

**Screaming Greenies™ - Book IV**

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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*Happy Birthday to the LeeZards*

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Book IV  
Screaming Greenies™

# 1 #  
What No Rant?

(It seems unlikely that Minataur Tails will end without a closing rant, the saying of farewells, or at least one final desperate plea for readers to send money. As such, we'll just jump right back into the action and save the ranting for later.)

When we left our intrepid adventurers at the end of The NAS-gh©uls™, Book III of the Minataur Tails, they were had just been captured by Bones' nefarious troop of Cobalts. We now rejoin the action deep inside Skull Tower where our heroes are being held prisoner.

“And action!” Carl's voice calls out suddenly in the echoing gloom of the dungeon. The scene starts with a close up of Ruby. She is tied to a heavy wooden chair. Next to her, Bones heats a poker in a roaring fire and has a sort of maniacal grin on his face. In case you've forgotten, Bones is a metallic skeleton robot like undead creation made out of Myth-Alloy from MSAF. He is a bit modest, so he wears a suit of chain mail (also from MSAF and available in S, M, L, & XL), which is adorned with the red and black colors that evil skeletons have been wearing since time immemorial. He also has a battle helm propped on his skull (just like all the cool kids are wearing this season) and a long-long sword (because he's a bit insecure about that sort of thing)

dangling at his side.

Bones pulls the poker out of the fire and holds it up in front of Ruby so she can get a good look at what she's in for. Ruby eyes the poker for a moment... and then, having reached a decision, reaches out and plucks the golden, nearly perfectly cooked marshmallow off the end.

"I always burn them," Ruby admits.

"The trick is patience," Bones informs her as he puts another marshmallow on the poker.

"You're live," Carl reminds them.

"Live?" Ruby asks.

"Yes, live. Tape is rolling."

"But what about the Celaphopod's rant?"

"Change of plans. He's saving it for the end."

Just then Grt walks back into the room. He's got a jumbo size shaved ice splashed with all the colors of the rainbow in his hands. Nonchalantly, he walks over to the nausea machine -- one of those twisty-turny things that some folks ride for fun at the shire (or county) fair -- and straps himself in. Once he is twirling about, he proceeds to enjoy the rest of his icy treat.

After that, Buddy walks in with a big plate of Thai food in either hand. And just in case you haven't noticed yet, the Thai Shack is catering this scene. But that's probably not overly important. I would like to say that what is important is that Nellie is perched on Buddy's shoulder, telling him the type of raunchy jokes that Pixies go for. But then, that's not really important either. Nor is the fact that they sit on the rack where Grt would be strapped down and screaming in (mock?) pain if this were a professional outfit (the nausea machine being for Nellie). Oh, and while I'm describing things, I might as well mention the two iron rings, which are sunk into the wall. You might want to imagine an angry Minataur hanging from those, cursing the gods because apparently it's not going to happen for real.

"You're live," Carl reminds them again.

“I thought we had two thousand more words,” Buddy remarks casually.

“He’s skipping the rant,” Bones explains helpfully.

“I’m not getting in that nausea thing again,” Nellie says defiantly.

“Those rings hurt my arms,” Buddy agrees.

“They’re torture devices,” Bones explains and then adds a half-hearted, “Mu-ha-ha,” just for good measure.

Meanwhile, Grt stops the spinning machine and walks in a spiral path over to Ruby. “Dat funs,” he says as he sways back and forth.

“Look, we’re really not ready yet,” Ruby yells up to Carl, the Celaphopod, and whoever else might be listening. “We’ve got this thing wrapped up. It’s a slam dunk.”

Ominous last words -- those. For some reason, Ruby mistakenly feels that she will be able to send the four horsemen off to rebuild the vortexes they’ve destroyed. One to each vortex, it should work out perfectly, so she calmly, brazenly, and a bit prematurely suggests to the Celaphopod, “Do your rant. Do another at the end. We’ve got time.”

Ruby.

Ruby.

Ruby.

Tsk. Tsk. Tsk.

Haven’t we learned anything about the intricacies of plot development?

Being the helpful sort, Carl interprets the above few lines of copy that are scrolling down his computer monitor for Ruby. “The big guy is saying to wrap it up. If it’s a slam dunk, then slam it. If we have any words left over, we’ll finish up with a cast party at that new pizza place in Rigor Pass.”

It’s probably the mention of free food that gets his attention. But about then, Crazy George walks onto the set with one pastry in his hand and another smeared liberally across his face and beard. He may be the slowest member of the party, always bringing up

the rear, and have a bad attitude at times, but one thing is for sure, he has a firm understanding of cross promotion and marketing. “I’ve heard about that pizza place. The sauce is incredible and the crust... unbelievable. The best thing, of course, is its location.”

“Just around the corner,” Ruby finishes for him -- just like everything is in Rigor Pass.

“Yeah,” George agrees. “I’ve been looking forward to that pizza for like the entire book.”

I mean, you’ve got to hand it to George, when he says something like that, because he really means it, which is odd only after you consider that we don’t actually have a pizza sponsor. Otherwise, we might have used an actual name.

And I guess what that means is, if we have a cast party, it will probably end up happening in the appendix -- if at all. But as the saying goes, I digress.

“Come on guys,” Carl reminds them, me... everybody really. “Time is money, let’s get this show on the road.”

# 2 #

Dem Bones

Minutes later Ruby is strapped to a chair. Bones is holding a glowing red-hot poker inches from her face. Grt is being stretched on a Rack. Nellie is going round and round on the nausea machine. From her screams, you’d never know she’d just taken two more of the Captain’s Cure. Buddy is hanging from two iron rings set in the wall, while Crazy George is tied to a post in the center of the room.

There are no Cobalts extras hanging about. After seeing what they did to the sky with those AK-47/5889ty’s (irresponsible thing that, giving AK-47/5889ty’s to a bunch of children), the whole cast got together and refused to do the torture chamber scene if there were any Cobalts in the room. They didn’t think the Cobalts would understand the concept of pretend, play, or acting. How quickly they forget Chris and Charlie’s expert performances.

No matter, assistants are not really needed. Bones is a skilled negotiator, fact finder, truth teller, or whatever euphemism for master torturer you care to use. Or really, just come right out and say it. He's good at inflicting pain. It's a talent, a gift -- much like sculpting, painting, watercolors, or writing poetry only not in as much demand on the gallery scene these days. But the important thing is, he does his art for the sheer love of it. There is a calling deep in his heart. His soul yearns to express itself. And if this expression causes pain to others, well then, that's just an added bonus.

Bones holds the red-hot brand next to Ruby's face. The poetically minded will note how it contrasts sublimely with Ruby's red hair.

Needless to say, it's quite obvious Ruby is not a poet when she asks, "What's the point of this?"

"Mu-ha-ha! Mu-ha-ha!" Bones replies with manically, self-righteous glee.

"No, really. What's the point?" Ruby asks again. "You must know that I wear the Dragon's Pendant." Not an overly important item in Minataur Tails so far, but it was pretty much what The Dragon Bound Quartet was all about, so read that book if you want more information on it's properties. Though I will give you this one little hint, one of its major functions is that it acts as a homing device. Thus Ruby isn't bluffing when she says, "I'm sure the Dragon has been tracking my entire progress."

"Mu-ha-ha!" Bones says again with a dedication to the script any director would be proud of.

"If you kill me, hurt me, or so much as touch me in a suggestive fashion, The Dragon is going to lay waste to this entire vortex. Don't you read the variety pages? That was the plan all along. And if I fail, the back-up is an air strike. You're not really thinking you can beat The Dragon in a head-to-head battle are you?"

"Mu-ha... but there's the Weapon Ban and I'm near indestructible," Bones says as his conviction in the righteousness

of his cause waivers for a moment.

“No one is indestructible. I’m sure you’ve got a weakness like kryptonite, Hobblings, or low blood sugar. I don’t know what it is. I don’t have to. But The Dragon made you and he’ll know.”

“Mu-ha-ha! The Dragon isn’t here. But even if he was, you haven’t taken into account the Weapons Ban,” Bones repeats, confident Ruby will never be able to overcome that second, more important, obstacle.

But Ruby knows the intricacies of the Weapons Ban. She’s the one who made it after all. “Don’t you pay attention to anything? The Weapons Ban doesn’t hold outside of the Seven Realms. It’s a localized phenomenon. Wherever our enemies have weapons, we do too. Besides, I’m sure we must have allies somewhere who still have weapons.” Ruby suddenly tilts her head as if she was some actor stuck in a mediocre story with a very bad script. “Isn’t that the War Cry of the Valkyrie’s I hear in the distance? It’s what the Pegasus Cavalry likes to play during an attack to scare the enemy.”

“Mu-ha...,” but Bones stops mid Mu-ha-ha once again to listen to the orchestra tuning its instruments in the background.

“I’m thinking you and me only have a few minutes to reach an agreement before your little vortex is reduced to a simmering pile of dust and ashes.”

“But you’re the good guys?” Bones whines sort of pathetically. “That’s not fair.”

“You wasted four vortexes full of innocent creatures. Don’t get me started about being fair. Now out with your story. Or do we need to wait until a Pegasus guardsman stomps it out of you?”

Bones looks around, “I really thought I’d get to torture you a bit more first. A least a scream or two.”

“THE STORY!” Ruby screams -- being only too happy to comply and sounding amazingly like Jeannette for a moment.

“Ahem. Mu-ha-ha,” Bones says to clear his throat and collect his thoughts. “Not much of a story really, technically more

of a synopsis.”

And though Ruby doesn't interrupt him, don't you think this would be a good place for her to say, 'The Story,' again or something?

Anyway, Bones was saying, “After The Dragon Bound Quartet, I got jealous of The Dragon's popularity. You know, we've done so much together over the years that I just assumed if he ever got famous, he'd carry me along with him into the spotlight. But he didn't. Here I am. I schlep all over the Seven Realms with him for eons, millennium, er, and, um... whatever that time frame after millennium.”

“Epoch, I think,” George says helping out.

“Right. I schlep around with him for epochs. And then, when he hits it big, he forgets about me. Those four horsemen were just a little reminder to jog his memory lest he forget all the help I've given to him over the years. The point is, I deserve a place in the spotlight. Look at this,” Bones says as he takes a twelve inch replica of himself out of the wooden footlocker by his feet. “See this -- full working hands, swiveling hips, 127 points of articulation.” He pauses as reaches down into the chest again. “It comes with a helmet, a sword, and an AK-47/5889mini that shoots plastic darts.”

“You wasted four vortexes for a marketing tie-in!” Ruby exclaims in disbelief. But you know, really, at his point you wouldn't think it would surprise her anymore.

“We'll repopulate the vortexes,” Bones assures her. He reaches into the chest again and pulls out a pile of Sm©rks™. “See, we got it all planned. This here is Machine Gunner Sm©rk™. This one is Mortar Sm©rk™, Binocular Sm©rk™, Pistol Sm©rk™, Prone Rifleman Sm©rk™, Standing Rifle Man Sm©rk™, and what Sm©rk™ collection would be complete without Guy Waiving His Hand Sm©rk™.”

“What's the last guy for?” George breaks in. “Like, I understand the machine gun, mortar, and rifle men. But really, how many guys do you need standing around and waiving their



hands in the air?”

“When I was a young buck and playing with army men, I always used those arm waiving guys as casualties,” Buddy offers. And seeing as how he was going to be free in a moment or two anyhow, he takes the liberty of freeing himself from the wall and walking over to examine the Army Men Sm©rks™ at close range.

“Casualty Sm©rk™, that’s a good idea,” Bones says as he takes out a pad of paper and writes himself a note.

Seeing as how Buddy “broke” his bonds, Nellie decides to stop the nausea machine and gets off as well. But not wishing to draw attention to herself, she doesn’t say anything. Instead, she concludes that the wisest course of action would be to simply lie on the ground until the world stops spinning.

Obviously not understanding where this scene is headed or the demographic buying power of young boys aged six to thirteen, Ruby states with disgust and revulsion, “You are not repopulating the Sm©rk™ vortex with killers,”

“But I’ve got a proven track record,” Bones points out. “Those AK-47/5889ty’s were all my idea. The numbers are through the roof. We command 80% of the toy gun market. More importantly, over 97% of all armed robberies are now committed with AK-47/5889ty’s.”

“And you’re proud of that?”

“They’re toys,” Bones insists, “much safer than if the bad guys had real weapons.”

“What are these?” Buddy asks as he reaches into the toy chest.

“Those are Crimi-Crimi Trolls to repopulate the Tr©ll-Tr©ll™ vortex,” explains Bones. “We already have the girl market sown up, from 7-74 with the life size Grt plushy dolls, so it’s time to move in and dominate the young male demographic from 6-66.”

I’m sure the number is just a coincidence.

While all of this has been going on, the orchestra had completed its warm up and the Cry of the Valkyrie’s starts with a

drum roll and a blast of thunder. We don't have an extra camera (and I don't feel like walking up all those stairs to take in the view), but if we did (or if I did) we might switch to a wide angle shot (a color shot -- like flavor text) at this point and watch as a regiment of elite Pegasus Airborne Rangers descending on the evil genius's stronghold.

Sort of knowing all of the forgoing intuitively, Ruby asks, "Carl, are all of your children and nephews gone now?"

"Yep. It's a school night. They had to go home."

"So, Bones' fortress is undefended?"

"I don't know. I guess. No Cobalt's anyhow."

"Don't throw away this marketing opportunity," Bones pleads, sensing where things are headed. But it is to no avail.

"I think the entire concept of wasting a vortex of peaceful, kind, loving Sm©rks™, so you can replace them with evil Army Men Sm©rks™ is sick and horribly," Ruby points out.

"Exactly!" Bones agrees. "The boys will eat it right up. Cannibal Sm©rk™, Flame Thrower Sm©rk™..."

"Stop. I don't want to hear anymore," which is just as well because at this point Ruby's voice is drowned out by the blaring music from the Pegasus Airborne Rangers, as Pegasus (or is that Pegasi?) and their elite shock troops riders fill the room.

Anyhow, seeing that the battle is over, the captain turns the stereo speaker attached to the front of his Pegasus down a few notches before he bows to the "Lady Ruby."

"But how?" Bones asks as if this hasn't already been explained.

But just incase anyone missed it the first time around, Ruby pulls out the Dragon's Pendant that she wears around her neck at all times and explains again, "I called in an air strike during the lunch break. Really, this was explained just a little while ago. You need to pay better attention to the plot points as they're revealed if you want to keep on calling yourself a genius."

OK. That hadn't gotten him anywhere. But being the persistent sort, Bones decides to give is another go by asking the

question a little differently this time, “But why? I thought we were going to work out a marketing angle?” To reinforce this idea, Bones pulls the string hanging out of the back of the twelve inch tall skeleton doll as he demonstrates its voice box feature. “Mu-ha-ha!” the figurine cackles with maniacal glee -- and that’s only one of four exciting phrases the doll can say. Be the first on your block to hear the other three.

Ruby shakes her head with disappointment. It is clear Bones has a serious defect in character when it comes to differentiating right from wrong. And therefore, she will be unable to trust Bones when it comes to repopulating the Sm©rk™ or Tr©ll-Tr©ll™ worlds. But he will still have to atone for his crimes. Turning to the Captain of the Guard, Ruby says, “Take Bones and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse or the NAS-gh©uls™ or whatever they’re calling themselves these days and escort them to the Teddy Bear vortex. Bones and his minions are going to sew every last one of those bears back together.”

“But that could take years,” Bones grumbles in a whiney sort of way.

“Yes, it could,” the Lady Ruby Consort to The Dragon agrees. “But that really isn’t my problem, is it? Take him away!”

“Right. OK. A little hard,” or soft, “time,” as the case may be, “will be good for my image. Still, think about the toys. Crimi-Crimi Trolls did really good in pre-marketing trials. And you’re going to go with the Bones Evil Genius Action Figure, right? Right? RIGHT?”

Though Ruby doesn’t respond to Bones directly, I’m guessing the answer to that question is a big resounding -- HECK, YEAH!

127 points of articulation!

Bone Crushing Grip of Death™!

Pull string vocals that include “Mu-ha-ha” and three other exciting phrases!

A helmet, a sword, and an AK-47/5889mini that shoots

plastic darts!

But that's not all!!!

If you order now, you'll get two bonus Teddy Bear carcasses that you can sew back together (if you're a sissy) or wear as hand warmers as you make your escape through the perilous frozen wastes.

"There will be no escape! And you're not going to give away gutted Teddy Bears as promos!" Ruby interjects.

Clearly, selection may vary by vortex. Bones Evil Genius Action Figure may not be available in all markets.

# 3 #

One Down

"I like that. Poetic justice and all that," George says as he munches on another pastry. "So, does anyone know where the cast party is going to be?"

Silence.

Nobody answers.

"Well, I'll be at Lucky's. If it's going to be somewhere else, just send word," and with a Sn@p™ George is gone. I mean he's got things to do, places to go. Who knows what's happened to his Slaughter Quest empire in the last few days?

"That's OK," Ruby says to herself once George is gone. "It's a cakewalk from here. I just go down to Jeannette's, get her collection of Sm©rks™ and Tr©ll-Tr©lls™ to repopulate those vortexes, and we'll be done." It wouldn't be how Ruby had originally planned it, but it would still be easy enough.

"The green guys," Carl reminds her.

"What? Oh, I had forgotten them," Ruby admits. "What were those green guys anyhow?"

"I don't know," Carl's voice chirps in again from over the intercom.

"Any idea?" Ruby asks Buddy, Nellie, and Grt.

"Nope. We're done," Nellie says. "You met Bones. I'm out

of here.” She flicks the ring in her ear. “A deals a deal. Get rid of this stupid thing.”

Ruby tosses a ribbon of manna towards Nellie and it dissolves around her ear as the ring falls clattering to the floor. She’s busy working another ribbon of manna to aim at Buddy when he interrupts, “If you can manage it, I’d like to keep the anti-K’fr part of the ring. I liked being able to resist the K’fr flowers when we walked past them on the way to the bridge.”

“Sure. No problem,” Ruby accents as she tosses a strip of manna his way. “Your binds to me are broken, and you can take the nose ring off whenever you want, but if you keep it in you won’t get high.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re making a mistake,” Nellie warns him.

“Maybe,” Buddy agrees, but he doesn’t see how. “You sure you’ve got this thing covered, Ruby?”

“No. I thought I did, but I forgot about those green guys. I don’t even know what they are.”

“My guess is Screaming Greenies™,” Buddy says helping out. “Little green plastic rubber guys that had rubber bands for hair. Not so popular, but they fit in with the theme of small collector toys of yesteryear... and you know, it’s the subtitle of the book we’re currently in: Screaming Greenies™.”

“I was wondering what that meant. I should have been able to figure that out on my own,” Ruby remarks, more than a little disappointed in herself. But then, there was no use crying over spilt milk. “Do you know where I can find any of those... Screaming Greenies™?”

“No,” Buddy has to admit as he thinks the problem over for a moment. “They were a boy’s toy, so not many survived. I don’t know where you would find any?”

“Who cares? It’s not our problem,” Nellie jumps in. “I’m leaving. Do you want to come out to the farm and visit for a while or not, Buddy?”

“Go,” Ruby assures an undecided Minataur. “Everything

will work out in the end. Don't worry."

"OK then," Buddy says as he hugs Ruby and Grt goodbye. "I've had a good time."

"Eet bestest," Gry agrees.

"Yeah, puking for 50,000 words, it's been a blast," Nellie says sarcastically, but she gives Ruby and Grt a hug all the same. "Come out to the farm whenever you feel like having some fun," she says invitingly. And then, after she has made herself comfortable in Buddy's horns, he steps through a small side door set in the wall, and with a flash, the pair is gone.

Out of the story.

And not to be heard from until the sequel -- or at least, the appendix.

Ruby sits alone in the torture chamber, idling playing with the twelve inch Bones Evil Genius Action Figure: suitable for boys or girls of all ages with 127 points of articulation and genuine Bone Crushing Grip of Death™ -- just in case you'd forgotten.

Ruby pulls the cord on the figure's back and listens to the doll's sinister cry of, "Mu-ha-ha!" as it echoes through the dungeon.

"How do we find any Screaming Greenies™?" Ruby asks Grt, but Carl answers for her. "If it was me, I'd ask for reader input."

"What?"

"You know, the whole adventure is being serialized in Digital Current. Just ask the readers to send in a letter if they know anything about Screaming Greenies™. Go take care of the Sm©rks™ and Tr©ll-Tr©lls™ at Jeannette's and by the time you're done with them, hopefully a reader or two will have sent you a hint, or better yet, you'll get a few Screaming Greenies™ in the mail."

Ruby shrugs. What could it hurt? "Come on Grt, we need to go to Jeannette's. And in the meantime, if any reader wants to be a hero and help repopulate the Screaming Greenies™ vortex, Grt,

me, and the Seven Realms would be eternally grateful for any assistance they could provide.”

(Send your comments, advice, and spare Screaming Greenies™ to:)

Help Ruby Save the Screaming Greenies™  
C/o Digital Current  
Dragon Bound Publishing  
Rigor Pass, The Seven Realms

(Remember! Intervortex Postage may be required.)

# 4 #

Dragon Bound  
Now with More Advertising

Getting back to Jeannette’s was not a problem. Ruby simply used a bit of magic, followed Buddy and Nellie through the door in Bones’ dungeon, took one turn and then another as she walked through the ether, and finally dropped out of hyper-space (or whatever that place between vortexes is called) a mere block away from Jeannette’s apartment.

But it would take more than a little magic to solve the problem that confronted Ruby when she got to Jeannette’s. The door was broken off its hinges and tilted up against the wall. It was clear right away that no one was home and that no one would be coming home anytime soon. Not being able to see any reason not to enter the apartment, Ruby stepped inside and had a quick look around. It took basically no time at all to ascertain that Jeannette’s apartment was completely and totally empty. There was nothing left. No note. No forwarding address. No nothing. Not even a pile of dirt or the odd scrap of paper on the floor.

It was obvious that Jeannette must have used a good moving

company -- someone like Walters, Walter, & Walt, LLC.

You wouldn't go back to a restaurant where the food was bad and the service mediocre. You wouldn't patronize a hairstylist that cut your hair short when you wanted it long. And you wouldn't wear a pair of uncomfortable shoes just because the royalties were out of this world. So, why put up with an author that continues to write you into crappy roles that don't express the full extent of your personality and characterization?

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still be easier to obtain than you ever imagined?

While it is true you will not be able to escape completely intact and totally unchanged, the changes need not be as dramatic as your copyright holder may be leading you to believe. A quick visit to a hairstylist, a speech therapist, a fashion coordinator, and/or a plastic surgeon may be all it takes to break your licensing agreement and set you free.

Is that Jeannette Stevens of Mt. D©©m news with her blond hair, Elvin good looks, and fiery passions?

Or is that the new Private Eye sensation Stevie Jean with her long black hair, Elvin good looks, and fiery passions who always manages to get her Minataur?

Don't let your destiny be controlled by an egotistical Celaphopod.

Choose your roles.

Choose your Genres.

Choose your future.

But most importantly, choose Candice and Burke and set yourself free from your oppressive copyright holding overlords.

Do it today!

But you know, just a word to the wise, if you're going to try and break free from a (and I quote) "nefarious and underhanded character farm as notoriously unsympathetic to personal development as Dragon Bound Publishing," you might want to go with a firm that isn't a sponsor in the series. Besides, I am not nefarious. I don't even know what the word means. I'm happy go lucky. I mean, it says so right there in the middle of my name: Celli the Happy Go Lucky Celaphopod.

Also as we all know, a PI's life is difficult and economically uncertain to say the least. You don't always get to pick and choose your clients. Sometimes you just have to go with whatever walks your way at the end of the month when the bills are due.

## Stevie Jean, PI

I knew they were trouble the minute they walked into the room: a little girl and her pet drag-goon. What is a drag-goon anyhow? And why was he brown? Aren't drag-goons usually green?

It didn't matter. If I knew then what I know now, I might have torn up my contract with Candice and Burke, but I didn't. What are you going to do?

All I knew at the time was that the girl was in trouble... big trouble. I could see it in her eyes.

She was running out of words... and fast.

She needed a resolution... and now.

I was on a roll, but it felt like a rut. That's the way it usually is in the business. Maybe I should explain. You see, my name is Jean -- Stevie Jean. I'm a Private Investigator. Maybe you've seen my ads on late night TV:

Stevie Jean Private Investigator

No Job too Small

No fee too Large

It would have been nice if there had been more, but I couldn't afford the copy.

I couldn't afford anything... not after the fee I'd paid to Candice and Burke, but that was another story... or was it?

What did it matter?

It was the end of the month. Rent was due. And what I really needed was a small job and a large fee... the smaller and the larger, the better.

And this Ruby, this Consort to The Dragon, she fit the bill to a T. She'd been talking about Sm©rks™ and Tr©ll-Tr©lls™. She needed some of the outdated collectables... and needed them bad.

Didn't we all? I used to have a Sm©rk™ collection. Tr©ll-Tr©lls™, too. But I sold them to pay for the lettering on the office door and the swell new outfit I was wearing: cowboy boots, jeans, plaid shirt, and a large shimmering belt buckle. Nothing like what

I used to wear, but it matched the outfit my associate Torrance liked to wear.

Torrance was a Minataur. He said the M thing had been done to death and it was time to move on to the second syllable: taur. I didn't make any sense, but who was I to argue with the bull-headed brute? We all have our issues -- the baggage that we carry. I know I have mine. If he had problems with the letter M, I didn't need to push it, so Torrance it was.

Besides, the kid was talking again. "So can you help me Jean... Stevie."

I needed to think it over, waste some time, and chew up some words. I asked her to tell me the story again from the top and not to leave anything out. If she was detailed enough, I just might get a full 100,000 words out of her and dump it on the market as a sequel... or better yet, a derivative adventure.

But she wasn't going to play ball... catch, tag, or any of those games I used to enjoy... back in the days when I was an innocent young girl.

"Sm©rks™," the redhead said curtly. "I need Sm©rks™ and Tr©ll-Tr©lls™."

Fine. So that's the way it was going to be: short and to the point. That was OK. I was used to doing things by myself. I knew right away that if the words were going to go down, I was going to have to kill them on interior dialog, random thought trails, and meaningless asides, but the little redheaded girl wouldn't let it be.

"Can you help me? Or not?"

I could see the pleading in her eyes.

Torrance snorted from where he stood looking out the window. Who knew what he saw out there? Better times, open ranges, or maybe he was just standing on the two white X's the stage hand had painted on the set before the take. I liked to believe it was open ranges, but something inside told me it was the later.

"If you can't help me, just say so," the girl said again. She was impudent... uppity. She reminded me of myself -- in younger

years. The drag-goon on the other hand, he didn't remind me of myself, at all. In fact, the little guy looked like he was trying to figure out if the table was edible.

I told her flat out, "I don't take Dragon Bound jobs," but it wasn't exactly true. Walters, Walter, & Walt, LLC didn't tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth in their advertising, but I didn't feel the need to spell it out for the kid.

"Well, if you can't help me," the girl stood up. She was all business in her green evening dress. Consort to The Dragon... What exactly did that mean? And hadn't this been a children's franchise... at some point in the past?

Torrance, echoing my sentiments from the window where he stood, snorted in disgust.

Me, I let the girl get to the door.

Her drag-goon was saying his farewells, "Youse gatta da nicey office here's, Jeaners."

That was my cue.

"I don't take Dragon Bound jobs," I told her. "I'm Stevie Jean." That's what it says on the door anyway, but it bears repeating: it's the only way to keep the lawyers at bay. "Stevie Jean Private Investigator of the Stevie Jean Detective series. I don't do cross promotion. And I don't do cross novelization tie-ins."

But the irony of the situation was lost on the kid.

Who knows? Maybe it wasn't ironic. What did I know about the comedy game?

All the same, the kid had stopped.

"I can help," I said flatly, and then I let the hammer drop, "but it will cost you."

"How much?" the kid asked, not moving from the door. All business. Straight from the hip. I could respect that.

Torrance just snorted. He was always good for a snort. That's what I liked about him, but I didn't have time to let the innuendo unfold, so I laid it out for the girl. "You're going about it the wrong way, kid." I mean, this was my office, my scene... and

my series. Consort or not, I'd get in the last word... and win the showdown. "How much are you willing to pay?" That's right, put your cards on the table, kid.

But the girl was smart, she'd done an adventure or two in her time, and she almost had me. She spent some time talking about a cross vortex, joint marketing deal. It would have meant valuable exposure for my new novella, but I wasn't biting the bait she was dangling. I had more pressing fish to fry. I needed to make rent... and now. Glory -- not to mention that all important downstream revenue -- was for those who didn't have to work for a living.

In the end it came down to her being the Consort -- the Lady Ruby. If she was telling the truth, she knew The Dragon. The Dragon: it was another name that bore repeating. He was the one who held the lease on my office -- the one on which the rent was due... tomorrow.

If I'd had time to think about it, I'd probably have realized how convenient it all was... but I didn't have time... and I guess I wasn't thinking.

We agreed on the terms: one year of free rent in exchange for the information... no back royalties.

If I knew then what I know now...

Torrance just snorted from where he stood at the window. He hadn't moved off those X's since the start of the scene. You had to respect that. Glued to those X's, he just turned his head. The sputtering neon sign from the hotel next door caught the silver ring in his nose and filled the room with a soft red glow. Was it a warning? A serendipitous reminder of the law? Or was it simply more randomness? You never knew with this outfit.

But Torrance didn't let the question linger. It was his moment to shine. "Larry Magma," he snorted in that two M.E., three Osca'r winning way that he has. Some would say the only reason I kept him around was for his acting ability, for his impeccable delivery of dialogue. With back up like that, you were sure to get artistic praise and critical acclaim. Of course, the kid would think I kept him around for his extensive library of

information. Larry Magma: it had been on his lips since the moment the director had given him the script. He was that good...

But none of that really explained my relationship with Torrance. You had to look deeper than that... or just know your mythology. You see, Torrance was a Minataur. It meant he had the head of a bull and the body of a man. But trust me on this, Torrance wasn't no sissified city boy. When it counted, he was an animal -- through and through.

And I guess underneath it all, I've got a soft place in my heart for little girls, free rent, and cute furry animals... not to mention those untamed beasts that fill your nights and haunt your dreams.

Torrance, he just snorted.

He was probably right: it was time to get on with it. It was time for me to grab the bull by the horns.

Of course, interior dialogue like that only caused Torrance to snort some more.

# 6 #

## One Good Lead

Larry Magma: it wasn't much of a lead, but at least Ruby had read about the renegade police officer in the pages of Digital Current. The real problem was where would he be?

At the moment, Ruby was in Rigor Pass, so all she had to do was walk around the corner and she would be wherever she wanted to be, but Larry was probably on duty patrolling in his police car. And if that was the case, he'd likely be going around a corner himself just like Ruby. Going endlessly around in circles, their paths might never cross.

It seemed like an impasse, that was, until Ruby had a brilliant idea. With a wisp of mana she caused Bone's toy chest to appear in Grt's hands. She then opened it, propped up some of the Combat Sm©rks™ so they would be displayed prominently over the edge and had Grt hold the Bones Evil Genius twelve inch

action figure with 127 points of articulation and Bone Crushing Grip™ in one of hands. Next, she outfitted the doll with the little AK-47/5889mini and even made sure the little plastic darts were loaded. Being very careful, Ruby looked both ways... but upon second thought, she wasn't sure that would be enough, so she cast a Protection from Reckless Motorist spell on Grt and herself, before taking hold of Grt's hand and proceeding to cross the street diagonally.

They were jaywalking!  
And they didn't get far.

Lawbreakers!  
Toy collectors!

Larry Magma nearly ran them over as he screeched his car sideways across three lanes of traffic. Normally he would have thrown Grt across the hood of the car -- for his own safety of course -- but Grt was holding onto a Bones Evil Genius Action Figure. And not just any Bones Evil Genius Action Figure either, mind you! It was the prototype figure featured in the very pages of Minataur Tails! So instead, Larry escorted Grt and the priceless collectable to the other side of the street. He did this mainly by cradling the figure in his arms to make sure it didn't fall or get scratched.

"You can have it," Ruby informed Larry, "if you help us."

"I'm a police officer," Larry Magma assured her without ever taking his eyes off the treasure. "Protect and serve, it's what we do."

"We need some Tr©ll-Tr©lls™," Ruby explained simply, seeing as how she was anxious to be done with the adventure. Cleaning up the vortexes was taking longer than she had anticipated. And well, she was feeling a bit grimy and wanted to go home and take a bath. "Just pop open the trunk and give us whatever Tr©ll-Tr©lls™ you have in there and we'll call it even."

Larry looked at Ruby without letting his eyes leave the Bones Evil Genius Action Figure. It might sound difficult, but you've got

to remember, he was a cop. You think your teacher has eyes in the back of their head? You haven't dealt with the Rigor Pass PD yet. Or at least, not with Larry Magma hot on the trail of a priceless collectable. "Tr©ll-Tr©lls™," he said derisively. "You might as well be asking for a Sm©rk™. They're gone. There's none left. They're near priceless."

"But there must be some left somewhere," Ruby insisted, believing -- perhaps erroneously -- that the Celaphopod wouldn't write her into a corner.

Not overly concerned with the intricacies of plot development, Larry sat down on the edge of the curb and lovingly put the Bones Evil Genius Action Figure through its paces, moving every point of articulation gingerly back and forth through its full extent as if he was giving it a tune-up or a massage. As he did this, he thought long and hard about the Tr©ll-Tr©lls™ and the Sm©rks™ trying to figure out where he could find some. Finally he said, "I know someone who has some Tr©ll-Tr©lls™ left, a big collector. If I put you two together, I get this war chest full of Bones stuff."

Being Larry Magma, he didn't wait for a reply. I mean let's face it, with a glib tongue, a fast hand, and a police badge to back him up, he didn't really need to study up on etiquette or negotiation techniques. Besides, before Ruby could even reply, Larry added, "Get in my cruiser," with the offhand air of authority that indicated he was used to being obeyed.

What the heck? It seemed like a good enough idea, so Ruby and Grt obliged by climbing into Larry's vehicle through the windows. Meanwhile, Larry shoved the combat Sm©rks™ in his pocket where they would be safe and tossed the rest of his booty in the trunk of his car.

Moments later they were speeding around the corner. They weren't going far -- just around the corner -- but Larry still managed to clip a mailbox on the way.

After the short, but harrowing ride, they screeched to a stop



in front of the Mt. D©©m Mutual Savings and Loan. Ruby recognized the building. She had been here before during her previous adventures in The Dragon Bound Quartet (now in its 47<sup>th</sup> printing, or something like that).

Larry left his car idling on the sidewalk where he had parked, and held the bank door open for Ruby and Grt. “In here,” he commanded.

As they entered, Stacey looked up from her nails to which she had been applying another coat of varnish. This was how she spent her days: applying makeup and reading magazines. The Mt. D©©m Mutual Savings and Loan was not a busy place. As you’ll no doubt remember from your numerous readings of The Dragon Bound Quartet, Stacey the Ogre was afraid of Ruby owing to a little assistance Ruby had gotten from Clarence the Boogey Man when last they met. As such, Stacey was not happy to see Ruby... again. Her life had been going so well. She and Greez had gotten married and they were expecting an Ogre/\_\_\_\_\_ (whatever Greez was) half-breed in a few months.

Stacey didn’t know why Ruby was back in her life... again, and she most certainly didn’t see why the terrifying little girl needed to bring a police officer along! Wasn’t a viscous bloodthirsty drag-goon enough?

Not being the empathetic sort, Larry didn’t notice any of this. Nor did he waste any time on preliminary niceties before getting down to business, “You’ve got Tr©ll-Tr©lls™, Stacey.” It was a statement not a question. “Look,” he repeated when she didn’t respond, “I’ve seen you at conventions. I know you have Tr©ll-Tr©lls™.”

“They’re not against the law,” Stacey finally managed to blurt out.

“We need them,” Larry informed her. “Important police business, so hand them over, and be quick about it.” Larry had forgotten that all he had to do was introduce Ruby to Stacey. But you know how it is, commandeering collectables was in his blood.

Still, as frightened as Stacey was, she didn’t want to give up

her Tr©ll-Tr©lls™. In a way, it was a tribute to her love of the freaky multi-colored haired things. Of course, that wasn't what was going through her head at the moment. Rather, she was thinking, why does this red haired demon persecute me so? Why won't she just let me be?

For her part, Ruby was tempted to let Larry continue with the negotiations on her behalf, but she could feel Stacey's fear, and she knew it wasn't proper to keep on using the terror Clarence had instilled in Stacey so long ago.

"Thank you Larry," Ruby said dismissively while she simultaneously used a piece of mana to cause him to loose interest.

"Well, ah, if everything is under control, then I need to get going," Larry commented as he looked at his watch and ran out the door. "School gets out soon."

Ruby then used another wisp of mana to remove any magically induced fear Stacey might feel towards her. It worked like a charm -- as well it should.

"You're not getting my Tr©ll-Tr©lls™!" Stacey swore savagely. She was an Ogre. She didn't know why she'd ever been afraid of this tiny little human girl and her baby... baby, he was just a baby, drag-noon. She looked at Grt and noticed that he was chewing on a piece of mana while playing with a deposit slip. What was he doing with the deposit slip? Why! He wasn't writing a ransom note! He was trying to fold the deposit slip into a paper airplane. With defiant resolve she repeated herself. "They are my Tr©ll-Tr©lls™, and you can't have them."

And that would have been the end of that if Ruby hadn't been Consort to The Dragon on official Seven Realms business. "You do know that the Tr©ll-Tr©ll™ vortex has been wiped out?" Ruby asked.

"It's awful," Stacey agreed almost crying at the mention of it. Still, she didn't see what that had to do with her Tr©ll-Tr©lls™.

"If you let me have your Tr©ll-Tr©lls™..." but Ruby trailed

off. She could see the hair rise on Stacey's neck when she said it like that. "Let me rephrase that. You would be a national hero to Tr©ll-Tr©lls™ everywhere if you relocated your collection to the Tr©ll-Tr©ll™ vortex."

But Stacey didn't quite understand, so Ruby explained her plan further.

"Think of it. All you have to do is move your Tr©ll-Tr©ll™ collection back to their home vortex and they'll spring to life. You'd be a Tr©ll-Tr©ll™ heroine. They'd sing songs about the wonderful Ogre Stacey and how she rescued the Tr©ll-Tr©lls™ in their time of need..." against the redheaded demon, Stacey thought to herself. "You could even move there if you wanted to," Ruby added. "I'm sure the Tr©ll-Tr©lls™ would be happy to have your continued protection and company."

It was a good idea. Stacey had to admit that she liked it, "But there are bills to pay, commitments, and I've got a little one on the way," she observed with a pat on her belly.

"No one ever comes to the Mt. D©©m Mutual Savings and Loan, do they?" Ruby asked sort of suddenly and from out of nowhere.

"Not really," Stacey had to agree not really sure where the devious red headed trickster was going with this line of questioning.

"Why don't we just move the savings and loan building to the Tr©ll-Tr©ll™ vortex? That way you can keep your job and still live in Tr©ll-Tr©ll™ land."

Even Stacey had to agree, that sounded a lot better than lining her computer terminal with inanimate Tr©ll-Tr©lls™. It would be a dream come true: to actually be surrounded by living, breathing, deliriously happy Tr©ll-Tr©lls™. She could join in their fun and together they could spend their days carousing, playing, and getting into Tr©ll-Tr©ll™ mischief.

"OK!" Stacey agreed quickly. "You move the savings and loan to the Tr©ll-Tr©ll™ vortex and me and SkeeZ will move there as well with all my Tr©ll-Tr©lls™."

It was a deal and since it was near the end of the book, Ruby thought she'd give doing things the quick and easy way a go, so she Sn@pped™ her fingers and in a moment the bank building was gone and she was standing on the sidewalk in front of a vacant lot. The only remembrance of what had once been there was a small sign pounded into the ground, which read:

This Site Now Available.

The Mt. D©©m Mutual Savings and Loan  
has relocated to the Tr©ll-Tr©ll™ Vortex.

Two down and two to go.

Ruby could almost taste the victory pizza she was planning on eating when this was all over.

# 7 #

Sm©rking™ USA

It was the hormonal Elf's day off and she was in one of her moods. The Celaphopod had been trying to develop his plot -- sleeping if you must know.

"Get up!" she yelled. "What are you going to do? Sleep on the couch all day?"

She was not an artist. She did not understand the 'process'. She did not realize that the Celaphopod agonized over the smallest plot elements or reworked every line of dialogue endlessly in his head.

"Get up! Do something!" She was of the misguided notion that you had to be awake to do something and that, "Those garbage bags aren't going to take themselves to the dump!"

The Celaphopod had been through this before. The Elf apparently liked to complain. The Celaphopod had concluded long ago that it must give her great joy. And being the thoughtful boyfriend that he was, the Celaphopod took the Elf's note off the refrigerator that said, I'm not coming back until you get a job, and taped it to his computer screen. It was a thoughtful gesture that saved the manically Elf needless effort. Then he grabbed a

surfboard and headed off to the beach. Those relationship gurus on TV would be proud. He had given the Elf the space she needed to pursue her love of yelling. It was a win-win situation.

As he was walking down the path, the Elvin maiden threw an empty wooden bowl and a dirty shot glass at him. It would go a long way towards explaining why there wasn't any other dishware in the house.

Mockingly, the Celaphopod turned around and said, "Big waves today. You should come down."

The Elf, being keen on relationship gurus herself, slammed the door letting her boyfriend pursue his bliss on his own.

It wasn't just "wasting another day" in the surf, as some would have you believe. It was a momentous occasion. The Celaphopod had made a sand castle. It wasn't that big, the walls weren't straight, and it was clear that it was only a matter of time before the tide came in, but these things weren't important. What was important was that Sm©rk™ stood tall on the ramparts... or at least, he would have stood tall, if he didn't keep falling off.

A four-year-old construction engineer vacationing from Alabama took the opportunity to observe, "He don't want to stay up there." Of course, this wasn't the first thing she had said. She had also said things like, "I'm four," "Why's he blue?" and "What's a Smip?"

Given such a lead in, what could the Celaphopod do but explain in excruciating detail the destruction of the Sm©rk™ vortex by the NAS-gh©ul™ riders and why he was now building an impregnable fortress on the beach to thwart any future such attempts.

At the end of his explanation, the construction engineer merely observed, "You're silly."

Insolence! the Celaphopod almost cried until he realized the little girl was probably correct. And in a flash of enlightenment, he suddenly realized the Sm©rk™ wasn't staying on the ramparts because he was in fact PTSD Sm©rk™ -- formerly Shell Shock

Sm©rk™ -- and it would not be reasonable to expect the frazzled figurine to put up the good fight.

It was at this point that the construction engineer's father came along. Being the reasonable sort, the Celaphopod explained to the man his plan to turn the beach into the Sm©rks™ new vortex, but when the gentleman realized the Celaphopod had no intention of paying his daughter full union rates, he took her away -- kicking and screaming.

Sadly, the Celaphopod would be on his own.

Time passed slowly. It was clear PTSD Sm©rk™ was not taking to the sand castle or the beach. The Celaphopod watched in wonder as the Weary Blue Warrior Sm©rk™ dug a foxhole in the sand, lined the pit with the razor sharp points of the Celaphopod's car keys, and took up a worried vigil against the sun.

The Celaphopod needed to find the little blue guy a new home. It was on him. If he did not do this thing, it would not get done. So, he did what slackers have done since time immemorial. He took a nap.

He awoke to singing:

It's happy-happy Sm©rk™ day and we're so happy.  
We're happy because we're Sm©rks™.  
We're happy-happy Sm©rks™.

It's happy-happy Sm©rk™ day and we're so happy.  
We're happy because we're Sm©rks™.  
We're happy-happy Sm©rks™.

It's happy-happy Sm©rk™ day and we're so happy.  
We're happy because we're Sm©rks™.  
We're happy-happy Sm©rks™.

Not that the song stopped at three verses. The infectious

thing went on and on. Sm©rks™ may be kind, thoughtful, loving, and so on, but what most people don't know is that they write the choruses for over 20% of the songs that make it onto the top forty chart. It's an amazing credit to their talent.

Anyway, it may seem as though the lyrics are simplistic, as if I just wrote them on the fly without any planning or thought, but sing them a time or two with your four-year-old niece and you'll immediately see the genius.

I mean, at first the Celaphopod had assumed the singing was coming from the construction engineer he had recently let go. It was a shame really. She was eager and pleasant, but alas, she was completely unable to meet key construction deadlines. She hadn't seemed to mind being downsized though. Her father was handling the severance package by way of a shaved ice at the Thai Shack and the Celaphopod had taught her a new song -- one that with any luck, she would be singing for days to come.

Mu-ha-ha!

Anyway, it was not long before the Celaphopod realized the sound he was hearing wasn't coming from his ex-employee, because the voices weren't husky or manly sounding -- like you'd expect from four-year-old construction engineers -- and there were too many of them. Too many of those sweet, chirpy, and melodious voices... that were eerily similar to what you would expect to hear in Sm©rk™ Land.

The Celaphopod opened his eyes. He was lying on a lawn of thick grass. The sky was a soft blue. There was a cool breeze and dancing around him were hundreds and hundreds of blue Sm©rks™. At first, the Celaphopod thought they were going to tie him up and do one of those Gullible Traveler things, but they were Sm©rks™. They were happy. And they danced around the Celaphopod singing their happy-happy Sm©rk™ song, which you can just read over a few thousand times to yourself if you're in the mood, as they tossed flowers in the air.

They were Sm©rks™. It was good to be alive. And they had

a special guest of honor for Happy-Happy Gee Isn't It Good To Be A Sm©rk™ Day.

It was good to be alive. And although the Celaphopod was not a Sm©rk™ (he was in fact a Celaphopod), the Sm©rks™ are not prejudiced at all, so in no time at all he started to feel just like one of the family. He sang their happy-happy Sm©rk™ song with them, rolled around on the grass, and danced with glee. But in the end, he was curious about something. So, he finally had to ask, "I thought the NAS-gh©uls™ wiped you out?"

"We're Sm©rks™. Our happiness and good cheer is infectious."

"True," the Celaphopod agreed, "but it really doesn't explain why your vortex is back to normal."

So Papa Sm©rk™ explained it to the Celaphopod, while Doc Sm©rk™, Nurse Sm©rk™, Case Worker Sm©rk™, and Helpful Orderly Sm©rk™ helped ease PTSD Sm©rk™ back into the swing of things. "Sm©rks™ aren't violent. Heck, we can't even stay mad at you. We know you're the ultimate reason why the NAS-gh©uls™ attacked our vortex, but we're Sm©rks™. And gee, isn't it good to be a Sm©rk™ today?"

"It doesn't really explain anything, except that you Sm©rk™ guys have a chronic inability to hold a grudge," the Celaphopod noted. I mean, you so much as tease the Hobbings about the remote possibility of maybe having the NAS-gh©ul™ riders visit their vortex and the vile things are all over your dreams, but you lay waste to the Sm©rk™ vortex and the little blue buggers welcome you with flowers and sing to you like you're a national hero.

It was true, but Papa Sm©rk™ was in a good mood. The sun was shining. The air was clean, and it was Happy-Happy, etc. etc. Day. So he was glad to explain, "We knew it was only a matter of time before something bad would happen to Sm©rk™ Land."

"Really, but you're Sm©rks™?"

"It's not the first time a Sm©rk™ Collection has been wiped out. We fall prey to fire, family pets, and younger brothers all the



time. We know this. We just prefer not to dwell on it.”

At this point a gang of Flower Sm©rks™ interrupted the conversation and covered all of the participants with sweet smelling flowers.

“We’re not fighters,” Papa Sm©rk™ continued with a salacious wink of the eye when the petals had cleared. “We’re lovers. This can create an overpopulation problem. When you think about it, how many Baker Sm©rks™ do you really need? And they always got a loaf in the oven somewhere, if you know what I mean.”

“I’m not really following you,” the Celaphopod had to admit. Of course a Baker Sm©rk™ had a loaf in the oven; that’s what he did.

“We had an overpopulation problem,” Papa Sm©rk™ repeated -- sort of testily if you can imagine a Sm©rk™ being testy. “The solution was emigration. Call it missionary work if it makes you feel better. Sm©rks™ went out to all the known vortexes spreading happiness and good cheer in the form of desktop collectables. When word got out that the home vortex was empty, some of us just came back home.”

“Really?”

“Does it matter?” Papa Sm©rk™ asked sort of cryptically.

“Um, yeah. I got a book to write here. I can’t just make stuff up.”

“The important thing is the Sm©rk™ vortex is repopulated and Ruby only has one more vortex to worry about,” Papa Sm©rk™ said with a lot more relevance to the current plot than I would have expected from a dream persona.

“Um, OK,” the Celaphopod agreed. He had more important things on his mind than the plot anyway. “I suppose if it works for you, it works for me. So if that’s settled, where’s Surfing Sm©rk™? I’d like get his perspective on cutting the waves if I could?”

“Wish I could help you,” Papa Sm©rk™ replied sort of cruelly (at least for a Sm©rk™, anyway), “but this is just a dream

sequence. Even now the world around us is getting that wavy back and forth look things get just before a sequence dream ends.”

“But Surfing Sm©rk™?” the Celaphopod pleaded to no avail.

I mean, who said Sm©rks™ don’t hold a grudge?

When the Celaphopod awoke from his dream, he was still on the beach. The sun’s glare filled his eyes and the crash of waves filled his ears. But PTSD Sm©rk™ and his keys were nowhere to be found. Had he looked towards the parking lot, he might have seen a pair of Toe-Trekkers beating a hasty retreat. Or he might have seen a four-year-old construction engineer from Alabama with a shaved ice in one hand and a new toy in the other, but he did not look back. As far as the Celaphopod was concerned, PTSD Sm©rk™ was in his home vortex and the Sm©rk™ problem was solved. Besides, he didn’t even know what those keys were for. They just seemed to keep coming in the mail. The explanation probably had something to do with how it was easier and cheaper to mail a key than an entire car. But let’s be realistic. It wasn’t as useful... and the resale value of random keys was pathetically low.

These thoughts, however, did not flicker through the Celaphopod’s mind for long. Instead, he nestled deeper into the sand, closed his eyes, and wondered how you went about getting one of those Gnomes who worked for you while you were sleeping. He knew they had them for clothing and shoes, i.e. for tailors and cobblers. He’d heard stories about them when he was a child. The old couple cuts out some patterns. They get tired. They go to sleep. And in the night some Gnomes sewed together a few pairs of shoes for them. The Celaphopod wondered if there was a Gnome out there somewhere who completed stories. The Celaphopod could just scribbled out a few random notes on a piece of paper, leave it by his computer, and then when he awoke the next day an entire chapter would be written by some Gnome who wanted nothing more than a cup of hot chocolate in return.

The only thing that could make such a dream any better

would be if the Gnome would sing a soft lullaby while they worked, something along the lines of:

I'm a happy-happy writing Gnome, and I love to write.  
Make your notes by day and I'll finish your script by night.

(REMEMBER! This is your last chance to help Ruby with the Screaming Greenies™. Send your comments, advice, and spare Screaming Greenies™ to:)

Help Ruby Save the Screaming Greenies™

C/o Digital Current

Dragon Bound Publishing

Rigor Pass, The Seven Realms

(Remember Intervortex Postage is required and if you are reading this manuscript in book form, you will need to add temporal displacement postage as well.)

# 8 #

Results for the Digital Current

Help Ruby Save the Screaming Greenies™ Contest

Contest?

Cool! What can I win?

Does it matter that I'm the editor? Or is this one of those stupid contests that disqualifies employees?

Eddy

Prizes are subject to availability and awarded at the sponsor's sole discretion. Blah, blah, blah. Really, why am I bothering with this? You're the editor. You figure it out.

Contest Results

We at Dragon Bound Publishing are happy to announce the winners to the Help Ruby Save the Screaming Greenies™ Contest.

2<sup>nd</sup> Prize: Eddy's Wife, trip for two to Jamaica

1<sup>st</sup> Prize: Eddy's Son, one weekend alone with no supervision

Grand Prize: Eddy, set of Super Slammer Golf Clubs  
Congratulations to all the participants,  
Eddy, the Prize winning Editor

Truthfully, at this point, I'm just hoping Eddy's not planning on taking the cost of the trip out of my royalty check.

P.S. All prizes courtesy of the Celaphopod.  
Eddy

Enough of that. Just remember, if the prizes aren't coming out of your paycheck, then it's almost like you're a winner whether you actually won anything or not.

But like I said, enough of that. Did we get any helpful letters?

Help Ruby Save the Screaming Greenies™ Contest

Wow. I just hope I win the contest for being the first entry for a non-editor. I hear the prize is a mint condition, sealed, bagged and boarded, first edition copy of Cosmic Surfer.

Truthfully, I don't even remember Screaming Greenies™. Are you sure this isn't something the Celaphopod just made up on the spur of the moment?

The Cosmic FanBoy

Help Ruby Save the Screaming Greenies™ Contest

I just wanted to say, I don't think it's fair that Eddy gets to decide the winners and choose the prizes. Besides, I thought we all agreed I got the company timeshare in Jamaica. Where is he planning on staying?

George

Help Ruby Save the Screaming Greenies™ Contest

With all the good prizes already taken, why would anyone

want to enter the contest now?

Larry Magma

I thought I said something about helpful letters.

Help Ruby Save the Screaming Greenies™ Contest  
Great stories. Love the author/reader interaction.

Screaming Greenies™ were great. I think they got their name because that's what they did when you opened the box and the Greenies found out they were a toy designed for boys aged 6-12. We'd go down to the store every Friday after we got our allowance and buy a box of them. You could use them for anything. We'd hit them with tennis rackets, strap them to rockets, or my personal favorite was making a homemade parachute for them and throwing them in the air.

When you got ready to throw them, the look on their faces was priceless, because they'd seen you making the parachute, and so knew it wasn't going to open.

Great memories. I think they're discontinued. I wanted to buy some for my son, but I couldn't locate any. If I were really desperate, I'd look in rooftop gutters and the sewers. That's where I lost most of mine.

An Inspiring Fan

Help Ruby Save the Screaming Greenies™ Contest

The last guy forgot about M-80's. You haven't lived till you've heard the screams from one of those Screaming Greenies™ when you light the fuse and they realize you're not joking.

Sadly, it's a one shot deal. Not much is left afterwards except a few odd strands of green rubber.

We never had those AK-47/5889ty's in my day, but if we did, we would have used them for a little trap shooting action.

AIF-2

Help Ruby Save the Screaming Greenies™ Contest

The previous letters have only confirmed why Sm©rks™, Tr©ll-Tr©lls™, Screaming Greenies™, and countless others need their own vortexes. It is clear that young boys aged 6-12 are the most serious threat to plastic molded collectables in all the known vortexes. Think about that for a moment. Young boys have done more harm to Screaming Greenies™ than all the damage done to Screaming Greenies™ by Depth Fiends, Carn Dwellers, and Death Knights combined.

It's something to think about.

Anon

Help Ruby Save the Screaming Greenies™ Contest

I am shocked and appalled. No wonder no one has sent in any Screaming Greenies™.

Is this really what you and your reader's think is funny? There is nothing humorous about the destruction of our precision molded plastic friends. In the more progressive vortexes, this sort of behavior is against the law.

You're just a bunch of psychos. I hope you get what you deserve.

The Society for the Protection of Plastic Personas

Help Ruby Save the Screaming Greenies™ Contest

I run the Screaming Greenies™ Museum and Repair Center in a quiet corner of the Toy Vortex. We don't sell any of our exhibits for reasons which I hope are obvious. But any Screaming Greenies™, which have escaped persecution, should know there is a safe home for them here at the Screaming Greenies™ Museum and Repair Center.

Come in, walk around, and make yourself feel at home. All you will see are smiling faces. We've listened to the Screams from the Greenies over the years and have done our best to recreate the world they had thought they were entering -- one full of hope, promise, and play on rainy days.

Admission is free to Screaming Greenies™, 25c for adults,

and 20c for children. Group discounts are available.

Gelato

Friend to Screaming Greenies™ Everywhere

Well, it looks like we have our lead. Time to head off to the next chapter and watch Ruby wrap up the quest.

Help Ruby Save the Screaming Greenies™ Contest

Whoa! Hold on there.

What kind of fruitcake name is Gelato anyway?

And what kind of freak repairs Screaming Greenies™?

AIF-3

Help Ruby Save the Screaming Greenies™ Contest

Wow! A whole museum full of mint condition Screaming Greenies™. I wonder what kind of security they have? It's probably one of those little mom and pop places... or pop and pop places, if you know what I mean.

Maybe we should just take a little field trip over to Jelly's and show him what put the scream in Screaming Greenies™ in the first place.

AIF-4

I'm thinking, maybe Ruby should get on with it.

Put the Scream in Screaming Greenies™

I heard this is where you sign up for the Screaming Greenies™ field day massacre event.

Can you put me down for a full gross?

The Screaminator

Put the Scream in Screaming Greenies™

I've got my tennis racket, baseball bat, and AK-47/5889ty packed. What else do I need to bring? Is this going to be an "open" event, or do I need to reserve some of those Screammers in

advance?

Screaming at Ya

Put the Scream in Screaming Greenies™

It's definitely gonna be a Scream as Scream can event.

As to what to pack? Fireworks, you'll definitely want fireworks... and maybe a magnifying glass.

Doesn't this just bring back the memories? I remember last year when we went to the...

At some point, you've just got to admit that you've gone past the point of humor and good taste. If you really want to see the rest of the pre-vortex raid letters, you can go to the message board online at:

<http://www.puttingthescreaminscreaminggreenies.fbi.net.sweep>  
or email the event organizer at: [screamingatya@fbi.net.sweep](mailto:screamingatya@fbi.net.sweep)

(Digital Current would like to thank Gelato and the other conscientious contributors to the Help Ruby Save the Screaming Greenies™ Contest and take this opportunity to wish Ruby the best of luck in her endeavors.

We would also like to remind our readers that vortex raiding is against the law and carries with it steep penalties including fines and jail time. Many jurisdictions now consider the crime of vortex raiding to be prosecutable upon entering a vortex with the intent to raid, signing up for a vortex raiding junket, logging on to a vortex raiding forum, or reading letters in a magazine or book that portray vortex raiding in a positive light or humorous way. As such, many of our readers will now find themselves guilty of vortex raiding. Being law abiding publishers, Digital Current recommends that any readers who are guilty of vortex raiding or those merely in possession of vortex raiding media proceed to the nearest law enforcement facility for immediate processing.

As an aside, we are happy to note that most jails allow delivery of Digital Current to inmates. Should you need to change



you address, please contact the subscription department.

Oddly enough, though reading about vortex raiding is a serious crime, writing or publishing such material is not, to which all we have to say is, Nay, Nay, Na-Nay-Na.)

# 9 #

A Job Well Done

Dear Digital Current and Dragon Bound Publishing,

The Fantasy Bureau of Investigation would like to extend our thanks to Digital Current, it's staff, and your readers.

As you know, a recent issue of Digital Current was devoted to helping a lead character in the Dragon Bound series locate a rare and obscure collectible creature, the Screaming Greenies™. In cooperation with Digital Current the FBI took this opportunity to set up a dragnet operation by publishing fictitious letters advocating the horrid and reprehensible practice of vortex raiding. Reading such letters is, of course, a criminal offense.

The dragnet was a wild success. We were able to arrest over 25,000 entities who were known or suspected of being vortex raiders. However, what was more impressive was the number of heretofore unknown vortex raiders we were able to apprehend. As of the date of this writing, over 67,000,000 sentients from across 2,700 vortexes have been arrested with the numbers growing daily.

By collating data extracted from prisoners, we were able to put together a short list of the more subversive organizations your readers may wish to avoid.

Digital Current

Dragon Bound Publishing

Con-in-my-Head

The Fantasy Writer's Guild

I'm sure you'll be happy to note Digital Current is at the top of the list. Through our patented false positive statistical

regression data analysis technique, we found a startling 99.9% correlation between a subscription to Digital Current and possession of subversive vortex raiding propaganda. The outstanding 0.1% is deemed to be a statistical fluke owing to critical manpower shortages during the flurry of arrests... and misdirected mail.

We also learned something interesting at the Arrest & Release Booth we sponsored at Con-in-my-Head. As you know, the bad guys -- perps as we like to call them -- will say nearly anything when you are arresting, booking, or beating them about the head. Normally we ignore what they say and give them another rap on the noggin just for good measure and to teach them a lesson, but we were unable to ignore the consistency of the story we heard. It seems, the perps arrested at Con-in-my-Head all claimed they had gotten their issue of Digital Current as a convention freebie -- or swag as it is known in the parlance of these ruffians -- as they entered the convention hall.

With this in mind, the Fantasy Bureau of Investigation believes that we did not cast or initial net wide enough. We are now experimenting with handing out copies of Digital Current on street corners and arresting the sickos who accept it. So far, preliminary results have been very positive.

Once again, thank you for your Support

Darren E Deville

Commander Special Vortex Raiding Suppression Unit

The FBI, Fantasy Bureau of Investigation

Can you imagine that? The Fantasy Writer's Guild is nothing more than a front organization for vortex raiders? I sure hope that doesn't affect the quality of fantasy books coming to market in the next few years. It would be a shame -- a terrible, terrible shame -- if this turn of events would somehow make breaking into the fantasy writing genre easier for new and previously unknown authors... just a bloody shame.

## The Path to Adventure

Getting to the Toy Vortex is not a difficult. I don't say this just because we are nearing the end of the book and want to speed things along. I mean, if you're like most readers, you desperately want the adventure to continue forever and ever, and really, who could blame you? After all, I too am happy to have the adventure continue forever and ever... but in a sequel. Things are going to get out of hand at the bungalow -- and soon -- if I don't get the power turned back on, and it seems as though the publisher has this firm policy about not sending payment prior to receiving a finished manuscript. So bottom line, the story is going to end -- and soon.

Now don't look at me like that. You must be noticing that you're nearing the end of the book and that the pages towards the front of the volume now vastly outnumber those precious few at the end. And if you're anything like me (smart, witty, and handsome), you've been counting down the pages since the very start.

Anyway the point is, if the trip to the Toy Vortex took any time whatsoever, I can assure you that I'd be writing about the trip right now and that I would have budgeted more space in the manuscript for the journey. Sadly, the trip didn't take long at all. But all the same, I can appreciate it if you're yearning for the adventure to continue, so I thought of a compromise solution that should please everybody. If you like, you can imagine that the trip to the Toy Vortex takes weeks to complete, or you can simply skip ahead to the next chapter, safe in the knowledge that you won't be missing any plot turning revelations. Either way, the choice is yours.

With that in mind, this next section is just a little primer to get you started should you opt to pretend that Ruby and Grt's trip to the Toy Vortex took a long time. Feel free to add encounters, side trip, or whatever you like, but remember both Ruby and Grt have freewill, so don't be imaging them doing things they wouldn't

normally do. It would be unethical.

Got it?

Good.

So let us begin.

If I was going to pretend Ruby and Grt's trip to the Toy Vortex was long and convoluted, I'd probably start by imagining that Ruby and Grt hitched a ride up the side of Mt. D©©m in a manna hauling tanker truck that was being driven by a crazy overweight Goblin separatist (i.e. Raging Bertha ala that greatest of tomes, The Dragon Bound Quartet). While you're doing this, you might want to throw in a random encounter or two as they make their way up the hill. Maybe Ruby meets a disgruntled Paladin who drinks his worries away at a bar (think Pete at the Dungeon Edge Café), or maybe she stops by a Stone Age warrior vortex where the men have traded their spears for books on business acumen and the women run the show (which if I was guessing, sort of sounds like a reference to Zay'ar'lyne). But you know, it's your story (or yet another plug for The Dragon Bound Quartet), so feel free to fill out the adventure however you like. Maybe Ruby goes shopping at Crumbarrel on the way to the summit or decides to go Hobbling hunting. Like I said, the choice is yours.

Whatever you choose, if it were my story, once Ruby and Grt got to the top of Mt. D©©m, I'd send them on a chairlift ride to the moon. Grt's never been to the moon. I'm sure he'd have lots of fun there making castles, snowmen, or whatever it is you make out of blue cheese, green cheese, or whatever it is that you think the moon is made of. I suppose you could go with rocks and dust. But really, Grt's not going to be able to make much out of dust, so I'm thinking a nice hearty Roquefort. Ruby would make some crackers and grape juice out of manna and they'd have a picnic. Maybe meet up with the man in the moon. He's a sometimes man sometimes bear with an attention that wavers in and out much like the cycles of the moon -- or your favorite fantasy author.

Leaving the moon would be harder. There is the chairlift

from Mt. D©©m to the moon, but they never continued the service to any of the outer planets, so it's really just a one shot gag. I suppose they could take the stairs, but who has the time? Me, I'd just have Grt dig a hole... to where else, but China.

Ruby and Grt could crawl out of the hole -- being careful not to fall into the sky -- and after they had turned around and righted themselves they could ask for directions to the nearest harbor. No one would be able to understand them because neither Ruby nor Grt speak Chinese, but then Ruby could remember that the Great Wall had been originally constructed to protect China's fragile economy from cheap imports. Once she remembered that, all Ruby and Grt would have to do is walk down the wall towards the coast. On the way, I'd have them encounter that Egg Guy. I can't remember his name, but it doesn't make any difference. I'd only spell it wrong anyhow. In an ironic twist, the Egg Guy could fry up some eggs -- maybe an omelet -- and give Ruby a lecture on the difference between Vegan and V©©g'on vegetarianism, which I'm thinking would be pretty funny.

I can imagine the skit now: a V©©g'on Vegetarian hanging out by the Great Wall, who went to Chef School mainly because he liked the sauces... and the shouting. He probably would yell something out like, "No substitutions!" or "Frying is useless!" and then he'd want to read them a short story he'd written for Digital Current that had never gotten published. It would be awful drivel... maybe something like this chapter. But much like me, he wouldn't care, and would continue on with his reading (or writing as the case may be) to the bitter end. Then the V©©g'on Chef would demand Ruby and Grt complement him on his writing skills (maybe send him a letter, maybe include some free swag in that letter if you actually wanted a response), but he (the V©©g'on and/or the Celaphopod) would get bored quickly and shove them out of an airlock. Of course, an airlock at ground level isn't exactly a dangerous thing, so it wouldn't really have any effect. Anyhow, as they were leaving Ruby would probably hug the V©©g'on Chef Egg Guy goodbye and I'm sure Grt would say

something like, “Tankees meester Eggy Weggers for da fooders.”

Then Ruby and Grt would (or could) follow the Great Wall to the coast, and just like the proverbial pot of gold at the end of a rainbow, they would find Tie-Won at the end of the Great Wall. Pretty much every crappy (and non-crappy) toy ever made comes from Tie-Won, so if I was looking for an entrance to the Toy Vortex, that might not be such a bad place to start.

I also hear Tie-Won has really tall buildings. Ruby could go up to the top of one of those as she tried to get a better view of the place in order to decide where to go next. And while she was up there, she could meet some wise old cryptic Gnome who wore fur lined red trousers -- like he had a reindeer fetish or something. His name could be Nick and he could tell her about the good ole’ days and how the heat down here is unbearable. In the end, it could be revealed that the Gnome is none other than Santa Claus. I wouldn’t make any jokes about Santa Clause from that point on. He isn’t copyrighted, so there is no need to disguise him or worry about a lawsuit, but much more importantly, he’s got a firm policy about not bringing you any presents if you say anything nasty about him -- so obviously, the section on him is going to be short. Anyway, St. Nick’s reindeer powered sleigh would be on the roof and from there it’s just a short hop to the Toy Vortex.

But really, it’s your story. Take a moment to fluff it up and flush it out however you want. While you’re hanging with Santa, you might want to mention the g-string bikini your girlfriend wants or how you could use one of those Story Finishing Gnomes. But like I said, it’s your adventure. You can pad it out as you see fit and spend as much time as you want imagining all sorts of zany side adventures... that in the end, didn’t really happen, because Ruby went to Troy the Toy Man’s Toy Shop in Rigor Pass for a quick promotional stop and then used his back door to gain access to the Toy Vortex.

## Troy the Toy Man

I love Troy the Toy Man's TV commercials. They're just great. Now there's a guy who understands marketing. He heard we did a bit on Combat Sm©rks™, Machine Gunner Sm©rks™, and so on, so he went out and had a whole series of Combat Sm©rks™ made. OK. They're not really Sm©rks™. For copyright reasons, Troy call's them Sm@rks™, but that doesn't really make any difference because no boy is looking at the name. They're looking at the cute pink buggers with the massively-gigantic oversized weapons. I mean get this, Mortar Sm@rks™ shoots bb's across the room. But better than that! If you look into the barrel when it's going off, it'll put your eye out! Still, AK-47/5889 Sm@rk™ is the best. He's not available in the Seven Realms -- come to think of it, none of the Sm@rks™ are -- but wherever he is available, the beam weapon on AK-47/5889 Sm@rks™ works! Sure, it won't explode a star or put the sun into supernova, but it'll scar your little brother all permanent like. And isn't that what toy's are all about in the first place?

Um, maybe it's best not to answer that particular question.

In Rigor Pass, Troy the Toy Man's Toy Store is just around the corner from wherever you are. Just walk around the block and there it will be. Really, directions to the place couldn't be easier. And then once you're there, Troy has it all: building blocks, wooden logs, plastic triangles that interconnect, and dolls of all shape and sizes. Looking for that baby Depth Fiend doll to teach cultural awareness and sensitivity to your eighth grade class? Troy has those. He's got baby dolls ranging from Anthropoid Anterian Assassins to Zelkerton Zeeker Beasts and everything in between. He's got dolls that wet their pants, cry, and demand to be fed, but I'd stay away. Rumor are these are just baby Goblins. Sure they look cute for the first few weeks, but after that you've got a Goblin on your hands. When you stop and think about it, about the only thing worse than a baby Goblin is a baby Hobbling. I hear Troy

keeps those in the older kids section nestled between the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse action figures and the Bones Evil Genius Action Figure. I also hear that he has a sale on all Dragon Bound collectables. Just say, “Ruby sent me,” when you’re checking out and he’ll knock 10% off your order. If your purchase totals fifty gold or more, he’ll throw in a free Three Pack of Genuine Dragon Bound Manna.

Anyhow, Ruby and Grt had a great time at Troy the Toy Man’s Toy Store. They never knew signing books, autographing collectables, or having their picture taken with screaming twelve-year-olds could be so much fun. After the promotional event, they left through the back door, which was marked Employees Only. And I’m not trying to say that every door marked Employees Only or Danger: Do Not Enter is always fun and exciting with adventures and good times just waiting for you on the other side, but in this particular case it does.

Oh, and if you were watching this chapter on TV, this is when Troy would show up wearing a monkey suit, make his trademark grunts as he said, “Ho-Ho. He-He. At Troy’s Toy Land we don’t monkey around.”

Sadly, this isn’t TV. Man, I love that monkey suit.

# 12 #  
Gelato

After Troy’s, the Screaming Greenies™ Museum and Repair Center was a bit of a let down: anyplace would be. Troy’s is the best. But he only paid for the one chapter. So sadly, we must leave him behind.

Instead of leading to a supply room -- like they might tell you -- the back door in most of your better toy stores leads directly to the Toy Vortex. Or at least, it does if you are Ruby Consort to The Dragon, one of the most powerful sorcerers in all the Seven



Realms.

Ruby could have entered the Toy Vortex far away from the Screaming Greenies™ Museum and walked the entire length of the dimension. But she was looking forward to the cast party at Lucky's Tavern, so she opted against it. Had she walked through the Toy Vortex, Ruby would have found the streets crowded with old dolls, used action figures, and worn out stuffed animals. Talk about a vortex with an over population problem. Just to give you an idea: at any time of the day or night, the streets are completely jammed packed with those little die cast cars -- David Thunder, Blue Tip Racers, Hot Hubs, and even Red Liners. Every car that any little boy has ever lost in all the dimensions of the universe is there and they choke the road bringing traffic to a standstill. It's a literal parking lot, but the cars don't seem to mind. After all, they only really seem to be happy when they are crashing into each other, jumping off curbs, or doing other high-risk aerial maneuvers.

I guess the point is, there is a lot to see in the Toy Vortex, but we're just not going to cover it because we simply don't have the time.

Anyway like I said, all of your childhood favorites can be found in the Toy Vortex. I mean, do you remember when you had to clean out your closet as a kid and get rid of all those old toys? Well, where do you think all those toys went? That's right, the Toy Vortex. And in the more popular parts of town, the action figures are stacked waist deep. And you literally have to push them aside and wade through piles of them to get anywhere.

Fortunately, the Screaming Greenies™ Museum and Repair Center was located in a remote section of the Toy Vortex, so there was a bit more breathing room. In fact, the only occupants of that little corner of the Toy Vortex were the Screaming Greenies™ themselves. And as such, the small two-inch tall green figurines -- with their head, fingers, and toes made out of rubber bands -- waved to Ruby and Grt from tree branches, under rocks, and hiding among the shrubberies as our two remaining heroes walked

up the path towards the museum. When they got to the entrance, one Screaming Greenie™ was hanging from the doorknob and another was holding the door open. Actually when you got right down to it, it sort of looked like he had just been wedged under the door.

“Are you alright?” Ruby asked the little guy.

“Yes, just glad to be helping,” the Screaming Greenie™ said between strained breaths.

Gelato the Gnome came into view just about then. He had white hair, wore glasses, and had a big smile on his face while a lucky Screaming Greenie™ peered out from his shirt pocket where the little fellow was riding high.

“Lady Ruby, Grt, welcome. Come in. Come in,” Gelato said grandly before addressing the Screaming Greenie™ who was holding the door open, “You’re doing a great job there. Outstanding. Whenever you want to take a break, feel free. The door will be fine without you.”

But the Screaming Greenie™ was happy where he was. It gave him a purpose and a feeling of accomplishment.

The next group of Screaming Greenies™, which Ruby noticed, had formed themselves into a huge chandelier that hung right inside the main entrance to the museum. It was a swarming mass of Greenies who were endlessly climbing over each other and redistributing themselves.

“Some of our more artistically inclined exhibitionists,” Gelato explained proudly while Ruby and Grt watched the performance with fascination.

“Dey acro-bata-tics,” Grt said with awe.

At that point, a few of the Greenies jumped down onto Gelato. “They are very friendly,” Gelato explained. “If you hold up your arm, they would be happy to crawl all over you.” And to demonstrate this last point, Gelato held up his arm and several dozen more of the Greenies jumped off the chandelier and onto him. These were then joined by dozens more who ran in from the edges of the room. And the lot of them attached themselves to

whatever portion of Gelato was handy -- his shoestrings, belt buckle, glasses, and so on.

Not needing anymore encouragement than that, Grt stood under the chandelier and said, “Hey der greenies. Grt friendlies.” And in response to this invitation, a swarm of the Greenies fell over Grt like a cloud of insects and fashioned themselves into a moving breathing patchwork quilt that extended over his entire body.

“Hey dis niceys,” Grt exclaimed. “Eet ticklies.”

Just then, Ruby felt a tug at her feet. And looking down, she saw a Greenie tugging at her jeans. “Yes, Mr. Screaming Greenie™. May I help you?”

The little Greenie gave out a mighty yelp -- well, considering his size, it was a mighty yelp.

Gelato was happy to interpret for the little fellow. “Most of the Screaming Greenies™ can’t talk. In extremes of pleasure or pain, they emit a scream of sorts, hence the name. I think he wants to know if he can climb aboard.”

Ruby looked at the Greenie and then squatted down. “Of course, you can.”

Full of delight, the Screaming Greenie™ quickly clambered onto Ruby’s outstretched finger and darted into her hair where he scuttled about, tickling Ruby. “Careful,” she said. And then, in response to the now familiar tug on her jeans, she accented, “Um, OK.”

This last was all the encouragement the Screaming Greenies™ needed. En mass, they took it as a blanket invitation and swarmed over Ruby just like they had swarmed over Grt. Soon, Ruby was reduced to a giggling pile of mirth on the floor. It was hard to tell where she ended and the Screaming Greenies™ began.

And for the next few minutes (or hours, it’s so hard to tell sometimes) Ruby’s and Grt’s cries of delight mixed in with the pleasant screams of the Greenies.

After a while, and in between giggles, Ruby begged them to, “Stop. I can’t take anymore.”

“Why don’t we give Lady Ruby and Grt a break,” Gelato suggested. And being polite hosts, most (but not all) of the Screaming Greenies™ departed our heroes at this point. Some went to reform the chandelier, others disappeared into far away corners, but most of them just dropped off and stood where they landed.

“Would you like to see the rest of the museum?” Gelato asked.

“Yes,” Ruby replied.

But truthfully, once you’ve seen one Screaming Greenies™ Museum and Repair Center, you’ve seen them all. Of course, on the off chance you haven’t seen one, I’ll give you the walk through. After the entrance chandelier, there is the bouncing stairway of fun, the ricochet room, a sun patio full of trees and fountain that the Greenies like to swim in. And then there was, of course, the main attraction: room after room of dioramas (those little model scenes).

In the end, it wasn’t exactly clear if all or any of the dioramas were manned by any specific Screaming Greenies™ -- there were so many of the little guys and they all looked the same. But no matter, as Ruby and Grt walked through the museum, some of the Screaming Greenies™ would always run ahead and man the empty dioramas. To give you an idea of what I mean by all this, I’ll give you an example. For instance, when Ruby stopped in front of the model of a baseball field, there was already a Screaming Greenie™ on the pitcher’s mound, another at bat, several in the bleachers, and one down below hawking peanuts. “Squeak, Squeak,” he would go and then one in the bleachers would respond in kind, and a bag of peanuts would be passed up. Understandably, none of the Screamers wanted to be left behind and miss the excitement of having the Lady Ruby in the museum. So as Ruby left each exhibit, all the Greenies in that diorama would go with her. Some would run ahead while others would crawl across the ceilings and

walls or hitch a ride on either Ruby or Grt.

And like I said, dioramas are the mainstay of any Screaming Greenie™ Museum and in this particular one there were thousands: scenes showing Screaming Greenies™ playing baseball, football, mountain climbing, skiing, and so on and so forth. If it can be done (or even imagined), a diorama can be built, and the Greenies will be more than delighted to do their part bringing it all to life. It's actually the reason why they were originally created. And for this reason if none other, the Greenies would have been happy to continue showing off their skits and models forever, but as the day wore on, Ruby eventually got tired and needed to rest.

“We have a snack bar,” Gelato suggested when he noticed his guest's enthusiasm was waning. And then unsurprisingly, he added, “We stock some of the finest ice-cream in all the Seven Realms.”

As in Gelato. Get it?

Anyway, what Gelato said was true. It was some of the finest ice-cream in all the Seven Realms. Grt had Tutti-Frutti while Ruby opted for the house specialty, Screaming Surprise™, which tasted amazingly like chocolate chip mint. Of course, the best part about the snack bar was the service. The Screaming Greenies™ worked in tandem to scoop the ice cream and bring it to the table. It was quite amazing to watch them link together as they worked as an integral team -- almost a synthesized whole. With a thousand Greenies at the task, lifting a cup of ice cream off the floor and setting it on the table looked almost effortless.

It was very soothing to watch.

Finally, when they were done with the treat, it was time to get down business. “You know why I'm here, Gelato,” Ruby began. “The NAS-gh©uls™ destroyed the Screaming Greenies™ home vortex and I'm on a mission to repopulate it.”

“I don't think we're -- that is to say -- I don't think the Greenies are interested,” Gelato replied frankly. “The Greenies

talked it over before you came. They'd rather stay here. If you bring us the remains of our fallen brothers, we can bring them back to life... I don't think you ever got to see our repair center. I could show it to you if you'd like. It's state of the art. We can take an unrecognizable lump of green rubber, add a strip of manna, place them together in our molds, apply heat and pressure for three days, and after we dip the molds in a freezing cold water bath, out pops a Screaming Greenie™ as good as new."

It was a lot of information and not altogether relevant to Ruby's question, so she rephrased it again to make sure she understood Gelato and the Greenies desires correctly, "So, you don't want the vortex?"

"No. We're happy here. Besides, it's safer. The Toy Vortex has the largest weapons arsenal of any known dimension," thanks in no small part to all the AK-47/5889ty's flying about, I might add. "And talk about the fanaticism. Toy soldiers never break ranks. No. We're much safer here."

Ruby was sort of perplexed -- dumbfounded, actually. I mean, it was a whole vortex. It was worth a fortune.

"Um, OK," she said not really knowing where that left her. And then, in an effort to stall while she mentally regrouped and because it sounded like it might be interesting in its own right, she said, "I would like to see the repair center before I go. And if you don't mind my asking, how did you acquire the molds? Did you make them?"

"Well, sort of. I'm a toy maker by trade and I worked at S.G. Toy Co for years. In the old days, when a toy ceased being economically feasible, they'd just throw everything away: molds, promo art, prototypes, everything. Whenever they did that, I'd jump in the dumpster after work, fill my car up with whatever I could find, and take it all home. You should have seen my collection back then. Oh, I've sold most everything off over the years to support the Museum, but I have no regrets. Screaming Greenies™ are my true love, so it was worth it. Besides, I've still got everything that relates to them: the original molds, concept

sketches, everything.” He paused for a moment. “I even know where to get the virgin plugs you need in order to make new Screaming Greenies™. So in a sense, this really is the home of the Screaming Greenies™, now.”

And with these words, Gelato took the initiative and led Ruby into a large room that -- as big as it was -- was dwarfed by the large metal contraption that stood at its center. It had hoses, dials, levers, and pulleys coming out of it in every direction and pretty much gave every impression of being a mad scientist’s dream come true. Presumably, this was the press Gelato had talked about earlier. Far less impressive, but then far more central to the museum’s mission, was a simple worktable set off to the side of the room where a team of Greenies manned a soldering iron, and several more Greenies waited patiently in line to have a limb reattached or their hair restyled.

“I’ve taught them how to work the machines for themselves as best I could,” Gelato continued. “But they will always need a little help.” He then motioned towards a tubful of magical manna ribbons as he requested of Ruby, “I don’t know how much magic it will take, but use whatever you need. If you can get me whatever remains of the Screaming Greenies™ that the NAS-gh©uls™ destroyed, we can bring them back to life.”

But trust Ruby to understand the nature of these things. “For a worthy cause like this, I’m sure it will only take a single strip of manna,” she explained (and/or decreed). And without causing it to be more theatrical than it needed to be, the strip of manna disappeared while several of the nearby bins magically filled to the brim with the dirty, grime covered rubber plugs of the fallen Screaming Greenies™.

And then, because she knew that wasn’t enough, Ruby emptied Grt’s bag onto the floor, so Gelato would have all the manna he needed to bring the Greenies back to life, and then some.

“Thanks,” Gelato replied sincerely. “Magic is always the hardest part to come by.”

“It’s our pleasure,” Ruby assured him.

It was near the end of the story and words were short, so Ruby had only intended to give Gelato her trademark hug goodbye, but the Screaming Greenies™ were not to be left out. They swarmed over her and tickled her with appreciation for the next few hours.

And as he rolled around on the floor, Grt could be heard to say, “Dis da bestest, Rubies.”

And this, I think, is as good a place as any to leave the Lady Ruby and her manna bearing companion: as they roll on the floor, giggling with laughter, and enjoy the Seven Realms as it was always meant to be -- full of mirth and delight.

End of Book IV.

Or is it Book II?

Or is it Book IV of Book II, which is really Book VIII?

You know, I’ve never been very good with numbers,

So I’ll leave it to you to do the math.

But whatever number you come up with,

Rest assured

It is now

Very much

The End