita nor The Dragon could tell you exactly how this had happened, but I can tell you why it had. It is part of The Dragon's new philosophical outlook and a cornerstone in his crusade to become a softer, gentler, and kinder monarch. It is for this reason and no other that The Dragon has instilled Katrinita as his voice and will in the Citadel. Of course, change sometimes comes slowly, because although Katrinita might be good at heart, that doesn't mean she's not also -- at heart -- a product of her environment (i.e. a place psychotically preoccupied with social power and struggle where only the strong survive). In the end, it might be helpful to think of the Citadel as a place where everyone is playing a giant game of King of the Hill, but where no one knows where the hill is, what the rules are, or what it takes to be king.

Anyhow, enough about the Citadel. As to other matters, it's probably just a coincidence that Katrinita looks exactly like Ruby if Ruby had black hair instead of red. If you ask me, it's probably best not to try and think too hard about some sort of alternate universe, parallel existence connection between Ruby and Katrinita. There might be one, but the odds-on-bet is that it's just

one of those things. Serendipity? Happenstance? Or maybe something deeper?

One rumor that I like to spread whenever I get the chance is that they both share some common ancestry. I mean, Ruby's last name is Firehaven, after all, and her biological father has never surfaced -- anywhere -- this despite Ruby's power, fame, and generous nature.

Well, I'll let you connect the dots. Let's just say if a guy could convince Ruby that he was her father and he didn't act like a total dill weed, he could make out like a bandit. And that sort of sounds like a great storyline for a sequel, but the simple truth of the matter is, I have no idea who Ruby's father is or whatever became of him. Rachel has never told anyone, which is really quite odd now that I think about it, but there it is. In the end, I don't why Ruby and Katrinita look like identical twins. I'm just the narrator. When I notice things like this, I relate them to you. That's my job. I mean, if you were ever in the same room as Ruby and Katrinita, you'd notice the eerie similarity between the two girls right away, so I'm thinking I should mention it somewhere. But if it is more than just a coincidence, nobody has figured it out yet, least of all me...

It's true.

Honest.

I swear it.

Look, I've already owned up to the fact that I can't keep a secret. There might be something more to the coincidence, but if there is, no body has told me yet. Once I know, you will. Trust me.

Now one thing I will tell you, rather than simply learning about Bones at the library, Katrinita is actually hoping to meet him there. She has every reason to believe that they will, but we will get to that in a moment.

And after all those asides, we've wasted -- or used up creatively and informatively -- enough time for the gang to

descend through the Citadel. Presently, they are walking along a cobblestone street outside in the open air. Oh, and I should probably mention that the Citadel doesn't look the same from ground level.

Down here, it's dark and overcast. The sky is a blackish-gray stuck in a perpetual twilight, while the occasional flash of lightning and crash of thunder sounds off in the distance. Think hardcore gothic romance and you can't go wrong. Or if you like, think scary vampire story movie set. The streets glisten with a sheen of water. It's always wet. The occasional horse drawn coach with its riders hidden from view or cloaked rider passes in the night, but mostly the streets are deserted and empty. The buildings are gray stone with elaborately carved Gargoyles, Demons, Angels, and similar adornments. I think you know the style. And in the middle of an inconspicuous street at a building unmarked in any way, Katrinita leads them up a short flight of stairs to a pair of tall wooden doors that have been reinforced with decorative bands of iron.

Katrinita doesn't knock. They're at the library. Who knocks before entering a public library? So instead, Katrina pushes on the doors, which despite their size, swing open with ease. From there, the party walks through an arched entryway. Come to think of it, there's probably a fancy name for an arched entryway, but I don't know what it is, so there you have it: arched entryway. Anyway, on one side of the entrance, there is bookcase for recently arrived books, but the only tome on the shelf is a curiously entitled book called The UFO Attractor's Handbook: Practical Advise for and Impractical Hobby (a friend of mine wrote it -- Eddie Takosori if you must know). And in a niche on the opposite wall is a seemingly empty aquarium, which bubbles away merrily, but if you stopped and looked hard enough you would be able to locate a scared Striped Psionic Squid hiding in the corner -- one of the creatures highlighted in the aforementioned tome (and nearly every other story Eddie -- not the editor -- writes).

Katrina, however, is not interested in any of these details. She leads the party on and does not pause until they have reached

the lobby. Or do you call it a foyer if it comes after one of those arched entryway doohickeys? No matter. Great halls full of books branch off to the left and right, while straight ahead lies a customer service counter lined with computers, checkout stations, and the like.

Behind this counter with his back to the door sits a robed -- as in a bath-robed -- figure. The haggardly human in question is hunched over a computer screen doing important research into the most effective strategy for dominating Slaughter Quest: the biggest, baddest, most realistic, online multiplayer portal ever designed -- now with an exclusive Dragon Bound gaming era. Try your free trial today. That's Slaughter-Quest.com-net and use the promo code -- Crazy-George -- and get your first 30 days free!

As mentioned, Crazy George is engrossed in his research. Slaughter Quest has that effect. If you are looking for engrossing game play, complicated quests, and interaction with players from across the vortexes, then Slaughter Quest is the interactive gaming experience you are looking for.

As I think I've previously mentioned, Ruby's not really on the whole marketing bandwagon, so she rings the customer service bell without delay.

In response, George waives his hand over his head without looking around as he points his finger first one way and then the other. "Children's that way. Adult's that way."

Ruby, of course, instantly recognizes George's voice, his distracted demeanor, and slovenly appearance. "Is that you? Crazy George?"

The sound of Ruby's voice gets George's attention. He swivels around quickly and stands up. His robe is loosely tied at the waist revealing an ample belly, skinny legs, boxer shorts, and white socks with enough holes that it is generous to call them socks in the first place. "That vindictive Celaphopod didn't send you to hunt me down, did he?" George asks with a voice full of concern and worry.

“No. Of course not,” Ruby reassures him. “What are you doing here?”

“Mostly playing Slaughter Quest. This place is dead,” he remarks to Katrinita. “Don’t any you at the Citadel ever check out a book or read?”

Now, Katrinita has spent most of her life in the Citadel. She was born elsewhere, but sent to the Citadel as tribute at a very young age. Anyhow the point is, giving out information to strangers simply isn’t done in this vortex. It’s one of the many ways to shorten one’s life in the Citadel. In fact, in the Citadel there are many ways to shorten one’s life and precious few methods of lengthening it. As mentioned, it has a harsh, violent, power driven culture. And as such, Katrinita does not see any reason to tell this... this Crazy George that she had been in the library twice in the last week alone -- the library being one of the few places she can actually go in order to escape the politics and backstabbing that passes for life in the Citadel. Usually the library is empty. That is the nature of the library. Or course, it is rare, but sometimes Katrinita has met a fellow denizen of the Citadel here, and even The Dragon, himself, but the place is usually empty -- no matter how many patrons are actually present.

More to the point, Katrinita has also read stories -- legends really -- about individuals encountering Bones in the library. Someone would be studying some esoteric subject and Bones would provide assistance by recommending a book or pointing the way to a secret chamber filled with priceless manuscripts. Not uncoincidentally, it was in the library itself that Katrinita had first met The Dragon, though at the time she had not known he was The Dragon. And curiously enough now that she thinks about it, it was The Dragon, himself, who had handed Katrinita the book with the stories about Bones in it -- a sequence of events which the observant reader might recognize as being surprisingly similar to the plots of many of the stories in which Bones appears. This, of course, is merely a coincidence. At one time Bones was The

Dragon's second in command and their modus operandi do overlap.

Anyhow like I said, seeing as how she came of age in the Citadel, rather than sharing any of this knowledge with the others, Katrinita instead opts to challenge Crazy George openly -- the best defense being a good offense and all that. "You are not supposed to be here," she says, her voice carrying with it the edge of a threat as only one who speaks The Dragon's will can. "We were intended to meet Bones here. What have you done with him?" Of course, there is also a little of the bluff in what she says, but only a little. The stories she has read have led Katrinita to believe that Bones is -- or at least, was -- the chief curator of the library and that is why he is so often met here -- not that she, herself, has ever met Bones. Still, that is hardly germane. The Lady Ruby has gone to the library in search of Bones. If she has been intended to meet anyone here, it is Bones, not this, this Crazy George personage.

So anyway, seeing as how Katrinita's is finished with her two lines of dialogue -- and the significantly longer silent commentary of the Celaphopod appears to be over -- George nonchalantly grabs an oversize mug of coffee off his desk and walks over to the counter where he points his finger at Katrinita and says, "Don't be threatening me there, Missy. The Dragon's protection only goes so far and I'm Crazy." He says this last part while tilting his head, bouncing his eyebrows, and showing the whites of his eyes as if this proves his point. He then puts his cup down -- spilling coffee all over the place -- sits on the counter, and swings his legs around so that he ends up on the same side of the counter as Katrinita and Ruby. You probably did the same thing when you were like thirteen. "You're searching for Bones, huh?"

"Yes," Ruby agrees. "What do you know about Bones? Why didn't you tell me?"

"You're conveniently forgetting that you made a small fortune of K'fr, my K'fr -- K'fr that I earned fair and square, mind you -- disappear from the plot." (Well, almost disappear from the

plot. Funny how that works.) “I’m sure I could have used that to find another wife, true love, everlasting romance...”

“It would have only lasted two paragraphs,” Ruby reminds him.

“Which goes a long way towards explaining why I’m not really that upset over the entire thing. Follow me.”

Scratching his belly, George leads the group -- Grt, Buddy, Nellie, and all -- into the library’s main reading room. It is a large room filled with numerous wooden desks and tables. Bookshelves three stories high line the perimeter, while rain gently taps against the dirty panes of glass, which form a wall to wall skylight, far overhead. To the sides, Ruby can see water streaking down the windows.

And as long as I’m describing things, I should mention that if Ruby were to keep on going through the reading area and to the far back of the library, she would eventually come to a secondary atrium where the ceiling is only two stories high. This is the reference area. Bones keeps a small room back there for himself, but George has taken it over in his absence. Oddly, George doesn’t need much more than Bones. The only thing he has added to the room is a sleeping bag (which he has lain over the wood plank bed), and a few empty potato chip bags (to accessorize the otherwise empty night table). Other than that, there is nothing else in the room. Bones is a construct, a magical robot. He doesn’t need much. George on the other hand is simply a crazy wizard. One might imagine that like an author or an avid reader, George lives mostly in his head.

Of course, all of that doesn’t really concern us at the moment, but I thought it added a bit of color and maybe a little insight into the man who is Crazy George.

Back in the main reading room, most of the tables are empty, but some have great heaping piles of books on them. George ignores these and leads Ruby over to a table that only holds one lone tome. It’s obviously an antique, probably priceless, and quite

possibly magical, so George carelessly sets his coffee mug down on top of the open pages. It would take a mind reader to know whether the coffee that is subsequently spilled over the priceless artifact has been done on purpose, by accident, or is simply an incidental byproduct of who George is. Fortunately, I am a mind reader, and so I can assure you it was all of the above.

But even if you don't buy that, it is clear that George is in a generous, helpful sort of mood, because without any prompting by yours truly, he takes it upon himself to end the chapter by turning to Ruby and explaining, "This book will tell you everything you need to know about Bones."

7

Dusanne Vendette

It was between the third and fourth Goblin wars that Barovan X'lavier created the steed Dusanne Vendette. Tired of loosing his mount in battle, he had decided it was time to create a steed as strong and robust as himself, one capable of withstanding...

"I'm not reading this into the script," Ruby remarks as she looks up from the massive tome. "How long does this thing go on anyway?"

It's a full history of the Early Goblin Wars, but we'll only paste the relevant sections -- 5,000 words or so -- into your adventure. That should take us past the halfway point of book three and from there...

"No. We're not going to do that."

You've been saying that sort of thing a lot lately.

"I'm not giving up 5,000 words of my narrative for this: The Early Goblin Wars," Ruby says as she reads the words off the page. "I've never heard of them before. Have you heard of The Early Goblin Wars, Katrinita?"

"No."

“It’s fascinating reading,” Crazy George says helpfully -- if you can believe that, being helpful that is. “I hadn’t heard of them before either, but it’s really amazing. Seems this Baravon XL Dude got sick of losing his battle-mount, so he made a steed for himself out of Magical Steel Alloy.”

“That’s right folks, Magic Steel Alloy Foundries,” but before the commercial’s announcer can really get into the swing of things, his voice is cut off by Ruby.

“Is this all just a set up for another commercial spot?” Ruby asks incredulously.

It’s plot background. This information about Dusanne Vendette and Bones has got to get into this adventure somewhere. You’ve got your choice. You can read the passage, which is easiest for me. I mean, since it’s already written, I just cut and paste it in. Or Crazy George can give you a short synopsis...

“Quite possibly leaving out important details,” George notes as he slips and spills coffee on himself. And while wiping the spilled coffee off his arm, George absentmindedly spills coffee on the tome, like again. And as he’s using his bathrobe to wipe this up, he probably manages to smear a few unimportant words. Meanwhile, a frog on the next table over can be seen jumping around trying to read a book about breaking curses, ending transmutation spells, and/or erasing unwanted flavor text.

So like I was saying, you either read the text out loud, George summarizes it, or we go with a commercial spot.

“Grt likees da commercials,” everyone’s favorite drag-goon chirps in.

“I like the commercials, too,” Nellie adds from the magazine section of the library where she has been reading the latest issues of Pixie Life, Fairy Living, and Fictional Persona Weekly -- your personal weekly guide to all your favorite celebrities’ doings.

“Go with the commercial,” Buddy urges as he holds up a copy of Rustler, so the readers can see that he’s on the cover --

along with a few of his many adoring fans. “Rustler it’s what a real Minataur reads.”

It would appear that Ruby is outnumbered. And since it’s clear it’s only a matter of time before her highness acquiesces, the Celaphopod Sn@ps™ his fingers and signals Carl to roll tape.

“That’s right folks, Magic Steel Alloy Foundries, best known for Atom-Might and Myth-Alloy propriety blends of magical and mythical steel has worked with master creators since the beginning of time.”

A video screen embedded in the pages of the book shows a smoke filled blacksmith’s workshop where master craftsmen are hard at work crafting a mechanical horse and a robot. The robot looks an awful lot like that cool chrome robot from that awesome action movie from not too terribly long ago, only instead of being chrome, the robot has a burnt black sheen to it that has a reddish sort of hue, well, that and it looks a lot like a skeleton, so really it looks nothing like a robot. But one thing it does have in common with your typical robot sent back in time to destroy the Human race is that not much is going to stop this construct. Bullets? The beam weapon from an AK-47/5889x? Fireballs? Or even acid? None of them stand a chance against Myth-Alloy!

Meanwhile, the narrator continues, “Whether you need to create a steed that can withstand the rigors of combat or a squire worthy of being called your personal assistant, let Magic Steel Alloy Foundry’s dedicated team of alchemists work with you to create a custom batch of magically enriched metal to suit your exacting specification.”

From there, the narrator continues with ordering information and advises the viewer to contact a field rep for more information. But that’s pretty boring stuff. So instead, we’ll go back to a close-up of Bones. Think: takes a lick’in and keeps on ticking. Think: it goes on and on and on. Think: that crazy psychotic robot starring in every cheesy Holly Wood movie since the beginning of time. Think a bit character saying, “I’m not a bit character. I’m Bones

and I'm not playing second fiddle to no one, least of all some weapons banning dragon that has abdicated his commonsense to a little girl. And what exactly does consort mean anyhow?"

But perhaps I digress.

"What did that commercial spot tell us," Ruby asks when it is over.

What, Ruby? No brand name tie-in? No color commentary on how you once had a nail clipper made out of Myth-Alloy and it sure was sharp? Or that Roger swears by his Atom-Might toolset? Personally, I'm disappointed. It remains amazingly clear that Ruby is not on the sponsorship bandwagon, and that she's needlessly letting money slip through her fingers.

Of course, not everyone feels the same way as Ruby. Take Buddy for instance, he's smart enough to jump in and inform us that, "The commercial tells us Bones is made out of a Magical Alloy from MSAF, so he's going to be hard to take down. And you can be sure there won't be any metal fatigue or corrosion issues. He'll be as good as the day he was forged -- even now, thousands of years since his creation."

"I think it means Bones is tough, maybe a little sexy in a hardened steel, bad boy sort of way," Nellie suggests tentatively. She might be new to this whole marketing thing, but she's quick enough to follow Buddy's lead and try to get a slice of the MSAF sponsorship pie for herself.

"But did we really learn anything important?" Ruby asks, again.

"Evidently not," George chastises her as he deliberately spills yet more coffee on the pages of the old book and the newly chromed table underneath. Smiling straight into the camera as he uses his bathrobe to wipe up the coffee, he remarks, "If this was a regular wooden table, this coffee would have left an unsightly stain, but look how easily coffee stains clean off of this Myth-Alloy kitchen counter top. Myth-Alloy, ask for it by name."

“What does it tell us about Bones?” Ruby asks again growing a little frustrated with these shenanigans.

Helpfully, Grt tugs on the hem of her dress and points to the cue card Carl is holding off screen, which reads:

Oh, I get it
If Bones is made of
Myth-Alloy, Atom-Might
Or one of MSAF other proprietary alloys
We won't be able to destroy him.

But loosing yet another sponsorship opportunity, Ruby declines to read the card out loud and instead sort of peevishly says, “Just tell me, how do we find Bones?”

“It seems to me you're not staying focused,” George notes.

“I'm not staying focused?” Ruby says sort of flabbergasted. Of course, if I knew exactly what flabbergasted meant, I might not use that word, because it sounds like it might be... you know, a little messy. But somehow, it seems like it might sum up Ruby's feelings right about now, so I'm going to stick with it, and seeing as how Ruby has regained a little of her composure, it is time for her to continue. “I don't see how you can say I'm not staying focused. It seems to me like I'm the only one who is staying focused, here.”

“No. You're jumping ahead,” George explains. “Earlier in the story you, yourself, specifically said that you wanted to study magic or something in this here, the third book of the Minataur Tails, right?”

“Yes,” Ruby has to agree. She did say that.

“Well, here you are in a library stacked as high as the eye can see with magical tomes. You're standing next to a masterful wizard,” George pauses to take a bow. And yes, you guessed it, he manages to spill yet more of his coffee onto a stack of library books before continuing, “You also have an expert vortex tracker at your disposal.” Buddy takes a bow. “And a magical Pixie

hanging about, whose dust is reputed to be the cure of what ails you.”

Nellie blushes, “I’ve been told I have that magical touch.”

“And to top it all off, you’ve got a magic caddy in Grt, who from all appearances might just be as versatile as The Dragon himself. But probably more important is the fact that he has a vortex full of manna in that satchel of his. So if you want to practice, no problem, you got the goods.”

George might have had something else to say, but he’s sort of lost his train of thought for the moment. So to stall, he takes a sip of coffee. It was horrid stuff at the beginning of the chapter and it’s only gotten worse. So without thinking much about it, he spits the swill out in great spray and then pointedly pours the remaining coffee in his mug on the floor, table, book, and whatever else happens to be underfoot. “This stuff is horrible,” George remarks as he looks around. “Don’t we have a coffee sponsor, yet?”

“Not yet,” Carl’s voice echoes from off screen.

“You know, I’m usually not this helpful,” George notes to himself as much as Ruby or anybody else. “You might want to take advantage of it while it lasts. You said you wanted to learn more about magic. So, what do you want to know?”

8

Duk’ah

Ruby doesn’t have an answer to George’s question. She doesn’t know what aspect of magic she wants (or needs) to learn about -- at least, not right away. So while Ruby is thinking that one over, this is as good a spot as any to clear up a few specifics, which might seem a bit confusing or inconsistent to some of our more detail oriented readers.

First of all, Crazy George is staying in Bones room. What’s with that you ask? Well, it seems unlikely Ruby will ever ask George about it, so...

“I can ask,” Ruby offers as she breaks into the Celaphopod’s narrative. “George, you heard Celli. Why are you here?”

“I needed a place to stay. It stood to reason that if Bones was waging a war on The Dragon, he wouldn’t be here and I could hang out. Besides, the Library has an unreal Network connection. The response times are through the roof.”

“Does that really explain it?” Ruby asks.

“Yep, ‘fraid so, the Celaphopod will back me up on this one,” George insists. And the Celaphopod will back him up. He is telling the truth, but not the whole truth.

“Fine. I’ll lay it on the line. You’ve read the entire story to date as printed in the back issues of Digital Current, right?”

“Yes.” Ruby has always been a conscientious character and so she had.

“Then you know the story is going to be 100,000 words to the letter,” give or take a few. I suppose it matters what language you’re reading it in as well (or what edition), but you get the idea. “Well, based on the word count, it’s simply too early for you to meet up with Bones. If you had walked into the library, say 10,000-20,000 words from now, he’d be here and I wouldn’t, but you didn’t. You bypassed M©ther G©©se. You haven’t done the bridge yet. Who knows what else is missing, so it’s not going to happen, not yet. The story isn’t ready for you to meet Bones.”

“How is that different from being railroaded?” Ruby asks.

“You’re a smart girl,” George continues. “So, don’t believe a word I say. I’m just a big name star in a major fantasy series whose sole purpose in life would appear to be the messenger of important plot points. So, what do I know? But the basic idea is, in the end you only get so much life, time, or in this case words. Bones will show up in a few thousand words whether you want him to or not. Ask any old person.” George scratches his head for a moment. “I guess those old people are calling themselves middle aged persons these days, so I’m not sure whether you would need to talk to an old person or a middle aged person?” And then, being sort of distracted by this concept, George suddenly stops mid-

thought as his mind wanders off trying to decipher the difference between old age and middle age considering that old age is the new middle age.

In a desperate attempt to keep the previous line of questioning open, Ruby throws out, “But I have freewill.”

Yeah, sure. You’ve got freewill, but you’re not omnipotent. Trust me on this. I can’t even get characters in a book to follow a simple script. How could you ever hope to conquer disease, death, and -- to continue the analogy -- whatever you want to replace slaughter and desolation with? Stuff happens. Deal with it.

“This is the magic lesson?” Ruby asks doubtfully.

“This is reality,” George responds having regained his composure. “We’re just hanging out.”

We’ve got the second half of a book to fill. Saying George plays Slaughter Quest while Ruby reads a stack of magical tomes only takes a few words. The limiting factor is not always time, sometimes other resources are involved like money, energy, and attention, or in this case words.

“I’m not following any of this,” Buddy admits. Of course, he doesn’t bother to look up from the pages of his Rustler magazine when he says this, so that might be part of the problem.

And Nellie is right there with him on this one. She’s reading Fantasy Fashion and to say the magazine is so interesting and captivating that she can’t put it down would be an understatement.

Oh, and by the by, I might as well point out that you get what you pay for with your advertising dollar here at Dragon Bound Publishing, which is really just another way of saying, you don’t get what you don’t pay for.

Taking that as his cue, Grt looks around anxiously to see if there is anything for him to hawk, but sadly there is not. This would also have been a good place for Grt to say something cute, but the bottom line is, he’s a little off balance, since he hasn’t been able to follow the gist of the current conversational thread any better than Ruby has.

As if to prove this last point, Ruby asks in a straightforward manner, “What are you saying?”

“That we’re done explaining why I’m here,” George answers simply as he closes off the topic with a subtle bit of irony.

The other loose end that needs tying off -- which many of you probably don’t even consider a loose end, but it would sort of gnaw on my mind if I were a reader, so I feel compelled to address it -- is the question of why Ruby feels compelled to continue the quest at all at this point. What is her motivation? Sure, she’s having the time of her life; it beats going to school, etc. But in reality, she’ll be back home before the day (the Earth day, that is) is over -- before it’s past her curfew on Saturday night -- and it’s not like she’s going to miss a single day of school. I mean, trust me on this. Rachel is pretty liberal about letting Ruby prance around the Realms, but come Monday morning, if Ruby knows what’s good for her, she’ll be in school.

But none of that addresses the issue adequately or directly. You see, The Dragon has the NAS-gh©uls™ in hand. He’s not going to let them destroy another vortex -- no matter what, whether Ruby succeeds or no. So the real question remains, why is Ruby bothering to go after Bones? Why stress it?

“That’s simple,” Ruby remarks. “If I don’t do something about it, Bones will just send more NAS-gh©uls™ in the future. The current four riders might be quarantined, but if Bones is not dealt with, he’s only going to send more. And I like being the Lady Ruby and defeating Bones and the NAS-gh©ul™ -- no matter how much assistance I get from others -- is something I need to do in order to maintain my position as The Dragon’s Consort.”

Excellent. I’m proud of you Ruby. Now, can you figure out how these two subjects are related? What your continuation of the quest has to do with the word count?

“No. I don’t think so.”

“Stuff happens,” Katrinita jumps in. Hey, I’d almost forgotten about her -- she’s so quiet -- but it sounds like she might be on to something. “Something has got to happen. You got your word count and Ruby has her quest, so they sort of work together, somehow, I guess. My hunch is that you’re going for something Eastern -- maybe the interconnectedness of it all -- but you’re not following it up with enough detail to make it all fall into place.”

Well, that a good start anyhow, Katrinita. Stuff happens. Accept it. Let it roll off you. I’ll go along with all of that, but it’s really too common of an idea to be compelling -- at this level of literaturistic greatness, anyhow. I’m going for something a little more esoteric. I’m trying to say that your story -- everyone’s story -- is only so long. You only get so many words, sunsets, embraces, or whatever. It all is limited, but even more than that, the order of things is limited too. Even Crazy George hasn’t found a way to get divorced before he gets married.

“Hey! Now that’s a great idea!” George says breaking in. “If we could start it all by throwing dishes at each other, maybe we would live happily ever after watching the sunset on some Jamaican Beach.” And then, after a moment’s thought he adds, “Hey! I thought we wizards were supposed to be a backwards living lot?”

You have no idea of the difficulties involved. How do you write a scene starting with that as your assumption? How do you even write a conversation? The wizard is saying hello at the end and goodbye at the beginning and doesn’t have the slightest idea what has been said the entire time.

“So, the real reason George has such a hard time fitting in is because he got it all backwards?” Ruby says giggling. You’ve got to hand it to her. She tried to say the line with a straight face, but she sort of failed miserably.

Anyway, don’t be deceived by any of that. This is a straightforward narrative (I don’t lie, though I am perhaps often ill informed), and George is a straightforward living type guy. As cool as the idea sounds, I’m not dealing with the editing nightmare

that a temporarily reversed character brings with them. Which is all to say, George might as well get with the program and adopt one of those progressive forward thinking ideologies.

“Ain’t gonna happen,” George says defiantly.

Anyhow, after Ruby wipes the smirk off her face and thinking she finally understands the nuances involved, she says in a summarizing sort of way, “What you’re saying is, certain key plot elements are going to happen at more or less set times and in a certain order, but other than that I’ve got a lot of control.”

Well said. Birth. School. Work. Death. If you’re not going to do it in that order, your going to need to be one powerful wizard.

“And have a better author in your corner who is willing to tackle the hard stuff,” Crazy George points out, which in the end, probably goes a long way towards explaining why his marriages never work out -- i.e. no one likes a wise guy, or a back talking character.

9

Time Drifts By

George helped Ruby locate some of the more useful magical tomes residing in the library’s extensive collection: 101 Magical Tricks, Merlin’s Magical Tips, Creative Manna Use and Tax Dodges, and other books of the kind. When they had filled up one of the larger tables, Ruby started her studying, while George went back to playing Slaughter Quest.

Not being much of a reader himself, and since the good folks at Rustler had only paid for a single chapter, Buddy grew bored very, very quickly and would have gone out of his mind if Grt and Nellie hadn’t invited him to play a game of Hide and Seek.

Now, you might not think so, but in the end, Buddy found this game to be very challenging. Both Nellie and Grt are relatively small and had soon found countless little niches scattered around the library into which they could crawl and hide. I mean, Nellie could squeeze herself into the empty space on a bookshelf.

And once Grt saw her do this, he remembered that he could change his size at will, so he started hiding under lampshades, behind seat cushions, and inside flowerpots. And then to top it all off, since both of them could fly, they crisscrossed the open area above the reading room whenever Buddy was in some back corner searching for them. So, it is a credit to Buddy's great skill as a tracker and personal perseverance that he found them even once after that first hour.

And while the delightful children played and filled their (and our) lives with color, Ruby and Katrinita read.

Time passed.

They read some more.

More time passed.

And yet they read.

One might care to note how few words were utilized in the narrative to describe the immense amount of literature which Ruby and Katrinita had worked their way through. In fact, it wouldn't take a genius to note that more words had just been used to describe a game of Hide and Seek than were required to describe the huge pile of books Ruby and Katrinita had consumed.

It was a metaphor.

Of course, whether it had any meaning or not was an entirely different matter.

In any event, when they had worked their way through the first stack of books, night had finally arrived and it was time to go to sleep, so Ruby tapped Grt's immense supply of manna and created an elaborate campsite in the middle of the library floor. And then at dawn the next day, Ruby and Katrinita got up bright and early and continued their studies.

Perhaps with a view towards strengthening the tie between Ruby and herself, perhaps because she was (or could be viewed as) an extra-dimensional alter-ego of Ruby, or perhaps because she was more comfortable being a follower than a leader (my personal guess), Katrinita made a point of reading whatever Ruby did.

Meanwhile, the children switched to a game of Kick the Book: a game very similar to the classic Kick the Can only harder on the toes and with the added bonus of being a little more symbolically rewarding.

Grt will remember these days in the library fondly and not just because he could be heard to cry “Grt wins again” on a regular basis. Food, friends, fun, and good times, along with a string of cute catchphrases, these are the things on which Grt elects to spend his word count. It goes a long way towards explaining why he is so popular and receives so much fan mail. Well that, and his pleasant demeanor, limitless loyalty, and the fact that he is so darn cute. Don’t you just want to squeeze the little fellow and give him a hug?

Well, if you buy a Grt plushy doll, you can.

10

Birth -- School -- Work -- Death
What about Play?

After the fourth day, Ruby did not feel like reading anymore. She dumped the remaining books, which she had not read, into her extra-dimensional bag and then put the bag into her back pocket. It was handy that way. Then she announced to the room at large, “It’s time to move on. Are you going to come with us, Katrinita?”

“No, this is my place,” Katrinita responded simply before hugging the travelers farewell. She had enjoyed their stay, but it was time for her to return to the Citadel and the flow of power.

Ruby walked Katrinita to the door and then dropped by to visit with Crazy George at the customer service counter where he was still playing Slaughter Quest -- it’s that fun.

“We’re leaving, George. We’re headed off to the beach for a little fun. Do you want to accompany us?” Ruby asked.

George looked up from the computer screen. He was only moments away from leveling up, and then he’d be only moments

away from completing a quest, and then he'd be only moments away from leveling up, and so on. It was a difficult decision.

"The sun, the ocean, maybe a barbecue," Ruby said trying to sweeten the pot and make the trip seem more interesting.

"What beach do you have in mind?"

"The one by The Dragon's hoard, where I went to sleep," during a previous adventure don't you know. And had that been only been a few short months ago? It seemed like ages, or at least, like a completely different story arc.

"They've got Mermaids there," George stated more or less to himself as he mentally calculated the benefits of going. And then, after scratching on a week's worth of whiskers for a moment or two, he added, "I'll have to pack."

"Take your time," Ruby responded easily, but she was not the least bit surprised when George grabbed his coffee cup and said, "OK. All set. Let's go."

Ruby knew that last bit could have gone a bunch of ways. George could have nothing to pack, it could have taken him all day to pack and require a dozen porters to move a mammoth pile of suitcases, or he could have decided to swipe everything from the library. She was sure with a flick of the wrist, a bit of manna, and a gag to back him up, he could have emptied the library shelves in an instant. She was glad he hadn't chosen the last option.

Gathering her party together in the main reading room, Ruby addressed them by saying, "I've been doing a bit of reading on dimensional transfers, so I think I have this down. Your job Buddy... Would you rather be called Minne or Buddy?"

Buddy who was born with the name Minne rubbed his jaw. The pain of his alter-ego's assault was still fresh on his mind, and so the decision was not a hard one, "The name Minne isn't bringing up any happy memories right now. I think I'll stick with Buddy for the time being."

"Buddy it is," Ruby accented without delving any deeper into the matter. "Now, what I want you to do, Buddy, is just tell me if

I'm making a mistake. Don't help. Don't do anything really. I've got a sneaking suspicion that if you help -- even the tiniest little bit -- we'll fly off track and get lost in Mother Goose Land, or who knows where at this point. And we all want to go to the beach, right?"

"Beach-es-es is funs," Grt agreed whole heartedly. He already had on a pair of swim trunks. Sun block streaked his face and a beach towel was strapped over his shoulder.

And for whatever reason, it was at this particular juncture that Nellie decided to break into the narrative. Her timing was off by a little, but you had to hand it to the little Pixie for taking the initiative. "That reminds me," she said. "Before I travel I take the Captain's Cure. Doctor recommended number one and used by the Seven Realms Navy. The Captain's Cure is the professional's motion sickness relief remedy of choice. They come in handy blister packs, just two pills and you're safe for the next 12 hours or 2,000 words," whichever comes first.

Without delay, Nellie downed the pills and then felt around in her garter belt. Yep! The two gold coins had appeared just like her agent had said they would. That sure was easy money, but she still wanted to make sure about the motion sickness thing, so she spoke to the ceiling where presumably the Celaphopod could be found lounging in his heavenly abode, "That means no more puking for me. I've got the Captain's Cure in my corner."

Hmm!

No matter, the puking gag had been done to death, so I guess that's that, as long as Nellie remembers to take her pills, that is.

Ruby had patiently waited the sponsorship spot out. When it was over, she continued, "So, Buddy. You just watch. And you too, George. No snapping your fingers. No helping. Just let me know if I'm making a mistake."

"Well, the first mistake you're making is leaving all these priceless books behind, just think what you could sell them for on Manna-Bay."

“You’re forgetting I’m the Consort. If this is The Dragon’s library, then it’s already my library, and I don’t have any need to steal them. I can check out these books anytime I want.”

“I did notice that.”

Ruby wisely chose to ignore George. He might be happy going down side trails forever, but Ruby had an agenda. “I’ve read a few books. I could probably just snap my fingers and get to where I want to go.”

“Works for me,” George said sipping his coffee.

“But it makes me appear too powerful.”

George gave her a sideways glance. How could you look too powerful? Intimidating bit characters was half the fun of being a crazy -- on the edge of losing it completely -- wizard.

“I am the Lady Ruby,” her highness explained. “I -- along with Grt -- star in the Dragon Bound series. We owe our fan base to a certain style, a certain finesse. If I snap my fingers whenever I’m confronted with a problem, it will make it extremely difficult for many members of my fan base to relate.”

“But you can’t beat the efficiency of the system. All the cool characters are snapping their fingers these days: me, The Dragon, even that copycat Celaphopod,” George expounded in that annoying way that he has. And then Sn@pping™ his fingers, the view through the skylights above changed from a dismally overcast day to a perfectly sunny afternoon. He sn©pped™ his fingers again and all the books disappeared from the shelves to be replaced by potted plants. And then, just for the fun of it, he Sn@pped™ his fingers one last time and it started to rain inside the library -- to water the plants, don’t you know.

“Change it back!” Ruby insisted.

Compliantly, George Sn@pped™ his fingers and all was as it had been before, except for the frog croaking in the corner. He was still a frog.

“Maybe it’s that I’m not that confident yet,” Ruby thought out loud. “If you change too much at once, who knows how much you’re fraying the ends of reality?”

George shrugged, "Reality's not really my problem."

"Well, it's somebody's. I think it ties in with that whole magical wish issue thing," Ruby continued. "The reason wishes never work in stories is..."

"Because writers are vindictive," George finished for her.

"No. In the Magic of Writing it clearly states that the reason wishes don't work is because if they did, it wouldn't make for good fiction." And believe it or not, the wish granting powers that be have an esthetic sense. "But more importantly, if wishes worked, everybody would soon be bored to tears." When George didn't say anything Ruby added, "You're probably the most powerful wizard in all the Seven Realms."

George brushed some pastry crumbs off of his chest and then held his head high as he graciously accepting the praise and acknowledgement which was long overdue.

"And you've spent the last few weeks playing Slaughter Quest."

"Don't be knocking a sponsor," George objected, but he got the point. He could do nearly anything. And what did he do? He played Slaughter Quest.

"Back to the issue at hand, then," Ruby said starting over. "I'm not going to snap my fingers to travel. I'm also not going to turn myself into a winged creature, fly on a broomstick, or anything like that. Walking has been good to me, so that's what I'm going to do. Now Buddy, if I was going to leave this room, I could open any door and walk through it to a different vortex?"

"Yep, but if you're going to pretend that you're a mere mortal, it helps if it's a little more related than that. Say for instance, if we want to go to the beach -- a place where there is a lot of water -- it would be easier if we went through a bathroom door because of the water connection."

"Fair enough, but moving away from doors for a second. If I wanted to, I could take an appropriate book off the shelf and jump through the pages -- especially if there was a picture."

“Or a painting on the wall,” Buddy agreed, but Nellie had opinions of her own on the matter. “Yawn, that’s been done to death.”

“But we could do it?” Ruby asked again because at this point, she was still doing a generalized review.

“Sure,” Buddy agreed. I mean, since it was true, what else was he going to do. But all this talk wasn’t going to get them anywhere, so in an attempt to make this review segment as short as possible, he expanded upon his answer, “You can go to sleep and wake up somewhere different or travel in your dreams and find that the dream had substance. I mean, if you want it all to be relatable to readers that might be the way to go. Or we could all sit down at a table, hold hands, and drift away. Really the ways to travel are near limitless. Heck you don’t even have to sit on a broom. Just sweeping the floor is good enough. One moment you’re sweeping the back porch and the next you’re getting ready to go to a ball.”

“OK,” Ruby accented, satisfied that either she or Buddy had given the different possibilities as careful a review as the situation warranted, so now it was time to get down to business. “My plan is to line this bookcase with manna and then push it open to reveal a secret passage.”

“It’s a good solid plan,” Buddy agreed. “Of course, I can’t work magic so if the passage wasn’t already there, I couldn’t do that.”

“And you don’t need to line it with manna,” George added.

“I don’t?” Ruby asked, but then she didn’t stop to listen to George’s reply. He started talking about the interconnectedness of all things and how everything was related, so if you affected one thing, you affected them all. It was a concept Ruby had come across in her reading, but Ruby wasn’t looking for a random passageway. She was looking for a specific passage, without any side shoots, random encounters, or unexpected surprises. For that it was best to light a candle; etch something in chalk, charcoal or graphite; or as in this instance, line a bookcase with manna. It

wasn't a requirement or anything, but that didn't mean it wasn't a good idea.

Now, I'm not going to torment Ruby by mucking with her plans and throwing a spurious enchantment her way or by arranging for the walls to have some sort of anti-theft measures built into them. You remember those books she put in her back pocket, right? I can basically do anything with that. Any spell in any of those tomes is there for the plucking, just waiting for me to activate it when she steps through a portal (any portal), but I'm not going to do that because I'm not that type of guy. Ain't no way. Ain't no how. Seriously.

Oh, and after that, I might as well mention that thinking -- or writing -- in double negatives isn't exactly such a good idea. It's exactly the type of thing you'll want to avoid if you ever take up spell craft due to the ambiguities involved.

Anyway, that's really neither here nor there. Ruby did what she said she was going to do, didn't do what she said didn't say she wasn't going to do, and when she was done with it all she put the slightest amount of pressure on the section of wall she had chosen with her little finger, and the wall -- bookcase and all -- swung effortlessly inward.

And even though she'd just caused a hundred odd magical tomes to crossover into a nexus from one dimension to the next -- sloppy work that -- someone must have been looking out for her because the portal held fast without so much as a cough, sneeze, or a hiccup.

Instead, a cool moist breeze could be felt gently blowing from the cavern beyond -- a lava tube if you must know -- and after listening for the crash of the ocean, Ruby took hold of Grt's hand and walked through the opening and down the passage.

The rest of the party soon followed, with that frog -- and its incessantly croaking, which you may have noticed -- bringing up the rear.

The Cove

The waves were fantastic today. This was much better than surfing on Jupiter. Who would have thought there would be 50' waves that broke for a quarter mile in The Cove? The Celaphopod was having the time of his life as he tried out a new long board that had just arrived by DDS and which was powered by a thank you note. "Three weeks, couldn't have done it without you," was all it said, but it was enough (because apparently, you don't have to be completely clean to be an inspiration). It was as good as having an outboard motor attached. The board powered itself up the waves and out into the surf. All the Celaphopod had to do was stand tall and enjoy. It was a lot like riding on a jet ski or being the Cosmic Surfer, the Celaphopod thought as he wove between the flirting Mermaids and the dolphins at play. I mean, can you believe it? He'd even stayed inside a pipe for a full three and a half minutes. While all the while, the sun had sifted through the surging water in an incredible array of blues, greens, and purples before the wave had finally collapsed around him. What a rush! This was the good life.

Ruby had found that the path through the lava tube did not go on for long. One quick turn, then another, and the cave opened up into The Cove. It was a beautiful warm sunny day. And thinking it might add to the ambience, Ruby fashioned sunglasses out of manna for everyone, even the frog.

Then it was swimsuits and the ocean. No one wanted to waste any time.

In the sand by the shore, there was a line of surfboards stuck upright like a picket fence. They were mostly of the old school, long board variety, but a few smaller planks were mixed in. Some had messages attached to them, while others simply had a delivery address written in permanent marker across their face.

Ruby grabbed one of the shorter boards and tried it for a while, but in the end she preferred floating on the waves and

playing with the Mermaids to surfing. Grt on the other hand could really cut it up. He was a born rider. I mean, here the Celaphopod lived minutes from the beach and he had never even considered riding a pipe upside down, but Grt was doing just that on his first run. He was a show off -- pure and simple. That's what it was. But no one cared and everyone enjoyed his antics.

Before long, Buddy joined the Celaphopod out beyond the breakers and past the reef where the water was calmer. It was here that they got off their boards and swam with the Mermaids and hitched rides on the backs of Dolphins. The excitement and squeals of some of the younger Mermaids drew a group of spear fish to the area. And with a little coaxing, they were soon diving for clams, abalone, and lobster. For their part, the spear fish were trying to outdo each other as they each tried to gift the most food to the Mermaids, but the girls were too busy giggled at the fun of it all to keep track of which spear fish was winning the game.

Crazy George, on the other hand, was not much of a surfer or a swimmer. He stayed close to shore for the first hour or so building an incredible sand castle. When he finally got bored with that, he left the frog in charge of it, and then decided to walk into the ocean. He didn't even bother to Sn@p™ his fingers to get a breathing spell going -- talk about showing off. He just started breathing water like he was born to do it and soon found himself an older, wiser, more mellow group of Mermaids who where happy to give him a tour of their undersea gardens. It had been a long time since there had been a visitor to The Cove worthy of their attention.

Warm, crisp, and clean, the intoxicating smell of the ocean filled the air while the soft soothing spray of the water felt cool on the skin. And all around them, there was a symphony of sights to behold: the tall volcanic cliffs which surrounded the Cove, the three waterfalls which fell into the ocean and lagoon, and the rainbows glittering in the accompanying mist. Deep in the back behind it all somewhere was the entrance to The Dragon's lair.

While nestled halfway up the cliff wall, positioned precariously on rotting wooden stilts stood the Bungalow: home to yours truly.

In short, this was paradise. The sensory inputs were unreal. And it should be noted somewhere that should you ever be blessed enough to find yourself on such a beautiful beach, your ability to enjoy it will correspond exactly to your ability to enjoy this very moment, no matter where you are, whether you are on a train, in a hospital waiting room anxiously awaiting the news, or in a classroom calming yourself before The Big Test. Wherever you are -- whatever the extenuating circumstances -- this is as good as it gets.

Don't fall into the popular mistake of believing paradise is somewhere else. Paradise can be found among the bubbles trapped in a bottle of shampoo that sparkle like the eyes of a Mermaid. Paradise is right at your fingertips as a field of wheat covered in morning dew is set ablaze with the light and glory of the rising sun. Paradise resides in the rivulets of water tracing their way down a window on a rainy day: the fractal reflection bringing to mind the swirling sky of some magical world. Paradise is the soft touch of the wind. Paradise is the warmth of blankets on a cold winter's night. Paradise is food for the hungry and rest for the weary. In fact at its heart, paradise is taking just one more leisurely breath.

Just one more breath: can you sense the completeness of the moment? Fall into it? And let go?

But there I go being preachy again (and sort of a hypocrite, but what are you going to do).

Speaking of which (talking about hypocrites, I suppose), have you ever thought about accepting Karthrax as your personal savior? He'll make you a good deal: just a few dozen easy to abide by vows (poverty, chastity, humility -- Hey, I'm almost there!) and he'll hold your sword steady in combat and give your hands that healing touch.

No? Not interested in Karthrax? Then how about Gra'gl?

Sadly, neither of them are sponsors. I've got this deal on the drawing board with an up and coming cult (The Sick: Drugs, Sex, and Celaphopods), but if I could work something out with those Gra'gl folks, I'd be set for all eternity -- I mean, like forever. But it almost sounds too good to be true, and I've been told to be careful.

And wouldn't you know it? There I go again, loosing the flow of what I was saying just to make another good/fair/middling joke. Suffice to say, the day was worth the words spent on it -- the time and the effort -- but none of the participants experienced more than they were capable of experiencing. George never remembered the frog. Grt could not have begun to explain why the Celaphopod obviously preferred the company of the Mermaids to the Dolphins, and Buddy kept on thinking to himself, this would be a really -- like a really, really -- good place to smoke some K'fr (had he only known).

Such is the nature of reality. You only see what you are capable of seeing. And just because I have been given the gift of relating this story, do not think that I am different or some special case. There is a limit to all perception and all enjoyment of experience. Ruby will read this passage eventually in Digital Current and if I may be so bold as to say, one's ability to enjoy the tropical paradise that is The Cove is directly related to ones ability to enjoy Mr. Thwartbridge's algebra class. This, of course, is merely an opinion. Buddy would disagree, Mr. Thwartbridge might not.

During the Celaphopod's patronizing lecture, most of the day had passed. And towards evening, the gang started collecting driftwood for a bonfire. That was, at least, until George saw what everyone was doing, took proactive action, Sn@pped™ his fingers, and created a massive pile of wood in an instant. Let me tell you, Nellie and Buddy were overjoyed that they didn't have to drag any more logs across that beach.

Then as the sun set, the fire was lit and the shell fish, which the spear fish had collected, were cooked. After supper, the Mermaids decided to sing a Siren's song and it wasn't long before Buddy and George decided a moonlit swim was the way to go. But just to be on the safe side, before joining them, Nellie popped two more of the Captain's Cure -- her motion sickness pills -- and then that left Ruby, Grt, and the Celaphopod alone by the bonfire.

"You look much better here, now," Ruby said after a while. "Your lobes look, um, so much more authentic."

"Yeah," the Celaphopod had to agree. "We're a couple of vortexes over from where I usual hang out. Here the lobes are real and I'm a Celaphopod," (this and the following explanation go a long way towards showing how truly toasted I was).

"What does that mean exactly? A Celaphopod?"

"It's a creature from," yet, "another story." (See?) "These squid guys come down from outer space and take over the world. They do this by eating Human's brains. It's the whole pod people, body snatchers thing, only the Celaphopods slowly get stupider and stupider over time. Perhaps it has something to do with their diet."

The Celaphopod was in a good mood. He was swaying back and forth, grooving to imaginary music, and he could sense that Ruby had paused with uncertainty at the set up. "It's OK. You don't have to hold back."

"Um, well. OK, then. I can see the attraction for you," why you chose that creature as your persona -- because they're stupid.

"There you go. Not so hard. Though, the jokes will work better if you just jump in there. It's all about timing. Anyhow, are you enjoying the beach?"

"Yeah. This is fun."

"The Cove is the best beach I know of."

Believe it or not, Ruby had picked the beach as her destination specifically because she had felt it was the best bet for her to travel through the vortexes unimpeded. Say, if instead of going to the beach, she had decided to go to a Vampire world or a

shopping mall -- someplace she knew the Celaphopod wouldn't want to spend any time -- well, if she had done that, she had a real strong feeling -- call it a foreboding, premonition, and/or one of those hunches we've talked about before -- that she would get blown off course. But a trip to the beach, how could the Celaphopod resist a trip to the beach?

And as if reading her mind (as he often did), the Celaphopod remarked, "Fantasy character's don't go to the beach often enough. You know, the only time Garg or Targor ever wind up on the beach is when they wash up on the shore after some shipwreck. The both of them should enjoy life more, maybe take in a movie or a walk in the park between killing monsters."

"Garg went to Central Park once," Ruby countered. And it was true. Ruby knew her fantasy trivia.

"He also managed to find the portal to the Under Slayer's hidden complex there." Garg hadn't gone into the park to relax. He was following up on a tip -- an adventuring lead. And in no time, rather than sitting back and relaxing, Garg had found himself battling Swamp Rautts under the sewers of Times Square before slugging it out with Yr'goth -- a giant octopus like creature -- in the East River. I could go on, but you get the idea. Bruce Brilliant wasn't any different. I don't think he ever went to the zoo just for fun. It was always to talk to Professor Knows-Too-Much and get the low down on the latest threat ravaging Tech City.

And then we break, more or less suddenly, because at the heart of it I'm a pretty lazy Celaphopod and don't feel like transcribing every last word Ruby said. Let's just say, time passed. Besides, although Ruby and the Celaphopod talked about a variety of subjects, only a few of them are any of your business. I mean for instance, Ruby spent a lot of time talking about that kid Bobby -- the boy in her Biology class. But really, that's sort of personal. So outside of alerting Bobby to the fact that maybe he should ask Ruby to the school dance, I'm not going to say anything further on

the subject. I mean, hey kid, I'm just the world's greatest author, no sense wasting your time listening to anything I have to say.

Anyhow, thinking Ruby might be more comfortable if Grt wasn't around or maybe because the little guy kept on looking longingly at the ocean and the fun everyone else seemed to be having in it, after a while the Celaphopod suggested. "I think some of the Mermaids might be thirsty Grt. Why don't you hand out the coconuts and pineapples?"

"Okees-Dokees," Grt said as he grabbed a handful of the fruit and headed off to the waiting dolphins and Mermaids at the edge of the surf.

And then, once they were alone, the Celaphopod turned conspiratorially towards Ruby and asked sort of point blank, "So what do you have planned next, Lady Ruby?"

"I'm really just enjoying the stars and the moon right now," Ruby replied easily. "You weren't lying. You really can see the Milky Way from here."

"It's better than that. If you concentrate, you can see the Milk Maid of Mercury slowly pouring the stars out of her pitcher and across the sky. See, right over there," the Celaphopod said indicating the spot with his finger while in the sky, the twinkling stars flowed together into a river that worked its way across the heavens. Mars pulsed with a warm red glow as it slowly circled the moon. A comet's rainbow-colored tail showered Orion with sparks while all around them the stars came to life. Which is to say, Orion notched an arrow in his bow and shot, but thankfully missed the bear he was shooting at while his dogs barked with the love of the chase and a Pegasus flew after a long serpent-like dragon whose coils filled half the sky.

Of course, during this entire time the ants on the beach had been hard at work repairing the sand castle that George had left behind. The frog -- you remember the frog -- was wearing a construction hard hat and giving the ants detailed instructions as he consulted a set of blueprints. He was trying to get the ants to build the castle according to code, but you know how ants are: very

industrious, but strong willed and stubborn -- not to mention slaves to the bureaucratic system. I mean, if an order doesn't come through the proper channels, it might as well not exist. So basically, they were ignoring the frog.

And really, after all that Ruby couldn't help but notice that the frog had managed to work its way into the story again. She had meant to ask about it earlier, but having failed that, there was no time like the present. "Did George have something to do with that frog?"

"You should ask George about it himself," the Celaphopod said. "Here he comes now."

"No." Ruby said, "I just want to talk to you about it."

And so, George suddenly remembered that there really wasn't anything better on shore than the Mermaids in the ocean. Thus, he did a quick 180 and beat a hasty retreat -- clicking his heels together at the last minute as he jumped into the water. It wasn't as easy as Sn@pping™ your fingers, but at least nobody was going to accuse him of being a copycat.

"That's how things work in the vortexes I favor," the Celaphopod mused to himself.

"What does that mean?" Ruby inquired.

"Oh, you know how it is. One minute you're typing flavor text, trying to explain the type of guy Crazy George is, and the next thing you know, what you're saying is coming true right before your eyes and a frog is jumping across the page, eager to get back in the story. Words are magical that way. Even if something isn't technically true, if you say something long enough, it has a tendency to become real."

"But not really." Ruby said doubtfully.

"Do you want to be a master sorceress or not?"

"Yes," because of course, Ruby did.

"Well, this is your next lesson. If you say, 'I'm happy,' over and over again, often enough, Walla! you'll be happy. You can maybe Sn@p™ your fingers if it makes you feel better or wrap a

strip of manna around your wrist as a reminder. Or if you want a somatic component a little more substantial -- stronger and more effective -- try having a cup of hot chocolate or curry stew the next time you're feeling down -- now there's some magical stuff. But the real trick is to say, 'I'm happy,' and mean it."

After a moment of silence, while he thought about what he had said and let meaning behind his words sink in, the Celaphopod continued, "At the end of it all, you're going to go back to Rigor Pass, right Ruby?"

"Yeah."

"And in a week or two, you'll be in algebra class and you won't be using magic to pass your test because that would be wrong, right?"

"No magic," Ruby agreed -- lest there be any ambiguity.

"And at that time, when you look back on this adventure, it will be no more than a memory. No different than a chapter in a book, a dream, or a momentary flight of fancy."

"OK."

"Well, there it is. Reality is a momentary thing. Look at it long enough, hard enough, and it turns insubstantial -- no different from something fictitious."

"You keep on saying that."

"Maybe it's important. But don't stress it. Enjoy the ride, Ruby. In the end, nothing is real: not you on a beach, the words on the page, or even the person reading them."

"Why do you keep on saying that?"

"Because it's like the real key to traveling through the dimensions. Once a person realizes that they're not where they think they are, they can be anywhere. And thus, free to let their feet dig into sand and be washed by the rising surf no matter the locale."

It was nice and cool, so the Celaphopod took a moment to enjoy the sensation -- the flow of it all -- before he noticed that the tide was indeed rising and the ants had abandoned their

reconstruction efforts. Meanwhile, the frog looked around forlornly as the castle slowly washed away into sea.

Noticing the sun was rising and the night was coming to an end, the Celaphopod remarked, "It's time to get going."

"Bones?" Ruby asked.

"No. No. The sun's coming up. It's getting late, time to get some sleep."

"What about the frog?" Ruby asked.

"Imagine that, I almost forgot."

"The frog," Ruby repeated insistently.

"You're a wizard, you want something done, then do it. I'm just a Happy Go Lucky Celaphopod with a total and flagrant disregard for what others consider to be truth and reality. Heck, my entire philosophy can be summarized succinctly as dare to be stupid, and aspire to be wrong. Oh! How does that saying go Grt?"

"Locals motions drag-goon style," Grt helpfully sang out as he emerged from the waves and returned from his mission of mercy.

"Local Motion Drag-goon Style, I think I'll have that spray painted on one of my boards."

But Ruby wasn't ready to let the frog go yet. "I already know my magic won't work on the frog." It was true. It wouldn't. Though, how Ruby had come to this conclusion is anybody's guess. Call it a hunch, a premonition. Or perhaps, because Ruby was convinced her magic would be impotent, it would be ineffectual -- sort of as an object lesson and illustrative example as to why changing one's own reality can be so darn difficult at times.

Of course, that wasn't the Celaphopod's problem. I mean, "Isn't that always the way it is. The magic you really want to work, you don't think you can. Besides, helping others is darn near impossible most of the time, so don't stress it. You can open the door, but you can't make them drink from the fountain, or something like that. I forget how the saying goes. No matter, when the frog's time comes, he'll work it out with George."

The Celaphopod stopped speaking at that point because he suddenly realized he might be wrong. After all, the frog might not need to work anything out with George. Maybe the frog really needed to work something out with Ruby, the Celaphopod, himself, or one of the readers -- you can never tell about that bunch, a shifty mercurial lot those readers. Or maybe -- and this was way more likely than all the rest combined -- the person the frog really had to work things out with was himself. Or then again, maybe there was nothing to work out. Maybe he was just a frog. And when you think about it, for a frog (that doesn't even have a name) he'd had a pretty good run of it so far (and if he had been proactive enough to get himself an agent, he might even have been due some royalties).

"It doesn't seem right," Ruby mused.

But the Celaphopod was through with the frog for the moment, so he simply noted, "But it doesn't seem particularly wrong either."

I mean, it sort of hard to get worked up over morality and ethics when you're pretty sure they don't exist in any sort of objective sense in the first place. Wouldn't you agree?

12

Da Bunga-low

(K'fr. I blame the K'fr, among other things... editors, errant magic, draconian deadlines, constant vortex shifting, and so on.

But mostly the K'fr.)

From the beach, they -- the Celaphopod, Ruby, and all -- walked up a narrow jungle road. The day was already hot and the climb was tiring. It was not the sort of grueling hike which lent itself easily to conversation. Jungle birds, parrots, parakeets, and things they called cardinals -- but which only had a stripe of red on the top of their heads like a Mohawk -- sang in the forest. Mina

birds hopped onto the trail in front of the adventures to say, “Hello,” but never stuck around for an answer while all around them the forest was life thick with animals, trees, and vegetation. They were in a rainforest, and yes, it would be raining soon.

As they trudged wearily up the dirt road, a badly dented red pickup truck came barreling down at them from around a corner. Ruby and the rest dove out of the way, but the Celaphopod and Grt stood by the side of the road and waved as a crazed Elvin woman narrowly missed running over them.

“Who dat?” Grt asked.

“That’s my girlfriend,” the Celaphopod replied easily. He liked to describe her as an ex-hippie island girl who fancied herself as a cowgirl, but whenever they were fighting -- which was often -- he simply shorten it to the hormonally challenged Elf. If the Dragon Bound series was ever made into a movie, having Jeannette play the Celaphopod’s girlfriend would be a good casting call, but then as we all know, Jeannette wasn’t returning the Celaphopod’s phone calls. Besides, the Celaphopod’s girlfriend had said, and I quote, “If you ever write me into one of your stupid stories, I’ll gut you like a pig.” When she says things like that, it’s obvious she’s in love with the big lug, and that her constant threats to leave and find someone who isn’t a “surf bum” are just a ruse. Also, if you’re curious, that’s where the line, I’ll gut you like a pig, in the TDBQ comes from. I like to give credit where credit is due.

“That’s your girlfriend? She almost killed you,” Ruby said in disbelief as she dusted herself off, but then she remembered Jeannette. “You have a way with women, don’t you?”

The Celaphopod shook his lobes, in that special way that all the girls find seductive. “It’s just the way I am, baby.”

For Crazy George, girl trouble was second nature. It was so much a part of his reality that it was like an ever present background noise, like the existential hum of the universe as it sings to itself. So almost getting run over by a truck driven by a crazed member of the opposite sex didn’t really bother him. It just seemed, you know, natural. Besides, he had other things on his

mind, like climbing that stupid hill. “How much further?” he asked, gasping for breath. And I say, kudos to the man. He was paying attention and going with the script, heeding that whole tiring climb not conducive to conversation thing.

But before there was time to go down the list and detail what the rest of the characters were doing (namely Buddy picking up rocks and tossing them into the jungle while Nellie whistled along with the birds), they rounded a corner and Ruby said, “I think we must be here.”

This was a good guess as the cars had come into view. Like I think I’ve mentioned, I’m a world famous author. My fans adore me -- worship the ground I walk on, really -- and from time to time they send me things in the mail like cars, surfboards, first class tickets to stay the weekend at their house, and cash. And I don’t mean to sound ungrateful for the rest, but the cash and short notes that say, “Couldn’t have done it without you,” are the best. And by that I mean, the cash is the best. You’ll see how I live in a moment. I’m not kidding. Send cash. I need it. Anyway, what Ruby saw was all the cars stacked up in the front lawn that I’ve gotten in the mail over the years.

Interesting factoid I bet you didn’t know about me, I get to live in this bungalow in exchange for watching The Dragon’s lair and making sure nobody steals his treasure. And though it’s easy to say I simply laze around all day and go surfing, I will point out that Crazy George was less than a quarter mile from an untold fortune in gold, silver, and jewels, but did he walk away with anything? A jewel encrusted crown? A bag of gold? Just one little copper? No, he did not. And why? Let’s just say, the Mermaids were my idea. Adventurers just sort of forget about gold and treasure and stuff when Mermaids are in the vicinity. But don’t think their guarding the treasure didn’t cost me anything, you know, that they came without a price. It was about the time the Mermaids moved into The Cove when all my problems started with my girlfriend. Of course, she’d probably try to blame it on my quitting my job at the resort, so I could write stupid, inane

stories, but you know how girls are: you start to spend your evenings surfing with Mermaids and they just seem to get the wrong idea.

But back to the cars. I've got a lot of cars. So many cars, in fact, that they don't all fit in the driveway, so I stacked them up. Aggressive jungle vines with names I've never bothered to learn cover most of them, but the important thing is that they're there. At the bottom of the stack, I even have an old Model-T, not that it works or anything, but it's there, and I like mentioning it whenever I get the opportunity.

Anyway, Ruby and the gang were standing there, sort of in awe, taking it all in, wondering what kept the pile of cars from toppling over, and that was when the Celaphopod's two ferocious guard dogs -- Satan and Hell's Fire -- decided to make an appearance. They stand about six feet tall at the shoulders, drool acid, and are into that whole snarling, enraged barking thing, so they were making quite the racket -- like they were Cerberus's own children or something -- but they're really just puppies.

Like I said, I spend most of my time a few vortexes over, and if you slip those two ferocious hellhounds sideways through the dimensions back from whence they came, they wind up being an uppity dachshund and a bloodhound with an insatiable appetite for French fries. But no matter where they are, when they see (or smell) strangers coming up the walk, they think they're the biggest baddest dogs in all creation. So whenever we travel to other vortexes, I let their inner nature shine through. Ruby, of course, saw the pair of fur balls for what they really were immediately and gave each of them a good scratching behind the ears.

"You're so cute. Such good puppies," and then, their duties as guard dogs fulfilled, they bounded out into the jungle to chase butterflies.

Besides the fact that I am Gra'gl's gift to women (oddly, I have no problem saying that with a straight face) and the world's greatest author (but you already know that), I think I might have

mentioned somewhere the disdain with which I regard Hobblings. I mention this only because that's what we named the pig. And right after the dogs left, the hated Hobbling stuck his head out from under the pile of empty Styrofoam food containers where he lives. So at this point, the Celaphopod asked, you know all friendly and neighborly like, "Feel like a Luau tonight?"

He had been talking to Buddy, mostly. He could see the mutual hatred of Hobblings in his eyes. Buddy was a meat eating Minataur after all. He'd eat the thing raw given half the chance, but Ruby wouldn't hear of it. "We are not eating this friendly little guy. No we are not. Oh, no. We are not," Ruby said in that annoying singsong voice girls get whenever they are busy talking to animals and scratching them under their chins.

"Fine. Whatever," the Celaphopod shrugged. "It was just an idea." He couldn't bring himself to kill the hated Hobbling either. That's the only reason the despised creature was still among the living, but someday...

"I've got to write," the Celaphopod said suddenly. "So, just make yourselves at home. There's a good Thai restaurant at the bottom of the hill if you get hungry," and with that reasonable explanation the Celaphopod plopped down on the couch and tried to get some sleep.

Now, one -- or at least, I -- would have supposed that the Celaphopod had just made it abundantly clear that he was busy and not to be disturbed, but apparently everyone else present thought what he really meant was bug the Celaphopod and ask him a bunch of trivial questions about everything and anything.

For instance, Crazy George saw the note the Elvin minx had put on the refrigerator that read, I'm not coming back until you get a job, and said, "I don't think your girlfriend is coming back."

"It's an old note," the Celaphopod informed him as he pulled a beach towel over his head. Believe it or not, the minx had gotten sick of writing new notes, so she just kept using the same old one over and over again. It didn't mean anything unless it was tapped

to my computer, car keys, or surf board, you know, somewhere where I'd see it.

Then Grt looked at the Celaphopod's computer and noticed the novel he was currently working on. It was more of a high concept piece than standard prose. So even though I really don't know which section Grt was reading, I'm pretty sure it went something like:

My girlfriend thinks I writing a novel, but when she finds out I'm just writing the same sentence over and over again, she's going to kill me.

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My girlfriend thinks I writing a novel, but when she finds out I'm just writing the same sentence over and over again, she's going to kill me.

Like I said, it was a high concept piece. Still, it was over a quarter of a million words long. If it ever got it published, it was going to be one long book.

Anyway, looking at the novel, Grt asked, "What dis?"

So the Celaphopod had replied quite informatively (I should add), "Art."

To which Grt replied, "Et neber sell."

Right! Everyone's a critic. The important thing is, it took the hormonally challenged Elf three months to figure out the ploy. She'd be getting ready to go to work and the Celaphopod would be typing away like mad. She'd come lean over him, kiss him, and ask him how the novel was coming, and he'd cover the screen and say something along the lines of it was coming along swell, but he didn't want her to see it until it was done. It would hamper his creative flow or some such nonsense, and he wasn't ready for criticism. If she pushed for details, he'd usually tell her it was a romance, real touching stuff. You know, make up some random

lie. Then she'd go off to work and he'd go to sleep... so he'd be well rested later when the waves were rolling. Anyway, life was like really-really good for the Celaphopod for the next couple of months. And then one night when he was a little too anxious to go surfing under the moon or maybe he'd heard the Mermaids Siren's call, if you know what I mean, and he'd grabbed a board and accidentally left his computer up and running with the novel on the screen. Well, you know how it goes. She came home from work, tired and exhausted from slaving away all day, and it was at this ill-timed juncture when her defenses were at a low point and she wasn't thinking clearly when she finally realized the truth about what the Celaphopod had been doing for the past three months. The Celaphopod found the first note nailed to the front door when he got home the next morning. It was a long one and went on about betrayal and lies -- you know, girl stuff. But it blew over.

Anyhow, back to the story at hand (Minataur Tails in case anyone has forgotten): the Celaphopod was on the couch almost asleep, happy thoughts about pulling a fast one on the woman he loved drifting through his head, and then it was Ruby's turn to speak up, "Is this a Hazen Crot tub?"

She was standing on the porch. Over here they don't call it a porch, of course, they call it a lanai, but really a porch is a porch. And we've got a bathtub on the porch. It's full of leaves and stuff, and my girlfriend keeps on bugging me to clean it out, but I view it as inspiration -- or if you prefer, installation art.

Anyway, that's way too much to explain when you're trying to fall asleep, so the Celaphopod just sort of waved lazily with his hand as he said, "Try the waterfall down the path instead."

And then as fate would have it, the Celaphopod finally drifted off into that most blessed of all worlds, the world of sleep.

13

Self Referential Social Interactions

The hated Hobblings beat the Celaphopod in his sleep. Call it a dream if you will. No doubt, the diminutive freaks were unhappy that a realistic portrayal of their barbaric ways was finally being crafted. In the end, I only mention this is because Hobblings aren't real and remembering this during one's sleep can greatly reduce the impact any Hobbling attack might have... that and laughing at them. They hate it when you tease them about their small size and how comically ineffective their blows really are. I'm not even bruised and they have the gall to call themselves night terrors.

Oh yeah, and while we're alone (since Ruby and the gang went back down to the beach a little while back... or will in a moment, depending upon your perspective), I also wanted to quickly -- very quickly -- go into the entire concept of fictional characters once more. Even if you don't buy that you and I are fictional, you might buy that Ruby and Grt are (I suppose, that is, if you've never met them like I have).

Anyway, the truth of it all is that this line of thinking started long ago on a surfboard, under the sun, way out at sea with no one else around (but ironically while under the influence of plenty of K'fr. Have I ever mentioned the K'fr?) Whatever. Fact is, I started talking to myself, the waves, the passing bits of flotsam, the clouds, and the sun -- in short, anything and everything. I'm a sociable guy. It's my nature. Talking to the waves had started to become a habit, and then one day as a frothy bit of surf crossed my board, I was reminded of all those stories from my youth of Mermaids being born from the foam of the sea. Well, I was literally surrounded by sea foam -- I had the stuff coming out of my ears -- so being an open minded guy, with an active interest in all things Mermaid-ian(ish?), I started calling out to the sea. Seems Mermaids get lonely too, and it wasn't long before we had a regular crew of Mermaids and other denizens from the deep hanging out on my board, happy to keep me company while I surfed.

Now, I don't know if you've ever talked with a Mermaid, but take it from me, as a class they are incredibly vain (and I know vain, OK, that narcissistic self-centered stuff is right up my alley). And if you ever want to get a Mermaid's scales all ruffled just tell them that they aren't real, that they are just a figment of your imagination. I mean, I don't care how you word it or how you try to clarify the nuances of the idea, they just seem to take it the wrong way and leave in a huff. Anyway, one day while I was waiting for the perfect wave, I had one of those eureka (AHA!) moments and realized that if they weren't real and I was talking to them, I probably wasn't real either.

And this is where the happy ending comes in, because Mermaids are real joiners. Once they heard me calling myself not-real, they all wanted in.

"If you're not real, then I'm not real."

"If she's not real, then neither am I."

"Don't be trying to steal my glory. I wasn't real first."

"No I was."

"Girls, girls, you're all not real, you're just figments of my imagination."

"You're just saying that to be sweet."

"But Celli, you know as well as me that some of us are more fictitious than others..."

And so it goes.

The point is, I am a social creature. I am a movie watching, music listening, and book reading socialable type guy. I mean, believe it or not, reading a book all alone in an empty room is a social pursuit. You and me are having a conversation right now. Only you know, it's one of those conversations where one guy does all the talking and even though the other guy might try to say something or get a word in edgeways, being sort of full of himself, the first guy doesn't hear the second guy -- like at all. It's that sort of conversation. You know, the kind I like best.

Anyway, knowing we are having a conversation and that some sort of inner need is being met in the reading of these words, it might be useful to take a moment and consider exactly what needs are being met and whether this is really the best way to meet those needs.

What I'm saying is, I don't own a TV, a radio, or even read books written by other creatures very much anymore, but it's not like my mind has stopped doing any of those things. The mind is a powerful thing.

My mind is a powerful thing.

Your mind is a powerful thing.

If you stop watching TV, your mind will find a television program (hopefully a sitcom, but dramas are good too) in raindrops. Stop listening to the radio and you will find a gentle symphony of music in the wind. Stop reading books and you might just start writing them yourself. You might not be able to help yourself.

Listen to me. I'm the world's greatest author -- actually the one and only author in my world if you stop and think about it, but that's not the point. The point is, I know what I'm talking about. You can trust me on this.

Books, TV, radio, major theatrical productions... and actually in many circles these are small-time, two-bit escapist fare. I mean, we live in a world full of magic -- not to mention K'fr and Drip. But not to fear, no matter the addiction, if you can stop doing TV and your mind will replace it, rest assured that if you stop doing other things, your mind will replace them as well. Trust me, your mind likes getting high as much as you do, and if you stop taking drugs (no matter the type), your mind will somehow find a way to still get high. You just have to give it a little time and space to relearn The Way (the Duh'Ow of it all, as it were) as your gray matter strives to rebuild all the bridges and connections that the drugs may have fried. But best of all, the type of high I'm talking about is much better than anything you can ever hope to achieve with K'fr or the rest (and yeah, despite my hypocrisy, I still believe

this -- mainly, because it's true). I mean as a general rule, folks like Ruby and Grt -- not to mention wild fun-loving Mermaids with an unbelievable need to please -- don't tend to hang out with (folks they know to be) druggies. It's just not their style.

OK. Fair enough. That's a bit preachy.

I apologize.

So on the off chance the last bit has been a total loss, that you consider it an utter waste of time and perhaps an evasion of your reading experience to boot, let me make it up to.

But how?

Let's see...

What can I do?

Oh, I know.

How's this? I'll fluff it up somewhere else in the book and give you back the thousand odd words I've wasted here. Maybe I'll add them to the beginning. I can always blame my editor. You should see the mail he sends me. I mean, it's the least I can do to return the favor. But don't worry about 'flow.' I'll do it all seamlessly, so you'll never notice. I mean, if I do it right, you won't even know why it went down that way until you're getting near the end of the book, which is to say, right about here.

14

the cove

(a wee-little bit earlier)

The Celaphopod's loud snoring quickly filled the small bungalow. It was clear he wasn't waking up any time soon. So, Ruby decided to walk down the path as the Celaphopod had suggested and take a shower. And the sight she beheld there was glorious. Water fell from far-far overhead, cascading off the lip of a cliff and crashed into a boulder a few feet above a small wading pool where it disintegrated into a thick mist full of dazzling rainbows. Then at the edge of the pool, the water fell once again,

over six hundred feet straight down to the ocean. It was a spectacular, breathtaking sight.

On the walk back after she had ‘washed off the road’ (her words, not mine), Ruby even picked some flowers and wove them into her hair.

“You got to try that waterfall shower!” Ruby exclaimed excitedly to whoever would listen when she got back to the bungalow.

“Eet bestest Grt agreed,” as he toweled off behind his ears.

“We got to get something to eat,” Crazy George corrected. The refrigerator was barren. Not that any food inside would have been edible. The appliance wasn’t plugged in, and even if it had been plugged in, there was no electricity in the bungalow. No one had paid the bill. It was something the hormonal Elf was keen to point out. But really, the computer was up and running, being powered by car batteries, so what more did you need?

As if to echo the Elf’s thoughts on the matter, Nellie pointed out that, “There’s not even a record player in this place. I thought he had a bunch of records.” But no, there was no record player, no radio, and no a television.

At this point, the Celaphopod might have imparted a few words of wisdom, say like, “Read the last chapter” or “Listen to the birds instead,” as he rolled over in his sleep.

George, on the other had, was pretty sure the Celaphopod had said, “Make yourself at home,” or if he hadn’t it was just a technical oversight, so he was still doggedly rooting around in the kitchen. He opened the cabinets one by one, but only found a wooden bowl, a pair of chopsticks, a glass tumbler, and a thriving cockroach population. Don’t ask me what they live on. “Maybe we should pop out for a while and get something to eat,” George suggested.

“Or a Luau would be good,” Buddy replied from where he sat cradling the pig.

“Thai food,” Ruby insisted as she forced Buddy to let the hated Hobbling go.

Now although Ruby, Grt, Buddy, and Nellie were all up for making the walk down to the beach, George didn't think he could make it back up the hill if they did, so the only thing to do was borrow one of the Celaphopod's many cars.

There was a big ring of keys by the front door (sort of reminiscent of the ring at the jail cell, if you remember that scene), and so Ruby and Nellie went around trying to find a set of keys that matched a car. Grt and Buddy opted to work the search by another route and started with the cars. In turn, they admired a Delta 88, a Ford Mustang, and then an Old Coupe before Grt spied the Cadillac.

"Eet Green!" Grt cried decisively. "Dis da ones we wants." And having made the decision, Grt hopped into the driver's seat and put on a pair of racing goggles that apparently he keeps on hand just for this purpose. "Okees-Dokees. Hoppers ins. We goes now."

George always being on top of where the plot was going, called, "Shotgun!" and hopped in beside Grt.

While Ruby -- being a sort of spoil sport -- made her way over and remarked, "Grt isn't going to drive."

But Grt begged to differ, "Grt drivees, eet Okays."

"I don't have a license," George advised Ruby as he made a key appear in the ignition for Grt, because as a reader you don't really want to wait around while they search for the right key, do you?

Anyway, staying focused on the conversation, Buddy informed Ruby that, "They took my license away when I got arrested," as he hopped into the back seat.

Nellie, however, didn't have anything to say on the matter. She calmly flitted over, dropped in the back seat next to Buddy, buckled her seat belt, took two of the Captain's Cure, and got out her Return to Future Spa Ticket, which she held onto tightly with both -- white knuckled -- hands.

“Are you sure you know what you’re doing Grt?” Ruby asked as she slowly climbed on board.

“We be fines,” Grt said confidently as he looked over the alien controls before him.

George helped him out and turned the ignition key. “There’s nothing to it, Grt. Just keep the hood ornament pointed in the direction you want it to go. Think of it as a sort of targeting crosshair.”

If you’ll take a moment to recall Larry Magma’s police car ride, that will put you in the proper mood as we prepare for Grt’s harrowing drive down the twisty-turny, one lane, lined with trees of death, mountain road.

Grt hit the accelerator, which is to say, he floored it. Since they were going downhill, they picked up speed fast -- like really-really-really fast. A great big rooster tail of red dust rose up behind them as Grt zigged and zagged all over the place.

Nellie, the poor Pixie, was frozen. Let’s face it. She should have torn that ticket up right then and there, right after the first turn. Heck, she should have torn that ticket up the moment she decided to get into a vehicle piloted by a one-year-old drag-goon, but you know how irresponsible Pixies can be.

Anyway, Grt slid the car through the first few turns and it almost looked like he had the car under control. That is, until the panel truck carrying chickens jacked up by the side of the road came into view. Grt did the only thing possible. He swerved off the road avoiding the Gnome who was busy changing a flat tire and tilted the car sideways onto the sides of the tress -- sort of like a bobsled.

From there, things got sort of exciting. Let’s just say, it was a wild-wild (etc.) ride down that hill. Grt used the trees as side rails -- some might call them safety rails, but let’s face it, there was nothing safe about Grt’s behavior -- and he bounced the car back and forth across the full width of the road. Towards the end, he was going so fast, it almost seemed as if the car would jump over

the top of the trees because from the start, Grt had never let up one little bit on the accelerator. Of course, this was mainly because he didn't know it controlled the speed. He just thought it made the car go. And besides, his legs weren't long enough to reach the breaks.

Finally at the bottom of the hill, they shot out into the open. And when it was clear Grt was going to keep on going, George said calmly, "The brakes Grt. Hit the brakes."

It sounded like a good idea, so Grt made his legs grow just a fraction of an inch more and slammed on the breaks. And wouldn't you know it? The car skidded perfectly into the only empty parking stall left in the beachfront parking area.

I should perhaps mention that although the screeching of tires caused some of the tourists to raise their heads, none of the locals paid the noise any mind. They were used to this sort of driving. Trust me, that hormonal Elf of mine, she doesn't even recognize this mysterious thing that I call, "Reckless driving, you say," even exists. "What odd notions you Celaphopods come up with. What will your kind think of next?"

Anyway, it was time for the driving scene to fade away. And even though no speaking parts were planned, Nellie felt the need to inform whoever would listen, "When we're done here at the beach, I'm flying back up to the top. There's no way I'm getting back in that car."

A girl after my own heart -- though I probably shouldn't tell the Elf that.

Now, despite George's comments regarding food, the real reason they had come down the hill was to go to the beach. The cove has a wonderful beach composed of reddish-orange sand that is speckled with large blackened red rocks that poke out here and there.

Of course, even though it's called "going to the beach," no one really pays much mind to the sand when they go there. The

beach is really about creature watching. And the cove has some of the most scantily clad creatures running about anywhere.

Splashing in the water, running across the sand, building sand castles, and lined up at the Thai Shack for a tasty treat were all manner of sentients from across the Seven Realms who had come here -- to my home away from home -- to vacation.

Elves, Pixies, Trolls, and Ogres... an Ogre in a bikini? If you can, do yourself a favor and stop your mind from bringing that picture to focus. There ought to be a law or something. And then, there are the buff Elementals, showy Half Breeds, boring Humans, walking lizards, snakes wearing sunglasses and carrying picnic baskets, goofy Goblins, ornery Orcs, the occasional gruesome Giant, one of whom was in the ocean making waves and playing with what must have been a full gross of cute Cobalt children -- talk about breeders.

And I could go on, but I guess George wasn't kidding about that being hungry thing because soon he appeared with shaved ice for everyone. And let's face it, with George you never know if he had bought it, stole it, or made it, but everyone was so hot, they didn't inquire about his methods too deeply.

Now, as far as flavored ice goes, they serve it all here: plum, coconut, pineapple, cherry, and all sorts of other flavors with very esoteric sounding names, but which tasted amazingly like some combination of berry, grape, apple, orange, lemon, and mango. In fact, it's rumored the shaved ice dealers only have six flavors on their carts and whenever someone asks for some, "Helba juice from So'rion?" they say, "Sure," before mixing together mango, orange, and coconut, because that's pretty much what Helba juice tastes like anyway. Well, maybe it doesn't taste like that, but they're tourists. The worst thing they are going to do is say, "It doesn't really taste much like Helba juice." And then, it's like a thousand degrees out. No one returns the ice because it doesn't taste right. You're really just buying the ice for the ice. The flavor -- any flavor -- is a bonus. Trust me, after you've seen a few

people pour cherry syrup over their heads to keep from passing out, you kind of stop taking the whole flavor thing too seriously.

But enough about ice.

Back in the good old days, way before the borders collapsed, and therefore long before I or anybody else knew about this beach, you could actually go surfing here and have some sort of chance of catching a wave, but not anymore. Don't even ask me how Grt got a parking spot. Magic is the only plausible explanation -- that or a special dispensation from the Tourist Board on account of me including the locale in this book. If you were going to be honest about it, that last is really the most likely explanation. Trust me, mid-day, there is no way you're finding a parking spot. You'll be driving all the way up to my place and asking, "Got room on the top of that stack for another?"

Anyway, parking troubles aside, the point is, thousands of sentients lay on the beach while several hundred surfers crowded a comically small break. Now, I've got a Cyclops on legal retainer, so I'm not trying to be discriminatory, so don't give me any grief, but it's hard enough to catch a wave when there are a dozen surfers out there. Once the surfers number into the hundreds and especially when some of them are Giants, Titans, and Cyclops's -- using small barges as surfboards, mind you -- well then, you're not really surfing anymore. You're sitting on a board out in the ocean. You paddle out and if you are really, really, really lucky, you don't have to paddle back in. But the rest of the time is simply spent enjoying the flow of the ocean, the warmth of the sun, the cool ocean breeze, and on a good day trading gossip with a gaggle of Mermaids.

Still, it's a great place to go and spend the day if you enjoy the crushing presence of others. Some of your more enterprising beings are always selling shell necklaces. And in the old days, you could have gotten anything you wanted -- K'fr, Drip, or whatever -- but the cove -- both of them, all of them -- is located deep in The Dragon's domain. When he outlawed K'fr, he didn't see much point in allowing the lesser derivatives of the drug to stick around.

So for some, it's not as much fun now as it used to be (others just get high in their home dimension before they arrive). Whatever the case, it's definitely safer. For example, besides the absence of drugs, Mermen lifeguards now swim unobtrusively with the tourists while Troll and Ogre policemen patrol the beach in shorts and aloha shirts. I mean, they almost blend in.

Basically everybody is as happy as they will ever be at the cove, which as we've stated before is a variable quality.

In the end, for me it's always a hard call which is better: The Cove or the cove. You can actually catch a wave at the one, but if you're looking to do a little creature watching the later is definitely better.

Anyway, the Celaphopod slept and the gang had a nice day at the beach. They even ran into the most beautiful Elvin girl in all the vortexes working at the Thai Shack. I grew up in a mosquito infested swamp and my dream was always to live as a surf bum in some tropical paradise. She grew up in a tropical paradise and her dream was working at the local beachside snack bar. Don't ask. It takes all types, I guess.

Anyhow, this beautiful girl -- who I won't write about, lest I get gutted like a pig -- hung out with Ruby over her lunch break and they giggled and gossiped like girls do. Then as the afternoon wore on, that beautiful Island Girl with only the slightest streak of hormonal difficulties loaded Ruby up with food and sent her back up the hill warning Ruby, "I get off a little after the sun goes down, and nothing personal, but I don't want you around when I get home." She didn't say it, but Ruby knew, I mean, you could just see it in her eyes: what the Island Girl really wanted when she got home was to have the Celaphopod all to herself. Which just goes to show that for some, if you know what you're about, dreams do come true.

15

Will Write for Food

The Celaphopod awoke as Grt and the gang returned from the beach. He took a deep breath and relished the heavenly scent of the Thai food, which accompanied them.

“Lam Chowsees?” Grt offered as he handed the Celaphopod a Styrofoam container.

The Celaphopod was tired, still groggy from a hard day’s work of character development, working out plot lines, and running from the hated Hobblings, which plagued his dreams. But his eyes perked right up at the prospect of eating a plate of fresh Lam Chowsees from the Thai Shack.

Now, the Thai Shack isn’t a paid sponsor or anything, so you’re just going to have to take my word on it when I say the Thai Shack is the best place to get a plate lunch in all the islands. Just don’t be hitting on that cutey behind the counter because she’s already spoken for.

Anyway, when they were done eating, the Celaphopod gathered up the plastic bags, Styrofoam containers, plastic forks, and those little dipping sauce containers, and threw the lot of them out the window, onto the giant trash pile that was slowly drifting down the cliff. If you thought about it, it was a lot like a glacier: white, slow moving, and if it wasn’t for the actions of man, it would still be there in a thousand years.

The hated Hobbling, however, did not pause to consider this poetic metaphor. The moment the trash flew out the window, the pig ran out the front door and raced around the house. Moments later shredded bits of Styrofoam flew into the air like so much snow, as the hated beast consumed its hapless prey -- the leftovers -- amid a chorus of vile snorts and cruel squeals.

Ruby walked over to look at the Hobbling and was shocked to discover the true extent of the Styrofoam glacier. “You don’t actually throw your leftovers out the window and leave them to rot, do you?”

Buddy walked over to where Ruby was, threw his empty plate out the window, and then looked down at the pile, “My guess is that, yes, he does.”

“That’s awful,” Ruby said. “It’s littering. It’s unconscionable.”

“That’s a big word,” the Celaphopod had to agreed.

“It wrong,” Ruby said rephrasing her remark, so Celli might have some slim chance of understanding.

But no such luck. “Wrong?”

“Yes, wrong.”

“You know the hormonal Elf says the same thing, maybe you could help me out and make it all disappear”

While Ruby was thinking about it, Crazy George stepped up to the plate and with a Sn@p™ of his fingers the mess was collected into garbage bags.

“That’s better,” Ruby said.

“What? So I take it down to the dump now?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know,” the Celaphopod said as he pondered the problem as only the truly-super-remarkably lazy can.

“Just do it,” Ruby said, sounding an awful lot like some Elves we know, or don’t know because we aren’t writing about them -- just like we promised.

The Celaphopod hadn’t really discussed the issue of trash as much as he would have liked in the preceding text, so he just sort of mused out loud, “Sure, taking the stuff down to the dump will make it disappear from my back yard, but it doesn’t really vanish; it doesn’t really solve the problem.”

Oddly, Carl the interrupting Cobalt chose this moment to ask, “Must we have another lecture?” Seems he’s not a big fan of the Celaphopod’s philosophical insights, but with an arrogance as profound as only a Celaphopod’s can be (we’re called Gaul Gauls in some dimensions, you know -- something about us having more than our fair share of gall), the creature was not easily swayed, and therefore, quite intent on speaking his mind.

“Lecture? Reflection? Words of wisdom? I’ll let you decide. I mean, I don’t know which is better -- taking the stuff to the dump or letting it rot in the open air -- but I’m pretty sure the world would be a whole lot better place if we all grabbed the bull by the horn -- no offense there, Buddy -- and gutted that hated Hobbling like the pig it is. At the very least, it would cut down on all the Styrofoam packaging.”

“I’m still hungry,” Buddy agreed, not really concerned about either the philosophical conversation or that whole bull by the horns comment. “I say we fry the pig.”

“No!” Ruby insisted as she wiped the last of the pulled pork sandwich from her face.

“Does this have a point?” Carl the interrupting Cobalt called out again.

“The point is my girlfriend is coming home real soon and you guys can’t be here when she does.” And wouldn’t you know it, just as the Celaphopod said this, a beat up red pickup truck pulled into the driveway shining its lights across the interior of the bungalow.

And since it seemed like the thing to do, the Celaphopod Sn@pped™ his fingers (just like all the cool wizards are doing these day), causing Ruby and the gang to disappear.

Moments later, the Elvin vixen entered the bungalow carrying a bag of leftovers from the Thai Shack. She glanced at the Celaphopod’s computer. She shook her head as she saw the screen saver automatically rewrite the same sentence over and over again.

My girlfriend thinks I writing a novel, but when she finds out I’m just writing the same sentence over and over again, she’s going to kill me.

My girlfriend thinks I writing a novel, but when she finds out I’m just writing the same sentence over and over again, she’s going to kill me.

My girlfriend thinks I writing a novel, but when she finds out I'm just writing the same sentence over and over again, she's going to kill me.

“Why do you even bother anymore? What’s the point? I know you’re not writing a novel.”

“It’s high art. It’s conceptual. When I’m done, you can read it.”

“Whatever,” she didn’t want to fight. Besides, who was she kidding? She couldn’t stay mad at the Celaphopod, not when he dangled his lobes like that.

“I got the trash bagged up today -- just like you wanted.”

“Really.” She could hardly believe it. “You’re going to take it to the dump tomorrow?”

“Sure.” Of course, the Celaphopod didn’t really think taking the garbage to the dump would solve the problem, it just shifted the problem somewhere else, but that was good enough for now. Maybe the realistic solution was to reuse the same containers over and over again -- or roasting the pig whole. He had to admit, it sort of sounded like fun and it would bypass that whole restaurant/packaging middleman business.

But just as if she was reading the Celaphopod’s mind (and I thought I was the mind reader, here), the Elvin temptress reassured Piggy (a.k.a. the Hobbling), “Don’t worry. Mommy won’t let the mean old Celaphopod hurt you. No she won’t. Oh, no she won’t.” It was the same annoying voice Ruby had used. And now that I think about it, you know what would keep the Goblins at bay on the Western front? A line of girls saying, “Aren’t you the cutest little Piggy in all the world. Oh, yes you are. Oh, yes you are.” If that doesn’t make the Goblins want to fall on their own spears en mass, nothing will.

Anyway, since my honey is home, it’s time to stop writing for the day, so this will be where the chapter ends -- with me snug as a bug, eating Lam Chowsees, once again.

Let me tell you, life is good.

Picture it if you will. A plate of food in your lap; an Elvin vixen sitting next to you, slowly relaxing and unwinding after a hard day's work, which with any luck will include the slow removal of clothing; while outside singing a mournful symphony, a frog croaks balefully away.

He had been forgotten, yet again. Left behind! An unintended hitchhiker carried this far by the needs of the plot and the story and then discarded without thought -- or concern for the ecological consequences.

But it could be worse for the frog, toad, or whatever the heck he was. I mean for an amphibian, a tropical rainforest has to be sort of comfortable. And by all appearances, the food was plentiful in these parts. But it wasn't home. And he hadn't always been a frog, a toad, or a whatever, so in despair of what had once been, the creature cried out -- or croaked on, as it were -- throughout the night and as he has continued to do from that moment on. You may have heard of him. He is now known far and wide as the infamous Croaky Frog Menace, which plagues these here fair isles.

16

H'wy

Along with everybody else, Ruby found herself in front of the Celaphopod's bungalow, only it wasn't the Celaphopod's bungalow -- not anymore. Ruby knew that instantly. There weren't as many cars. Though to be fair, the cars present were still covered with vines and weeds, but more important were the two snarling guard dogs that were busy stretching at their chains and trying to get a mouthful of hero-sandwich. It was immediately obvious to everyone that they were not the type of dogs which were used to receiving either affection or food. In support of this theory, a Goblin glared at them from out of one of the shanty's many broken windows. The Goblin wished he could find his shotgun, but he had misplaced it a few months back and when he

had gone to purchase a replacement all the stores had insisted that they didn't carry weapons anymore. Maybe he should just unchain the dogs, he thought, and let them run wild.

Undeterred, Grt waived at the Goblin in a neighborly sort of way from the road. And then reading the sign over the mailbox, he said, "Howdees Meester No Solicitores."

But as much as it appeared that the Goblin would be delighted to pass the time of day with our friends and talk about the weather, his house slowly began to disappear from view and in a few short moments it had completely faded away into the jungle. Only the birds and trees remained as even the barking of the dogs had morphed into something not quite the same and altogether different.

It was clear there was no going back.

"Now where?" Buddy asked.

"Looks like we're on a track ride," Nellie observed.

It was true, and Ruby realized they only had two choices: they could follow the road up the hill or down the hill. The jungle didn't really seem passable. And as if to confirm this, the trees all took one step closer together and closed ranks, defying anyone to try and squeeze through.

"Well, good luck. The honeymoon's over, as they say. I'm out of here," George indicated as he bid all a fair adieu. But unfortunately, nothing happened when he snapped his fingers, so he snapped them again and again and again, but without the @™ thing happening (Sn@pped™: ask for it by name), he knew it was a lost cause. "I didn't sign up for this," he muttered.

Nellie was watching George. She smiled weakly in the direction she thought a camera might be hidden as she took two pills and said hopefully, "The Captain's Cure?" But that was just a precautionary first step. Next, she got out her Return to Future Spa Ticket intending to activate it only to discover EXPIRED had been stamped across the face of it in bold red letters. "My ticket's no good," she announced with dismay.

Ruby hadn't said anything. She was waiting, watching the events unfold around her. So, their return to Future Spa tickets were no longer working and George couldn't escape. That meant she couldn't escape either -- by Sn@pping™ her fingers, wiggling her nose, or whatever. And just like she had originally thought, she only had two real choices: uphill or downhill.

The decision was an easy one to make: downhill. In her previous adventure, Ruby had wanted to get closer to The Dragon and to do that, she had been told that she would always have to make the harder choice, but now she wanted to go away from The Dragon and towards his arch-nemesis Bones. Walking downhill was clearly easier than walking uphill, so from that angle, it was the obvious choice. But more importantly, the story was nearing the end. Ruby could feel it. Her words -- for this adventure at least -- were almost up. In a sense, it was all downhill from here. And with a pun like that, it was indeed a no-brainer.

"This way," Ruby said as she pointed downhill, grabbed Grt's hand, and took the first step.

Shrugging, Buddy followed Ruby while Nellie fluttered close beside Buddy, and that left George to bring up the rear as he grumbled, "I've been shanghaied, hijacked. I'm in the middle of a Slaughter Quest adventure. I'm about to level up. I don't have time for this."

But time really wasn't the issue. I mean, it wasn't long before they ran into their first encounter: one turn, then another, and there it was. And wasn't that always the way? When you thought about it, the Celaphopod really had constructed his adventuring locales quite handily: two bends ahead and you were where you wanted, or at least, needed to be. It was almost like being in Rigor Pass.

Anyway, the first encounter was the panel truck carrying chickens, which you may remember from earlier in the story. Once again, it was parked by the side of the road. Or more accurately, since it was a one lane country road with no place to

turn off, the truck was parked in the middle of the road. And not that it matters, but the trees were really thick here. I mean, it was hardly possible to see through them, let alone walk off the road. Yet all the same, the sun shone brightly. Go figure.

As they got closer, Ruby noticed the old Gnome standing next to the truck. And hat in hand, he was gazing into the forest. No, that wasn't it. He was paying his respects at an altar -- a memorial. That was the only thing to call it: five crosses pounded into the red earth by the side of the road, stacked high with flowered wreaths; while nailed to the trees and littered about the forest floor was a plethora of t-shirts, records, stuffed animals, toys, and the like.

As they approached closer, the Gnome heard their footsteps. Startled, he turned around quickly. He had a piece of fried chicken in his mouth and seemed to be enjoying his meal. But as Ruby and the rest came into focus, he began to look very worried indeed. "You haven't come back for me, have you?"

Ruby, of course, didn't have the slightest idea what he was talking about.

"I'm guessing you're it," Buddy announced. He was really just vocalizing his opinion that the Gnome was the first encounter they were destined to resolve as the story wound its way to a close. But it was exactly the type of remark that the Gnome didn't want to hear -- like ever.

The Gnome started to shake. He looked genuinely scared. He gave the party a once over, and since Grt seemed to be the happiest, friendliest looking member of the group, he smiled weakly at him.

"Hi der," Grt smiled back as he waived to the Gnome in greeting.

Well, so he was the one, the spokesperson, the Gnome thought. It only made sense. He had been the driver. So on wobbly knees the old Gnome approached Grt. "Here, have some chicken," he said as he held out the box and offered chicken to whoever would take some.

“Dis good stuffs!” Grt exclaimed brightly after he bit into the first piece.

“Tasty,” George agreed.

“See,” the Gnome continued pointing to the ragtag pile of toys, cloths, flowers, and religious symbols littered about the site. “I come here everyday. I bring you chicken, flowers.” He fell to his knees shaking uncontrollably and cried out desperately, “Please don’t kill me. Don’t take me away.”

Ruby crouched down beside the terrified Gnome. “We’re not going to kill you. What’s this all about?”

Of course, it wasn’t unusual for ghosts not to remember... the incident. So, the Gnome asked, “You don’t remember, do you?”

“Let’s assume we don’t,” Ruby agreed, “What happened?”

“I got a flat,” the Gnome explained as he looked around, dancing in a circle, afraid to turn his back on anyone as the gang gathered around. “I knew I’d get a flat sooner or later, but I guess I was waiting for it to go out because I didn’t want to spend the money. OK? Fine? I knew it was going to happen, but I didn’t think.” Of course, when you get right down to it, that doesn’t really explain anything, and after a few confused looks from Ruby and the rest, even the Gnome figured that much out. “Then you kids came barreling down the road, right. Out for a joyride or something, and I was standing in the road. If you’d kept on going straight, you’d have hit me, killed me instantly, and you’d all still be alive. But you didn’t hit me. The little guy, here, swerved. You hit the trees and flew out over the cliff. It’s a long way down,” he added perfunctorily. “Nobody survived.”

Ruby looked to where the Gnome indicated. She could see a few cracked trees, broken and fallen over, but it had been many years ago and the jungle had grown back. Still, she didn’t need to be able to see through the trees to know it was a sheer drop of over 500’ to the ocean far below.

“See? So, I come here every day,” the Gnome continued. “And to thank you for making that, um... decision, choosing that route.” He had found another box of chicken and was handing this

out. And then he started handing out the toys and the flowers from the piles on the ground.

Ruby thought she was beginning to understand. In some parallel vortex, she -- some kids -- must have borrowed a car to go down to the beach, but they never made it. As if to confirm this theory, a car came whizzing by on the narrow road and just narrowly missed slamming into the truck.

“It’s dangerous parking here,” Ruby observed.

“It’s because this is where H’wy lives. I come to appease him... and you, of course.”

“Couldn’t you do that down at the beach?”

“This is where it has to be, to avoid more fatalities,” the Gnome insisted as another car came racing blindly around the turn at a speed that was obviously way too fast for conditions. It too just barely missed ramming into the Gnome’s truck.

“This is H’wy’s corner, his home. I’ve probably seen a dozen accidents here over the years. And that’s just while I was here tending your memorial. Who knows how many I missed?”

Ruby could see it easily, now, in her mind’s eye. The Gnome would park his truck in the middle of the road causing a dangerous obstruction that others wouldn’t see until the last moment. “You can’t do this, not anymore, not here,” Ruby quickly decided.

“But I have to,” the Gnome insisted.

“You’re not going to park or stop here ever again,” Ruby instructed the Gnome. “You can either swear an oath right here and now to that effect... or you can come with us. The more the merrier, I always say, right?”

“But H’wy?”

“Et be funs Meester Gnomes,” Grt said taking the bewildered Gnome’s hand. “Youse comes wit us. Eet bees alrights.”

“No! No! Please! I swear! I swear! I won’t stop anymore!”

And he wouldn’t! I mean, it was one thing to offer food to a bunch of ghosts who never showed up, but it was quite another to go along with them -- to the beach he figured, from the way they

were dressed. They must walk down this road everyday, he reasoned, but he didn't pause to try and understand why he'd never seen them before. He simply hurried to his truck and drove away as fast as he could -- never to return.

When the Gnome had turned the corner and was out of sight, George put on the Disgruntled Thrall t-shirt the Gnome had given him and asked, "What was that all about?"

Ruby shrugged as she started walking again. "I don't know. Probably some pet peeve of the Celaphopod's. Guess the guy annoys him. Who knows? But one thing I am sure of, in two more curves we're bound to run into someone or something else."

"Welcome to the track ride," Crazy George muttered, once again, to himself.

"You can say that again," Nellie chirped merrily.

And so, Crazy George did.

From there, I'm sure you can figure out how the two of them spent the next few minutes. No sense repeating the conversation verbatim because as luck would have it, I've got my word count, and then some.

So really, at this point, I'm just writing for the same reason I hope you're reading -- for the love of it.

17 #
Verde Grun

As the party continued down the road, thick vines grew between the trees, until the trees all but disappeared; and all that could be seen was a tangled brambly mesh, which arched over their heads and clouding out the sky above. The vine in question was K'fr and the leaves on the plant ran the gamut from small light-green leaves the size of clover to giant dark purple-green leaves the size of elephant ears. Intertwined with the leaves were flowers. Like the leaves, the flowers varied in size from small white, pleasing button flowers to large blooms with purple centers

that looked large enough to house a Pixie. The large blooms had an intoxicatingly sweet aroma and it was clear that both Buddy and Nellie were drawn to them. Of course at close range, one of the most noticeable aspects -- or at least, tactile aspects -- of a K'fr vine are the thorns. Like the leaves and the flowers, the purple thorns spanned the entire range of size: from small tiny barbs like one finds on roses to three foot spears that are used as weapons in some of your more primitive vortexes.

"This has got to be your thorny problem," George observed as he plucked a flower absentmindedly.

"It's K'fr. The flowers will get you high if you eat enough of them," Buddy added as his voice echoed the thoughts in his head.

And it should come as no surprise that Ruby felt the need to remind Buddy, "But not you. You're not going to get high no matter how many K'fr flowers you eat."

"Sure, not me," Buddy agreed as he flicked his nose ring. In a way he was glad to have the ring. Being sober had its advantages. He knew without the ring -- even as they spoke -- he'd be sticking his head into one of those big flowers and gulping down the sticky resin as fast as he could. "I'm just saying. In the original script me and Nellie end up eating a bunch of these flowers to get over the bridge."

"I find that hard to believe," Ruby replied matter-of-factly.

But it was true. And since Buddy hadn't explained it very well the first time through, he decided to give it another go. "What happens -- or at least, what was supposed to happen -- was that you and me get into this big argument -- call it a discussion if you like -- about drugs and magic. I mean sure, Nellie and me use drugs as a crutch. But you, George, and even the Celaphopod -- maybe especially the Celaphopod -- use magic as a crutch," (and at times in the past, anything else he can get his hands on). "And in the original script you can't get past the gatekeeper at the bridge because you don't know any algebra and your magic won't help you. It's supposed to be like an example of how drugs aren't the only way one can hinder their growth. Being stupid never helped

anyone. Anyhow, Nellie and me get real blasted on the K'fr flowers here and we hallucinate a rainbow staircase. We're too gone to climb it -- keep on slipping off or something -- but that's where you get the idea from to build a bridge."

"What happened next?" Ruby asked even though she had a pretty good idea of what the answer would be.

As did George, and seeing as how he was in a talkative mood, he decided to help Ruby out, "You make a rainbow staircase and cross over to the other side of the bridge, but find yourself no closer to your goal. You know, because you cheated, the problem you were trying to bypass is still there."

Just like the way it works if you use drugs.

(I should know.)

Lecture over.

Or at least, that particular lecture is over. Trust me, I've got plenty more lectures were that one came from. And since I sent Carl out to get me some more hot chocolate (truly, it's almost as addictive as K'fr), the little green freak won't be able to interrupt me if I do feel like ranting and raving here, there, or everywhere.

But I'm on a schedule now. And I think I've got my word count nailed down. So, I'm pretty motivated to keep the adventure moving along and set-up the next encounter without much ado. To wit, notice how I rush along to Ruby's next bit of dialogue where-in she asked (past tense?), "So, is that where we are headed now? To the bridge?"

The answer to that is no (was no?). Oddly, tense syntax is not one of my strong suits. Don't ask me why I ever took up writing.

Anyway, without getting into all that, George opted to point towards the giant Oak T'Ree, which was growing in the middle of the road, and said, "That wasn't in the original script."

"What is it?" Ruby asked.

"A T'Ree. Duh!" Nellie answered for her. Even she could see that.

But Grt's answer was more helpful. "Dat da Verday Gruns," he cried out in delight as he ran ahead to hug the T'ree; and then, scampered quickly into the upper reaches of the old Oak T'Ree's branches.

"Verde Grun?" Ruby repeated questioningly as she got closer.

"None other," the T'Ree answered. It had grown a giant smiling face where his lower branches forked off and was swaying back and forth in the breeze creating a funhouse effect for Grt.

"You not biggees as you uses'ed to bees, Verday's" Grt observed.

"It's the times," Verde agreed, trying not to get down about the entire thing. Things came. Things went. Maybe it was simply his time.

Ruby didn't notice the T'Ree sigh, because let's face it, it can be a hard thing to notice -- a T'Ree sighing. Besides, for the moment Ruby was more interested in why the road they had been walking on led straight into the base of the Verde Grun and ended there with only a narrow walkway leading around the T'Ree in either direction.

Of course, Ruby knew right away it went deeper than that. Don't ask me why. It could have been her skeptical nature? Growing paranoia? Or the fact that she'd been on one of these adventures before. But for whatever reason, Ruby knew -- she just knew -- that the two paths didn't merge back together and meet on the other side of Verde Grun. He was a point of inflection: a riddle T'Ree if you will.

While Ruby exchanged pleasantries with the ancient T'Ree ("Fine day we're having," "You bet, suns out, nice and wet," and so on). George took the opportunity to snack on a bag of potato chips that he had stuffed in his bathrobe (probably all the way back in the library). And then, seeing as how I haven't described what everyone looks like in a while, maybe I should just go down the list while Ruby and Verde discuss the weather.

(Trust me, this bit is boring. T'Rees tend to take their weather seriously.)

So, ever since they had landed at Katrinita's, Grt was back to being his regular baby drag-goon self. He was presently climbing around in Verde Grun's branches and having the time of his life.

Nellie hadn't changed outfits since the beginning of the adventure (though she has mysteriously managed to have it cleaned and pressed on numerous occasions). Anyway, she was wearing a low-cut black mini-skirt, revealing yellow blouse, and black fishnet stockings with high heeled shoes. She was bored out of her mind and looked sort of like a bumble bee -- a sexy bumble bee, but a bumble bee nonetheless.

Buddy was wearing a spare pair of swim trunks he had picked up at the bungalow. And if I might say, with his tanned well-muscled physique he was looking a lot like a Celaphopod. And I kid you not, he had also been enjoying the nice quiet walk through the forest. And furthermore, defying all sense and reason, since he'd never talked to a T'Ree before, he was enjoying doing that as well.

Ruby was wearing her black Martingale Endless Walker Boots and a green evening dress festooned with emeralds (a replica of which is available at your favorite Crumbarrel store). Under the dress she was wearing a pair of blue jeans and a t-shirt, and then there were the flowers she had woven into her hair at the Celaphopod's. She looked absolutely stunning -- just like she usually does. And now that the time was at hand, she was anxious to get on with the quest.

Then, at the end of the list was George. Of all of them, he looked the oddest. Somewhere along the way George had traded his socks for flip flops and his boxer shorts for swim trunks. And if you've been paying the least bit of attention, you'd realize that he just acquired a Disgruntled Thrall concert t-shirt from the Gnome in the previous chapter. The Disgruntled Thrall t-shirt looked sort of tacky. It screamed, old guy trying to look young (or to be fair, an author trying to sneak it yet another reference to a

minor work of his that absolutely no one had ever read... not yet). And then, to top off this disjointed wardrobe, George was wearing an old bathrobe: blue, full of holes, stained with coffee, but soft and well worn in just the right places. George couldn't have told you why he was along for the ride. And let's face it, neither could the Celaphopod. Sometimes it just works out that way.

Anyway, as you may have figured out by now, that's as good as descriptions ever get with me. So without further ado, let's return to the action.

When last we'd seen him, George had just grabbed a bag of chips out of his bathrobe and was eating them. So, it shouldn't be too much of a surprise to learn that when he was done, he tossed the empty bag on the ground at the foot of the gnarled old T'Ree.

"You're not really doing that wizard, are you?" Verde Grun asked with disdain.

"You heard the Celaphopod -- two, maybe three chapters back -- when he did the trash bit. What difference does it make?"

Of course, when Ruby realized what Verde Grun was talking about, she immediately told George to, "Pick the garbage up, George."

"He's just a tree. What's he going to do? Make me feel bad?" And let's face it, we are talking about Crazy George here. It isn't likely anything was going to make him feel bad.

"Just pick it up," Ruby insisted.

"Why?" George asked. Who knows? Maybe he was being obstinate just to pass the time.

"Don't be rude. Just pick it up."

"Tell me why I should pick it up first," George insisted and with those words a stalemate was reached.

"It's why you're here," Verde Grun said after a moment, breaking the silence. "I'm just a walk on character in cheesy pulp novel..."

Nellie had had about all she could take of that particular line, and she wasn't going to take it from a character who clearly hadn't

walked a single step in his entire life. “Captain’s Cure on not,” she declared, “if I hear that line one more time, I think I’m going to be sick!”

Nellie -- sweet motion sickness, juvenile gag, puking for the last 50,000 words, Nellie -- don’t tempt fate.

And I mean, with flavor text like that, you just had to know that Verde Grun knew, that the Celaphopod had his back, so Verde Grun started in with his bit once again, “I’m just a T’Ree. I don’t know... like lots. I mean, I really don’t know if it’s better to leave that wrapper on the ground...”

“See, so the wrapper stays where it is. I win!” George said triumphantly.

“And, I don’t know if it’s better to pick the wrapper up,” Verde continued, right from where George had cut him off.

“So just be safe, pick the wrapper up,” Ruby insisted as she narrowed her eyes and fixed George with a determined gaze.

For his part, Verde ignored both of them. He was getting paid by the word, and by Gra’gl’s honor he wasn’t going to let the -- albeit colorful -- shenanigans of two squabbling sorcerers cut into his bottom line. “What I know,” he said, “is that in any situation a person has two choices,” or more if you want to get technical about it. “Call them Choice A and Choice B. And if you look at it,” the problem, the situation, the dilemma, “in the right way, one choice is always going to be better than the other: A or B. Once you determine which one that is, that’s the choice you should take.”

“Leaving the wrapper on the ground is definitely the better choice,” George insisted. “I’ve got lower back pain and knee problems like you would not believe. Bending over is sheer torture.”

“No,” Ruby corrected. “What Verde is saying is that you’ll make a much more sympathetic character if you don’t litter and pick up your trash. Don’t you see? You could do something right here and now that would positively effect the reading audiences perception of your character.”

It was an amazingly poorly worded explanation. But then, it made a sort of sense to George. And for some reason, he found it compelling. So, George thought it would be best if he did bend over, groan and whimper a bit for sympathy, “Oh, my back. Oh, my back. Oh, my back,” as he picked up the empty potato chip bag. Of course, George still had a sneaking suspicion that the Buddy/Minne action figures were still going to outsell the Crazy George action figures by a factor of 5:1 when all was said and done. I mean you had to admit, it did seem like a long shot that that picking up a food wrapper was going to improve his overall popularity. But then, you never really knew. And he figured it was worth a shot.

Anyway, that bit of business completed, Ruby asked Verde, “So, that’s the riddle?” you know, in the tone of voice that sort of indicated she was hoping for more.

Nellie, on the other hand, was sort of hoping for less. Her patience had about run out. (Don’t ask me why.) All I know is that next she said, more than just a wee bit testily, “Yeah, obviously that’s the riddle. Stupid riddle if you ask me. So anyhow, now that’s it over, let’s get out of here. Come on. Time’s a wasting. Let’s get a move on to the next scene. Come on. Snap. Snap. Or however you guys do that snapping thing.”

Ruby, however, ignored Nellie because she was a clever sort of girl and realized there was obviously -- like, really-really obviously -- at least one more decision to be made in this particular scene before it was over. “We still have to decide which path to go down.”

“Yes,” Verde Grun agreed, happy that someone in the group could spot a fork in the road metaphor when they saw one.

“So, how do we decide which path to follow?” Ruby asked.

To which Verde Grun replied, “There’s a riddle.”

Nellie, as I may have mentioned, was in a bit of a hurry, so she took it upon herself to ask, “What’s the riddle then?” And when no one replied right away, which probably would have meant interrupting her, she got a little short (and or, shorter) and said,

“Come on, T’Ree. Cough up the riddle, so we can get a move on. Snap! Snap! Snap!”

Oddly, Verde took no offense to the Pixie’s attitude and was happy to comply. I mean, he could cut to the chase as fast as the next T’Ree. These anthropoids and their short live spans were always in such a hurry. It was fine. He understood. Best to cede to their wishes and...

“The riddle!” Nellie reminded him.

“Yes. Yes. The riddle. Of course. Ahem,” Verde said as he cleared his throat, shook his branches, and flexed his roots. This was his big moment, his reason de existence, and his moment to shine. He wanted to get it just right, leave no stone unturned, to cover the bases...

“The riddle!”

“Yes. Yes. The riddle -- the question if you will -- is,” drum roll please, “whatever you want it to be. That’s the lesson you are here to learn, Ruby. In any situation, you have two choices. This way,” Verde said shaking his branches to the right, which prompted Grt to scampered about in the branches overhead to see what was down that way. “Or this way,” Verde said and shook the branches to the left, which prompted Grt to scamper back to the other side. But in truth, after looking down both paths, Grt could see no difference between the two. Of course, that might be in part because Grt has never made any significant plot-turning decisions and so he probably didn’t have the faintest idea what he was looking for.

In any case, Verde finished by saying, “If traveling down any particular path, if traveling down one fork in the road is better than traveling down the other, then obviously that is the way you should go, the path you should follow, and the decision you should make.”

“That’s a riddle?” Nellie asked doubtfully.

“That’s a solution, my impertinent little friend,” Verde Grun corrected. “Or I suppose it would be if you were only smart enough to know the question.”

Ruby thought on it for a spell (which probably sounds more clever to me than it actually is) before breaking the silence by saying, “I still don’t know that I get it.”

“It easy,” Crazy George said as he broke open another bag of potato chips, poured the contents into his mouth, and then, continuing on before he was finished eating, “I can, um,” chew, chew, “either, um, throw his empty bag on the ground or, um,” chew, chew, “put it in my pocket. One of those,” lick, smack, chomp, “solutions is better than the other, and that’s,” suck, smack, slurp, “the action I should take.” He then looked at the bag in his hand and seemed unable to decide what to do with it.

“Put it in your pocket,” Ruby said as she made the decision for him.

George seemed to see the wisdom in that course of action as that way he could save the crumbs in the bottom of the bag for later and so put the nearly empty bag of potato chips back into his pocket.

“Great! Great! We go down the better path, chose the better solution,” Nellie said hurriedly as she tried to get this show on the road. And really, don’t ask me why she’s in such a hurry. Maybe she’s got to go the bathroom. Anyhow, color text or not, Nellie seemed determined to stay focused. “Great! Great! Lesson learned already! Geez! So tell me already, what’s the riddle? What’s the question?”

“I don’t know the question and I don’t know the answer,” Verde responded. “I’m just a two bit T’Ree in an award winning fantasy novel...”

“Youse da Verde Greeny,” Grt corrected him as he climbed back down to the ground, held onto Ruby’s hand, and perhaps most surprising of all decided to aid Nellie in her quest to get the show on the road by asking, “Which waysees, Rubies?”

Ruby could see the wisdom in what Verde Grun had said. In any decision there were better choices and there were worse choices. It made sense to choose one of the better choices, but

there were always so many variables, and extraneous factors that saying this course is right or correct in the long run was a meaningless statement. In the right context throwing your garbage into a pile, say a compost pile, made sense, and in another context, say when disposing hazardous nuclear waste, it could be more important to concentrate the poison and make sure it got to an appropriate collection site.

But then, this wasn't just some philosophy question. This wasn't some abstract problem in an ecology textbook. There was a decision to be made. In front of her stood a fork in the road, and she had to go down one of the paths.

"Any ideas?" she asked opening the floor to suggestions.

"Just choose. Flip a coin, whatever. It doesn't matter," the impatient Pixie blurted out. It was the first thing that had entered Nellie's head, but Ruby realized that it might not be such a bad way to handle the problem. If she chose wrong, they could always come back to this spot, or in an abstract sense change their minds in the future. But then, while seriously considering this option, Ruby had the insight she needed.

"It seems obvious we should always strive to move in the right direction," she stated out loud. I mean, when you consider that Ruby existed in a world that was heavily influenced by mediocre puns and play on words, it was the obvious solution. And without further ado, she took hold of Grt's hand, gave it a little squeeze for luck, and proceeded to boldly walk down the right hand path.

Though to be fair, those with keen hearing were able to make out the occasionally groan from the reading public.

Oddly, as she was the one who seemed most anxious for the scene to be over, just when it seemed like they could move on, Nellie remarked to whoever would listen, "Didn't anybody else find it strange that a deciduous T'Ree was growing in the heart of a tropical rainforest?"

Thankfully none of the other characters paid her any mind: they were all too anxious to find out what was around the next corner.

18

Mr. Thwartbridge the Senior (a.k.a. Max)

Rain!

The rain had come quickly. One moment the sun was out shining brightly; the next the clouds had moved in and darkened the sky; and then, a torrential downpour had begun.

The path grew muddy and quickly filled with large puddles. As if to mock our travelers, to the west the sun could still be seen high in the sky while to the east a brilliant triple-rainbow glimmered merrily. But please, do not let these two facts convince you to otherwise. It was raining hard -- real hard, tropical rainforest hard with raindrops the size of marbles.

By the time they turned that second corner and the bridge finally came into view, our intrepid adventurers were soaked to the bone, and George's bathrobe alone weighed an extra fifteen pounds.

At the bridge, a chain hung across the path and in front of this stood Mr. Thwartbridge the Senior -- Ruby's algebra teacher's father, standing tall and proud. And even though he was holding an umbrella, he too was soaked. It was that sort of rain. And this was how it rained pretty much all the time at the bridge. But off to the side there was a small waterproof shack. And this is where Mr. Thwartbridge the Senior lived and took his breaks.

Oh, and I suppose I should mention that it was almost teatime. As such, Mr. Thwartbridge the Senior had been spending most of his mental energies trying to decide between U'u'lug and Jasmine Orange. But when he caught sight of our intrepid travelers, he instantly forgot about his tea. Even at this distance -- and even in this rain -- he could tell that they were an odd group.

Maybe one of their number -- or dare he hope, possibly more -- would be worthy of being called a Mathematician!

“Hey der Thwarty,” Grt said in greeting. “Eyes Grt, eet starts with da G. Grt. G.” He wanted to get off on the right foot with Mr. Thwartbridge the Senior. Maybe the family had gone into math, because they weren’t so hot with letters. Maybe they all had dyslexia or something. You never knew. “G for Grt,” Grt said again just to be sure.

A little disappointed, Max realized the little drag-goon would be going for the letter board in his attempt to cross the bridge. But that left four others. To start, there was a Pixie and a Minataur. But neither of these creature types was particularly noted for their scholastic achievements. Then, there was an old man who couldn’t decide if he was headed to beach, going to take a shower, or on his way to a heavy metal concert. That didn’t bode well either. That only left a teenage girl. But she wasn’t smart enough to use an umbrella in this torrential downpour. Things didn’t look promising, at all -- not one little bit. Still, it was worth asking before he reached for the letter board. “Are any of you Mathematicians?” he asked, enunciating the last word and saying it very carefully with the respect it deserved.

Crazy George readied a piece of manna as he asked, “What do you have in mind?”

“Your magic will not work here,” Mr. Thwartbridge the Senior said with obvious derision. “We measure mathematical acumen here, not... the lesser arts.”

Fortunately, Ruby was up to the challenge. “I’ve solved a multi-factorial polymetric-array a time or two,” she offered.

“Really?” Max responded with an odd mixture of elation and surprise.

“Yes, really,” Ruby assured him. “I have one of the best teachers in all the Seven Realms, a Mr. Thwartbridge the Junior. Perhaps you have heard of him?”

Yes! This was indeed a most unexpected surprise!

Now, I've written this next section a lot of different ways. And I know I promised you some hot and heavy, lowdown and dirty, no holds barred algebra action, but when you get right down to it, the material just isn't working for me. I know, being the worlds greatest author and all, you must be beside yourself with shock to hear me make such an admission, but there it is.

I mean, I can start off by telling you that Max began by challenging Ruby with his ace in the hole: a question of the form $y=ax^b+cx^d+ex^f+gx^h=0$ (and in this particular case Mr. Thwartbridge the Senior opted for $y=2x^5+3x^3+4x^2+5x^0=0$), but as we've gone over before, the answer is 0. It's a trivial answer to be sure, but then this is a trivial book. You should have expected as much. I mean, if you wanted an exhaustive history on Lady Ruby, you perhaps should have picked up Lady Ruby: The Exhaustive History, by Bernard Bitpik. True to the title, Bitpik goes into exhausting detail -- or at least, I find the details exhausting. Like for instance, in Bitpik's book you can find out the type of chips Crazy George was eating while he talked to Verde Grun (Hot Salsa for the first bag, Creamy Ranch for the second), or the type of flip flops he was wearing: Toe-Trekkers.

Now, Toe-Trekkers aren't a sponsor, so I don't have any commercial footage to run, but if you want, feel free to imagine a pretty Elvin gal running through the surf while steel drum music plays in the background. Now you -- or I -- might focus our attention elsewhere, but seeing as how this is -- or would be -- a Toe-Trekker commercial, you can bet the camera would zoom in on her pretty Elvin feet -- even though many of us (if not all of us) would consider that a complete waste of good film.

Oh, and as long as I'm going off on asides, I might as well mention that not every Elvin gal's feet are what you would call -- or at least, what I would call -- photogenic. But you know how it is, for the commercial they would have chosen an Elf with good looking feet. I mean, that's why those casting-couch guys get paid the big bucks, right?

Anyhow, if I was in charge of designing this commercial -- and I guess I am -- the camera would then fade from the glorious feet of some hot Elvin babe wearing Toe-Trekkers to the hideous, hairy, dirty, smelly feet of some grotesque creature -- like, say, a Hobbling -- who would -- by some quirk of fate -- be wearing the same style (but hopefully not the exact same pair) of Toe-Trekkers as the hot Elvin babe. I mean, can you imagine sharing your flip-flops with a Hobbling? Makes me shiver in revulsion just to think about it... and then, laugh manically with glee. Ha! Ha! Ha! You short, stupid, short, disgusting Hobbings! You don't scare me!

Now, the vile, evil, horrid Hobbling would probably be in a dungeon or something, and so it would be dark, dank, and the putrid creature would be walking through puddles of grime, but the Toe-Trekkers would be holding up fine because that's what Toe-Trekkers do. And the Hobbling would be tracking ahead for a party of evil adventures at two coppers a day because that and catapult ammunition is about the only thing the hated creatures are good for. Anyhow, the Hobbling would then encounter some kind of gory, Hobbling killing blade trap.

Now this is a children's book... or at least The Dragon Bound Quartet was a children's book. I'm not really sure what type of book the Minataur Tails is turning out to be. But whatever type it is, the point is I can't -- or won't -- go into all the graphic details regarding what happens to the Hobbling from there. But rest assured, no matter what horrendous fate befalls the hapless Hobbling, the Toe-Trekkers would come out of it smelling like roses... actually, come to think of it, they'd probably smell like Hobbling feet, but as long as we don't film the commercial in Smell-o-Rama that shouldn't be a problem. Anyhow, outside of the smell, the Toe-Trekkers would still be in perfectly good shape.

And truthfully, I probably should go into that smell thing a little further. But right now I don't want to, because even as we speak, some poor Hobbling extra is being sliced and diced into tiny bite-sized pieces by a high quality blade trap (perhaps one made of Myth-Alloy). I say, as long as you're going to kill a Hobbling or

two or three to make a commercial, you might as well drag their deaths out for all their worth (i.e. two coppers a shot). So with that in mind and assuming you're all in the mood for the some Hobbling killing gore, I'd like to imagine that the blade trap sliced the Hobbling off at the feet leaving them behind in the Toe-Trekkers while the rest of the horrid little beast was carried somewhere off screen to be slowly mangled to death. And you know what the best part about all that is? Now you don't have to buy your next scout a new pair of shoes.

Anyway, that's the way I like to imagine the Toe-Trekker bit. Oh, and I also like to throw in a few blood curdling Hobbling screams. But then, this here is a do it yourself commercial, so work it up however you like.

And then, when I think about it a bit more, I realize that Toe-Trekkers might actually be a sponsor. You know, sort of like how the Thai Shack never paid me any money to mention them, but after years of free food, I figured I owed them something. Well, the same thing might hold true for Toe-Trekkers. You see, down at the cove, the tide must bring in any number of Toe-Trekkers, beach towels, car keys, and wallets each and every day. Really, it's basically anything you might need or want to enjoy a day at the beach. The tide tends to wash the goodies to shore around ten-ish in the morning. So if you walk around the beach at this time, you can collect pretty much anything you want. You just have to make sure to do your beach combing before three, because that's when the tourists rise out of the water and take all the flotsam home as souvenirs. So like, if you can pull yourself out of bed before two in the afternoon, you can make a decent living doing nothing more than combing the beach.

But it's not all fun and games. On occasion, you'll run into some overzealous tourist who thinks they can claim a pair of sunglasses, flip-flops, a purse, a wallet, or whatever by yelling, "Hey, stop! Thief! That's mine!"

And now I think you see where the Toe-Trekkers come in. I mean, you can really run in those things. So when you're out collecting flotsam, you might want to gather up a pair of Toe-Trekkers first thing just in case you meet up with tourist with an attitude problem and a misguided sense of entitlement.

Celli,

This is the type of amoral rant we talked about at the last meeting. Of course, you would have already known that if you bothered to attend any of the meetings. It gives the readers the wrong impression.

Eddy

Wow! Good to hear from you Eddy.
Long time since you've written. What gives?

Celli,

Just apologize.

Say you were kidding about that last bit, that you don't endorse thievery, and move on.

Eddy

Oh, yeah. That last bit, total fiction. It's like a second commercial. You know, like the first commercial was for Toe-Trekkers and the second one was to remind you not to leave valuables on the beach while you're swimming because not everyone has the same value system when it comes to personal property. Especially when the property in question is just sort of lying around unprotected and you just know that the Hu'at who left it there obviously considers the beach their personal garbage dump and is, no doubt, busy making a nuisance of themselves in the surf by hogging the waves and killing the vibe.

Celli,

I believe we were at the bridge and Mr. Thwartbridge and Ruby were going to have an algebra showdown. Why don't we just focus on that?

Eddy

Right. I guess I'm having a hard time getting my mind away from the beach. OK. So math...

Ruby and Max really went at it. After Max showed Ruby the first question Ruby just sort of giggled as she said, "Zero," in an offhand manner. Then she might have said something like, "A more difficult version of that problem would be..." and from there you can just look it up in Bernard Bitpik's cure for insomnia, Lady Ruby: The Exhaustive History, pages 2304-2433 (inclusive). That's over a hundred pages of math problems folks -- complete with solutions, derivations, bonus problems, and explanations on where Ruby and Max might, in fact, have been wrong. Suffice to say, Bitpik's history is longer than all my books put together, but I have yet to meet the sentient creature who has ever read the entire thing. I think that pretty much says everything that needs to be said on the subject.

Anyway if you want the short version, Ruby scoffed at Max's two dimension polynomial and retorted with a third factor polynomial. Max was impressed. He had finally met an opponent worthy of his chalk. So, he did what any math teacher standing outside in the pouring rain would do. He led the party into his shack -- which just so happened to be an exact duplicate of Ruby's algebra classroom, except that it had some teapots in the corner. Once inside, Max handily solved Ruby's equation and then upped the ante by writing out a complex min-max trigonometric quadratic, which plotted the intersection of two curves. It took some doing and half a piece of chalk, but Ruby persevered and solved the vexing -- if mind numbingly dull -- quandary.

Yeah, just check out pages 2384-2386 in the paperweight Bitpik has the nerve to call a book and see if you can stay awake. Buddy couldn't. He napped during this time while Grt went to the

chalkboard at the rear of the room and drew an abstract representation of Verde Grun -- which if you must know, had certain quasi-dimensional fractal qualities about it. George, for his part, produced a deck of cards and played solitaire or the occasional hand of Go Fish with Nellie, who between hands of cards fixed tea, which she served to the rest of the party with some biscuits she'd found.

Anyway, Ruby and Max went at it all afternoon as if Ruby was making up by proxy for all the math tests she ever cheated at. And they would have continued long into the evening too had Max not gotten carried away and posed a nonlinear derivative using the Laplace transform, which according to Bitpik is a lot like, "utilizing a logarithm to perform a cross multiplication of two variable integer functions before taking the derivative," whatever in Gra'gl's name that's supposed to mean.

The point is, Max was in a good mood. And so when it was finally time for them to leave, he let them all pass and didn't even bother to bring out the number board. This was a good thing for George. Not because George is particularly dim witted, but because as a rule Max doesn't like wizards, so he'd made a special number board just for them using dynamic Alzen characters, which change what they mean from one moment to the next. One moment a Alzen character may be a squiggly thing that is equivalent to the number eight, and the next it will change into an entirely different magical doodad that represents the letter F. So even if you point to the Alzen number board at the right time and the right place, give it a moment and the character will change from a number to a letter or vice a versa, and then Max could say, "Nope. Sorry, that's not a number."

Not that Max would do such a thing. It would be a blatant abuse of power. But then, when you think about it, what's the point in having power in the first place if you don't abuse it now and again?

See, it's just like when you're waiting for your turn to surf out in the line up, but there's a whole string of noisy Hu'ats in front of you. Well, what you need to do then is...

(And here one of the Celli's more brazenly amoral rants has been deleted by yours truly Eddy, the power hungry editor. Send me out for hot chocolate and then write an entire chapter behind my back, will you? I'll show you!!!)

19 #
The Skull Tower

Seeing as how Ruby had solved the math test with flying colors, she got a free ride over a thorny problem or something to that effect. And believe it or not, Ruby decided to bypass any further encounters the Celaphopod may have had planned and meet with Bones post haste. This was just as well. Because if truth be told, the Celaphopod was running out of material -- or at least, material that didn't have anything to do with M©ther G©©se, Aes©p, or the Br©thers Grimm.

So without further ado and just as the sun was setting, the party crossed Mr. Thwartbridge's bridge. It was one of those rickety rope bridges. You know the type that that they always seem to have in those movies (and/or these books), where the bridge sways in the breeze, and you can see through the rotting planks to the valley floor thousands of feet below. I mean, it was exactly the type of bridge that if you were a Pixie and you hadn't taken your motion sickness pills in the last two thousand words -- and trust me she hadn't -- that you would definitely not want to be walking across.

Sensing her mistake, Nellie frantically reached for the Captain's Cure -- guaranteed to prevent motion sickness, vertigo, or nausea for two thousand words when taken correctly -- but in her rush she dropped the pills through the planks of the bridge and could only watch as they fell to the valley floor far below.

“No! That’s not fair!” the Pixie cried out in despair. And just as if she lived in some cruel world, which only existed to mock her, her voice echoed surreally off the canyon walls, “Not fair. Not fair. Not fair.” It was disconcerting in a way that would make you dizzy, light headed, and maybe slightly nauseous if you were prone to such things.

Luckily for Nellie, as she began to lose her footing, Buddy grabbed hold of her and saved her from certain death. And as a reward for his efforts, what did Nellie do? But clutch at his face with an iron grip. Who would have thought Pixies could be so strong? Buddy tried to move her, so he could see or at least loosen her grip. But soon decided it would be easier to simply deal with the discomfort for the few minutes it would take to cross the bridge.

However, this was not as easy as it sounded as Ruby was standing in front of him, blocking his way, and enjoying the sunset. How does one describe the perpetual sunset that fills the sky that meets one as they enter the dark lands of Twilight on the edge of the Chaos Dimensions where Bones makes his home?

Yes, how?

Well, the colors swirl surreally, beautifully, and mesmerizingly -- sort of like the sky over the Citadel, but more so -- and are full of sprays of purple, smears of yellows, and screams of green. Well, I suppose that’s how you describe it. What do you know? It wasn’t so hard, after all. Though, the accuracy is perhaps questionable.

But not being in a critical mood and having other things on his mind than viewing the sunset -- like the terrified Pixie that was clutching onto his face -- Buddy asked quite calmly and reasonably, “Can we do our sightseeing once we get off the bridge?”

Grt happened to have the answer to that as he was just returning from a scouting expedition and informed Ruby, “Eets darks ahead. Suns go down. But sunners rises as Grt returners dis ways. Eet da strangers.”

Understanding that the sun would continue to set a little more with every step, Ruby said, “You guys go ahead, I want to watch the sunset a while longer.”

“How do we get past you?” Buddy asked. But Ruby already had that under control. A clasp of Grt’s hand, a strand of manna, and a moment later Ruby had swapped positions with Buddy on the bridge.

“Your way is clear,” Ruby said distractedly as she took her own sweet time to slowly walk across the bridge and gaze at the most magical sunset you are likely to find anywhere -- on either side of the Great Divide.

Much later after Ruby had crossed the bridge, it was night -- pure and simple. In fact, it would have been pitch black if it weren’t for the torches burning by the side of the path or the occasional oil filled skull placed on the ground.

“Dis creepies,” Grt observed.

“We must be near Bones,” Ruby agreed. And her instincts proved correct. Two switch backs later and a skull shaped fortress appeared in the distance. It was your standard skull shaped fortress owned by a megalomaniac skeletal warlord. And just like some of your better hotels, it had a big neon sign standing next to it, which flashed ‘BONES’ in bright red letters. But unlike your better hotels, a drawbridge led into the skull’s mouth while a Cobalt sentry was posted in either eye. The Cobalts were small vile looking lizard-ish creatures (more like alligators standing on their hind feet really). And the two of them had a sort of a familial resemblance to Carl. In fact, if memory serves, I think we’re looking at Carl’s nephews Charley and Chris. But as promised, they were behaving, and so did not waive to Ruby and the gang. Instead they looked grim and foreboding, which is quite the trick because it’s dark out and Ruby was still a quarter mile away, so I’m guessing their experience in their school’s production of The Slow, Grisly, and quite Painful Death of a Telemarketer who Continued to Call

Repeatedly at Mealtime Despite Polite Entreaties to the Contrary really paid off.

Anyhow, once you've seen one skull fortress, you've pretty much seen them all. The sky on the other hand, was something to behold. As they walked slowly forward with only the occasional complaint from the Pixie -- who wasn't the least bit grateful that she'd crossed the bridge with all the tea and biscuits she'd eaten back at Mr. Thwartbridge's shack still in her stomach -- the sky slowly changed from pitch black to the dynamic swirling colors of the Chaos Dimensions.

If you have ever been to the Chaos Dimensions, then you know what I'm talking about. The night sky is simply fantastic. Instead of stars, they have colored swirls and prismatic sprays. It's literally a kaleidoscope display, which changes from moment to moment. It's how the Chaos Dimensions got their name when you get right down to it. I probably should explain that last remark because I'm willing to bet that this is something most of the reading public doesn't realize.

Surveys have shown (OK, I just asked Charley and Chris) that most people think the Chaos Dimensions get their name from the odd appearance of some of their denizens or their more than liberal interpretation of the laws of physics. I mean, you're obviously a patron of the arts, so you've probably read about the Chaos Dimensions here or there in some other fine piece of literature. So, you probably know some of the landscapes are comprised entirely of floating ball bearings or that in other worlds you can become the rolling ball in a pinball machine. I could go on, but I think you get the idea. I mean, there are places where gravity is reversed, light shines backwards, and things happen before their casual factors have taken place. And although some folks think that these other items of interest came first, it is really the funky night sky which makes all of these other wonderful things possible.

Let me explain. As everyone knows, a person's fate is determined absolutely and completely at birth by the positioning of

the stars in the sky. This is true of people, animals, rocks, subatomic particles, everything. This is an Astrological fact, so don't even try to argue against it with your backwards, Stone Age, scientific thinking. The sooner you accept it as Truth, the better off we'll all be. In your more progressive vortexes, Astrologers decide everything, like who will be the next president, the winner of the World's Cup, and who the greatest author in all the known vortexes is. Oh, and a word to the wise, it pays to tip heavily.

Astrology, however, falls apart in the Chaos Dimensions because no matter how much you chart the sun, the moon, and the stars, in the Chaos Dimensions they change from moment to moment. 'Does Cancer have a rising moon tonight?' isn't really the type of question you ask in the Chaos Dimensions. Rather, it would be more appropriate to ask, 'When was the last time anyone saw Cancer? Can you really call a swirling vortex a constellation? And if the swirling clusters are constellations, what are the prismatic-spray flower thingies called?'

In the end the point is, Astrology doesn't work in the Chaos Dimensions. So whenever there is a dispute over the laws of physics, there is no way to resolve the issue. And once things have gone that far, it isn't long before some uppity rock with a streak of independence decides to fall upwards and the next thing you know he's started a fad and you have totally anarchy on your hands. In short, when Astrology doesn't hold, nothing else does, and the result is chaos -- hence the name of the place.

Luckily Ruby and the gang were just at the edge of the Chaos Dimensions. Trust me when I say this as you don't want to be anywhere in the vicinity when electrons start to go renegade and decide the best course of action is to just stop for a moment and take a deep breath. It's not a pretty sight and it tends to be contagious.

20

If you tell two Cobalts,

And They tell two Cobalts,
And They tell two Cobalts,
And So on, and so on

I think I've mentioned somewhere along the way that Cobalts are breeders. How many kids do you have Carl?

"Don't know. Lost track."

One hundred? Two hundred? Three hundred?

"Yeah, something like that."

All we really needed were the two Cobalts, one in either eye. But then, Charley and Chris started bragging to their brothers, sisters, friends, cousins, second cousins, third cousins twice removed, everybody in school, and everyone they met about how they were going to have starring roles in one of my books. And in the end, it was decided it would be a lot easier to let anyone who wanted to be an extra in this scene to be an extra in this scene. After we had handed out a few dozen gross of AK-47/5889tys, I stopped counting.

Anyway, as was indicated a while back, Ruby and the gang were walking down the path towards the skull tower. Not exactly what I would call a sound military strategy -- you know, casually walking up to the front gates of the castle. Sure, they just wanted to talk to Bones. But that doesn't mean Bones wanted to talk to them. He did want to talk. But that's not what it means. Besides, anyone who has read Management for Dragons by The Dragon -- and available at better booksellers everywhere -- knows that it is far easier to negotiate from a position of strength than from a position of weakness. And in this particular case for Bones, that would mean taking Ruby and the gang hostage.

So with that end in mind, a thousand plus Cobalt extras descended upon our hapless party from out of nowhere and each one of those cute little green buggers was packing an AK-47/5889ty. Oh, and I should mention, the ty in AK-47/5889ty means that the weapon in question was the toy model -- completely

appropriate for the situation and legal in this vortex. I mean, we had gotten a permit for the scene and filled out the appropriate paperwork. We'd told everyone what we were going to be doing. So, it was completely legal, legit, and above the board.

Anyway, the Cobalts didn't really descend from out of nowhere because a thousand Cobalt cubs don't stay quiet just because you tell them to. And trust me, they don't just not shoot an AK-47/5889ty just because there's no good reason. In fact, it is alleged in some malicious (and quite unfounded) legal complaint that this little bit of story telling magic was the reason all the stars in the Chaos Dimensions are swirling bits of color in the first place. Something about a thousand-odd beam weapons from all those AK-47/5889ty's shooting into the sky for hours on end until the battery packs were depleted. Complete and utter nonsense! No court will even hear the case, which might have more to do with not wanting a thousand of screaming Cobalt cubs with fully charged AK-47/5889ty's in their courtroom than anything else. But you take your justice where you can find it -- or at least, I do. Besides, the night sky in the Chaos Dimensions is legendary. I should get some kind of royalty for that... not that I'm responsible or anything. But if I was, maybe they should be giving me a medal instead of trying to sue me.

Anyhow, it would appear that Grt wasn't much interested in the legal subtleties behind the Chaos Dimensions, et al vs. Celli the Happy Go-Lucky Celaphopod because he just sort of broke into the Celaphopod's reverie at this point to continue the story.

"Hies ya, Jimmy," Grt said merrily in greeting to one of the Cobalts, who he just so happened to recognize from Chris's birthday party the two had recently attended together. Of course, perhaps of much more interest would be the thousands of other Cobalts who accompanied Jimmy and jumped out from the surrounded rocks at same time.

“Oh, hey. Hi Grt. Nothing personal, but we’re taking you captive,” Jimmy explained as it appeared that he was to be the spokes-Cobalt.

“Okee-Dokey’s,” Grt agreed good-naturedly.

“Did you hear that?” Jimmy yelled. “We’ve taken the Lady Ruby and her party of adventuring scum hostage!”

I’m sure that at this point the Cobalt cubs took up a mighty cheer. But let’s face it, you couldn’t really hear much over the roar of a thousand plus AK-47/5889ty’s going off all at once... well that and the exploding stars.

It really was quite the sight. Much is made of the night sky in the Chaos Dimensions, but for pure visual delight let a thousand Cobalts loose with high energy beam weapons and the resulting supernovas, exploding planets, and coronal discharge, is truly breathtaking (i.e. it will stop your heart and take your breath away).

So as readers prone to suggestion call 911, or in other ways attempt to resuscitate themselves, I urge you to take a moment to enjoy the show the Cobalts will be putting on for the next few hours. Due to recently enacted environmental preservation laws this sort of random destruction of the night sky over an entire quadrant of vortexes probably won’t be seen again for quite some time. You can thank the meddling environmentalist activists for that one.

Oh! No! Have Ruby and the gang just been taken prisoner?

And right here, just on the very last page of The NAS-gh©uls™, the third book in the exciting Minataur Tails story arc sequence of the award winning Dragon Bound series?

Why oh why would that happen just now?

I mean is it just me, or does the timing seem suspect?

You don’t think it was done to create artificial suspense?

Or to make darn sure everyone buys the next book in the series?

No! It's got to be more likely that Grt forget to bring Chris a cool birthday present when he went to the party?

Yeah! That's it, but...

Well, that doesn't seem like Grt?

It's probably more likely that Ruby has been taken captive because Bones is evil?

Yeah! Yeah! That seems pretty likely. A skeletal warlord bent on revenge. He sounds like the sort of guy who might be evil.

But, oh no! Now Ruby is Bones captive!!!!

That doesn't sound good!

What is she going to do?

Or more importantly, what is he going to do?

As for me, I'm not saying. If you want to know, you're going to have to pick up a copy of Screaming Greenies™, Book IV of Minataur Tails!

Or maybe you'd be happier not knowing the gruesome details.

"Mu-ha-ha!"

"Mu-ha-ha!"

"Mu-ha-ha!"

(Cough. Cough. Hack. Hack.)

End Book III

(Please Note)

(Book IV, Screaming Greenies™)

(Is Now Available at Better Bookstores Everywhere)

(Get Yours Today)

(Before It's Too Late)

(Ruby's Future May Well Depend On It)

(Mu-ha-ha!)

(Mu-ha-ha!)

(Mu-ha-ha!)

(Cough. Cough. Hack. Hack.)