

ONE HUNDRED MILLION BULLETS

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CHAPTER ONE

THIRTY YEARS AGO

"Here it is!" said the head explorer. "Civilization's final frontier, and we're discovering it right now!"

They were walking through the planet (as it was then considered) Pluto's "Secret Jungle." It was secret because no-one ever thought to look there, located between several farms and one textile factory.

"Well, there we go: the whole Solar System's been explored. I think that means our career ends now," said his partner.

"It's been fun. But at least there are five mountains named after us, so I'm satisfied."

"Yeah— hey, what's this piece of paper doing here?" He picked it up off the ground.

"If I were you I'd forget about it. Early Plutonian paper is already well-documented enough."

"Hey, it's a map!"

"I think it's a joke. I've never heard of any of these places. 'Jrug Land,' what's that supposed to be?"

"The paper looks about thirty years old. We can sell it as an antique."

"Fine. We'll put it in the storage unit when we get back."

That was the same storage unit where they kept all their historical Plutonian artifacts.

FORTY-NINE YEARS LATER

It was twenty years after the second Lemon-Jrug war, and Pluto was the Solar System's last leftover of the before-Lemon-Jrug colonization effort, and had a whole backwater civilization of its own.

And Smithy was easily counted among Bakerston, Pluto's, top ten blacksmiths, and owned a storefront on First Street that bewitchingly advertised itself as "Smithy's Premium Smithy." He preferred that name to Bartholomew, which he thought had two too many syllables, and had it changed at the Bakerston First and Last Name Office before he started his business.

How happy he was, one overcast day, to read on the Town Hall Bulletin that there was an estate sale for unit twenty-two going on at the nearest Ye Olde Storage Center that same day, because the former renters had stopped paying.

When he got there, he saw the door to the unit oddly closed, with a sign over it saying, "YOU NEVER KNOW WHAT YOU'RE GONNA GET!"

"Unit twenty-two going once, going twice--"

"Twenty doubloons," said a little man.

"Going once for twenty doubloons--"

"Thirty doubloons!" said Smithy.

"Going one--"

"Forty doubloons."

"Fifty doubloons!"

"Fool."

"Unit twenty-two going once for fifty doubloons, going twice, going thrice... SOLD!"

"Yeah! So what's inside?" asked Smithy as he handed the cash over.

"Have a look yourself," answered the owner. "Probably just some old junk. Well, see ya around." And he tossed Smithy the key.

Smithy unlocked the door, and found a bunch of old junk lying around, like seventy-year-old lawn-chairs, T.V. Guides for the year 2887, several stones, a hammer, and a yellowed scroll; all of what the explorers had found of the yesterly Plutoish civilization.

"I've been scammed! Shit! All of this stuff is crap! What am I gonna do with it?" Walking around, he stepped on the scroll. "What the hell is this?"

A MAP OF THE TWO PRINCIPAL NATIONS OF MARS, NAMELY JRUG LAND AND LEMON LAND

"Is this real? I've never heard of any of this... 'Joesville,' come on, 'Upper Class Ville,' what in tarnation? Maybe I should take this to the nearby cartographer. He'll

know if this is real or not."

"Let's put her in the Scanotron 5000 and see what we get!" said Bill the cartographer. He unrolled the scroll, inserted it into a slot in the machine, and pressed SCAN. "Hold on, she's gonna print out a report on the map."

"Sounds good."

"Ah, here we go! Yes, it's a real map. As real as it gets. Make no mistake about it. And, like you can see here, it's a map of Mars, the planet. But what all this Jrug bullcrap is, I have no clue. Probably just some worthless junk. Anyway, that's it. Have a good day, and see you next time!" He threw the rolled-up map back at Smithy.

"Thanks."

While Smithy was on his way home, thinking about whether he should hang the map up on his wall or not, he spotted a strange-looking man in a brownish-green suit planting a flag he'd never seen before atop a mound off the side of the road.

"Hey, what are you doing there?" shouted Smithy.

"Colonizing your asses."

"Oh yeah, have you an army?"

"I'm part of the army."

"What army?"

"The army that's colonizing you."

"Hey, now we're just talking in circles! What country are you from?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Or else?"

"If you keep asking me these questions, I'll have your head on the top of the 'execute' list, so how about you shut your mouth?"

"Whatever. I don't actually believe you."

"Doesn't bother me."

While Smithy was walking home, he watched another likewise-clad guard approach him, holding a club.

"Your country is now under our control. Please stand behind that line I drew," pointing to the line dividing the town in half, on the other side of which was

Smithy's house.

"Why the hell should I? Screw you. I don't believe this whole 'colonization' thing you and your buddy were telling me about."

"According to the Colonization Handbook, 'disobedience should be met with beating, or better yet, killing.' Alright, son, your ass is grass." And the guard struck Smithy in the side with his club. Smithy began to run away, and so the guard drew out a sword and followed him. "Get back here! Now you're dead!"

Smithy fled down the street and into a nearby alley, thinking that it had an outlet, but instead he ended up cornered, the guard readying himself to strike with his sword.

BANG— the guard fell dead onto the ground, and another, higher-ranked guard came into the alleyway toward Smithy.

"He wasn't following protocol. He never does. We're supposed to slay the rogues AFTER we overthrow the seat of government, not before! Now you run along quickly, before I have to beat you too. And yes, you can cross that line now."

"Wait, wait!" Smithy yelled, thinking he might have a chance of being saved from death altogether. "I'm one of you guys! Take a look at this." And he drew out the map of Mars.

"Hmmm... Very interesting," said the guard. "Well, there's no way any dweller of Pluto could find such a map as this one, or know anything at all about the Martian countries. So, I'm very sorry for your mistreatment, and I bid you come with me back to the office."

Smithy followed, playing along.

"The office" was a little shed reared by the far Eastern edge of town, near the fleet of military spaceships. The guard led Smithy inside.

"Who's this?" shouted the man inside sitting at the desk.

"This is Officer Smithy. He was almost shot by Officer Ownstone, so I had to shoot Ownstone first. Sad."

"Always gettin' into trouble."

"Yeah."

"So, Smithy, how'd you like to be a new lieutenant in the army?"

"I think I'll pass."

"Well, we are really getting low on lieutenants, so I'm afraid you, a handsome-

looking young man, are qualified enough. Here're your draft papers. Fill them out – here's a pen – and we'll take you to the training station."

"Hold on, I kind of don't want to be a lieutenant!"

"Hmmm... Well... No, too bad."

"Fine."

Smithy filled out the papers and signed all the foreboding clauses, and the man at the desk gave him his new training uniform and had the other officer drive him to a borough of town that had already been conquered and flew the same flag he had seen earlier.

"We've had this area conquered for the last month already, so the citizens are used to our rule. Now we're working on subduing Sector 3," said the officer.

Smithy had apparently not been to that part of town lately, because he didn't know about this at all.

"Smithy, you'll be on patrol duty in Quadrant B, that is the northeastern corner, for a week, until you can prove yourself worthy of lieutenantship. Sound good?"

"No. What if I'm not worthy by the end of the week?"

"Then you'll be downgraded to a private and sent off to fight on the frontlines on Welkin. You'd probably die."

Smithy didn't know what Welkin was, but he knew he didn't want to fight on the frontlines.

"Okay, sir, I will prove myself as worthy as it gets. The worthiest trainee on Pluto."

"That's the spirit! The Martian spirit!"

The officer gave Smithy a club and pocket knife and let him off near John's Bowleria.

"Good luck!" and he drove off.

Smithy didn't like the idea of policing his own brethren, but he knew he would treat them better than the new colonizers did, and would be lax in keeping the rules.

He strode around the area awhile, waving at the elderly and nodding at the passing youths, one of whom threw a stone at his face. But, so he reckoned, he would do too if he were a kid crossing a patrol officer of the assholes that just colonized his town.

Many of the storefronts were newly closed or forsaken or boarded up, or their glass was broken by looters, and everything was generally in poor condition.

"Screw these colonizer assholes," said Smithy aloud, seeing the forlorn cityscape before him.

"Screw you! You're one of them," shouted back a bum on the street.

"I can't argue with that."

As he was passing northward through the suburban district for a moment, he heard a high-pitched shout come from one of the nearby houses. The front-door was open. Smithy ran toward it and went inside, to see a middle-aged man lying on the floor crying.

"What's the matter?" asked Smithy.

"Someone held a gun to me and stole my fan. It was electric. It can get hot in the Summer! And he held a gun to my head!"

"What kind of fan was it?"

"An Aerosource 2000."

"What did the man look like?"

"Like a man with a gun holster carrying a fan."

"Which way did he go?"

"All I could see were my tears!"

"There, there, man. I'll get your fan back. Or at worst, give you a new one. When did this happen?"

"One minute ago."

"Shit! Alright, I'll be back!" And Smithy left the house and noted its address (1416 Pluto Estates Lane).

"If I were a fan-thief, which way would I go?" he thought to himself.

"Probably North!" And he started running that way.

A block later he reached Seventh Street, another forsaken row of storefronts, and the only people in sight were tramps, none having any fans.

"Alright," he thought. "I'll have to make an ad."

Smithy went to the nearest Colonial Government Office, and took a stack of papers and a pen.

"WE BUY AEROSOURCE 2000 FANS!! \$200, EASY CASH IN HARD

TIMES!" And Smithy began stapling the signs up in the area of town where the robbery occurred, on doors, windows, walls, lamp-posts, and even handing them out to passersby.

As he was doing so, he saw a man in an alleyway sitting with an Aerosource 2000 fan and a dagger next to him. Handing him a flyer, he said "Sir, Officer Smithy here. What are you doing with that electric fan?"

The man started sweating. "Oh, nothing, officer. In fact, I don't even have an Aerosource 2000 fan, and if I did, I would have gotten it lawfully. For example, I would have borrowed it from someone, by asking nicely."

"I see. Then explain why that fan is sitting there."

"Oh, THIS fan? I think it's been planted on me! This is a rigged trial! Take me to court! I need a lawyer!"

"You're under arrest for suspected robbery and suspicious denial thereof, and will be taken to 1416 Pluto Estates Lane to give a reckoning."

"Shit."

When Smithy reached the house, dragging the handcuffed, fan-bearing thug with him, the fan-owner ran out and hugged the fan.

"I thought I might never see you again! Thank you, officer!" And the man punched the criminal right in the jaw.

"That's enough, kid. I'll take care of him."

"Okay, take care!"

"Fuck you," said the criminal, and Smithy punched him in the jaw too.

"I hereby find Mr. Theedwise Shleisswig guilty of knifed robbery, and of profanity," said the colonial judge. "Take 'im away, boys." And he was taken away to the slammer.

"You did very good on your first day, Smithy!" congratulated the head officer. "Facing crime head-on wherever it may lie."

"Thank you."

"If you keep this up the rest of the week, we'll be FORCED to give you a lieutenantship!"

"Thank you."

"Now go on, and keep patrolling the city."

"Yes, sir!"

The next day, as Smithy was patrolling the "Woodside Beat" as it was called to make it sound better than it actually was (it was just a strip of road near the western edge of town by the woods), he found a man angrily striking a tree branch with his fist and yelling curse words at it over and over again.

"What's the problem here, sir?" asked Smithy.

"Fuckin' leaves, that's what's the problem."

"What about them? They didn't hurt anybody, did they?"

"Leaves killed my grandma!"

"How did they do that?"

"She was walking in the woods, but the fucking leaves hid the fact from her that a bear was coming to EAT HER, and so when—"

"Alright, that's enough. Look, by order of the law you'll have to settle down; this is what we call a 'public disturbance.'"

"How about I disturb your face!"

"I'd rather not."

The madman slapped Smithy in the face with his palm, and went on beating the leaves.

"That's it! You're under arrest for public profanity and for battery of law enforcement."

But before he could put the handcuffs on him, the man got away and started running in circles and otherwise unpredictable patterns, slowly making his way toward his house, where he shut the door and locked it.

You would think Smithy, with his pocket-knife and club, could easily catch a man running in circles like that, but you would be wrong. It turns out that if you run around in so unpredictably-sized circles and at such frantic and mad angles, it's very hard for a normal person to catch you.

"Alright, fool," said Smithy, out of breath from all the running and failed tackling. "You're coming out of there."

"Give me three reasons why!"

"Umm, let's see... One, it's the law. Two, the punishment will be worse if you don't. And three, because I said so!"

"That last one's not a valid reason."

"Okay, then because I'm gonna break down this door anyway."

"Alright. Well, then do it! Hahahahaha!"

For about ten minutes Smithy tried to break down the door, but the madman had moved all of his furniture to block it, so it, in effect, weighed a few hundred pounds. So then Smithy tried the window, which broke open on the first try.

"Caught you!" yelled Smithy.

"I think not!" And the man leapt out through another window.

Smithy jumped through a third window and resumed chase, until they ended up by the woods again.

"Goshdammit, I lost him! I'll just have to stake out his house until he get back."

Smithy took a tree branch with him, with many leaves on it, and went back to the man's house, waiting outside in the yard.

Sure enough, just as Smithy was beginning to fall asleep, he spotted the man making a run for the fourth window.

"Get back here!" shouted Smithy, and he launched the tree branch in his way.

"Ah! AH! AH! Get that thing away from me!"

Smithy ran back to the branch and pinned the madman against the wooden fence, wielding the branch in his hand.

"Whatever you do, don't hold that thing near me! I swear I'll behave!"

"Alright then." And Smithy dropped the branch.

"Die! Die!" shrieked the man, lunging at Smithy with his fist, and Smithy picked the branch up again and warded the madman off.

"Okay, okay, you got me! I surrender!"

"Okay, I'll put it down now."

"Fool! Die! Die!"

Smithy picked up the branch again.

"If only you drop the branch, I'll even arrest myself!"

"Really, that would sure help." Okay, and Smithy tossed the branch away.

"Hahaha! I'm killing you now!"

"Shit!" And Smithy ran back to the branch and slapped the madman on the cheek with it.

"Ow!"

"You're a liar!"

The man recoiled in fear from the leaves, but eventually was knocked unconscious, and handcuffs were slapped on his wrists.

"And there we go. I did it. Man, that was the hardest case of my career." And Smithy had the madman thrown in jail.

Over the next five days, Smithy made eleven arrests and broke into six houses, proudly returning to the colonial office on the eighth day.

"Smithy, are you ready to get promoted?!"

"I sure am!"

"Here you go, here's your new lieutenant badge, and your new, slightly bluer lieutenant uniform. And I think you're good to go. A ship will be here in a few minutes to take you to the Welkin War Room, which is located on Welkin."

"Sounds good to me. Wait, I won't have to do any fighting, right?"

"No, of course not! See you later, Lieutenant Smithy!"

"Yes, sir!"

"No, now you're my 'sir.'"

"Ah, very well. And goodbye."

After the ship landed, which happened to be on top of Smithy, and the captain apologized and tried to straighten things out, Smithy got on board and the ship took off for Welkin.

Welkin was the biggest planet in the nearest Solar System to ours, Proximus Shitholi, and bore the empire of the same name, which at that time was at war with the Lemon and Jrug republics. Fortunately, for the last nineteen years they had been in alliance, in order to get rid of any leftover bad blood between them from the Second Lemon-Jrug War; so they were in a good position to take on their common foe together. Sadly, this meant that Phinnary Hecklesburg was forced into exile from both empires, because suddenly Jrugland, which formerly harbored him, was a friend of the Lemon King, and everyone knows what Phinnary did to the former king last time that made him so famous. Thus no-one knew where he was, including his best friend and governor-in-his stead Yatrid Jogan. But this story isn't about them yet.

It turned out that the ship was just a regular passenger saucer, but all the seats except for one were stocked with army personnel, such as officers, sergeants, nurses,

the big band and dance company, and the military accountant.

"This is your captain speaking. Our flight will last about two weeks and seven hours, and our destination is Hobbergobberdy City, Welkin. Make sure to keep your seatbelts fastened while the indicator is on."

Each seat was equipped with its own screen, headphones, and selection of Lemonlandish (Smithy finally learnt) films to watch, like Spickham 3: The Return of Spickham 2; Jrug Wars I and II; and The Barbara Film.

But what really excited Smithy were the unheard-of Martian delicacies, like Proxinian Forboloi (which was just frozen cubes of spice-water) and the selection of ten different kinds of "chips," which he didn't know the meaning of until then.

And at times the passengers were even let to wander about the Sightseeing Deck, where they enjoyed the awesome sights as the asteroids and battlesaucers went by.

The breakfasts were also luxurious: steak and eggs with buttered toast and a glass of patriotic Lemon juice. Lieutenant Smithy had never eaten such delights before, and now was thrilled to be lieutenant, seeing as he'd be saved from all the death and war of his fellows.

And after two weeks and seven hours of living in such luxury, and tasting the bliss that noble lying can bring a man, the ship reached the Hobbergobberdy Martian-side landing strip, and Smithy was led to a makeshift building built near the Martian barracks with a sign saying "War Room Inside."

"Hello, everybody," said Smithy. "I'm your newest lieutenant, Lieutenant Smithy, and I will be helping you win this war against the Welkin folk or whatever."

Everybody cheered.

"So look," explained the head of the war board. "We have five hundred thousand soldiers, whereas the enemy has a million. That means, as you could probably figure out, each of our soldiers will need to kill two of theirs. Got that?"

"Sure."

"But what we're going to do is invade their so-called 'Top-Secret Military Base,' which advertises that on a billboard out front, and steal their plans. That way, as you also probably could have figured out yourself, we'll know what their every move will be, on a broad scale. Got that?"

"I think."

"Good. And you, our greatest and bravest lieutenant, shall be the foreman of the aforesaid base invasion."

Someone had given Smithy a mug of coffee when the meeting started, and now, hearing this, he spat out his sip into the board-head's face.

"Lieutenant Smithy, do you understand?"

"Oh. No, you can't take me alive or dead into the military base! Let me be a footsoldier! Let me—"

"If you would have actually read the contract for becoming a lieutenant, you would have seen the clause, 'You hereby agree to enter any military bases, whether at the back or front of a troop, at any time when so commanded.' This is what you get for being careless."

"Shit."

"Lieutenant Smithy! This is no time for profanity. Now, we're set to enter the base in one hour. Got that?"

Smithy spilled the rest of his coffee on his uniform, burning himself.

"Smithy, this is war business, not funny business."

The whole room burst out in laughter at his funny remark, except Smithy.

One hour later, Smithy being dragged by his feet into the base past the bewildered guards, was forced to stand up and draw the gun they gave him.

"Let me go!" he shouted.

"For the last time, that's not gonna work, pal."

"I thought it would."

"Look out!"

Behind Smithy's back, a soldier of the Welkinish army was charging toward Smithy with his sword in hand, and so Smithy fired the gun at him, killing him. The troop went onward through the building, setting fire to this and that, and killing everyone in sight, sometimes even their own men ("Oops!"), and they all agreed to spread out and "divide and conquer." So Smithy uneasily ran through the hallways, shooting at unsuspecting men or women, and at last got to a room whose door read, "WAR ROOM."

"I know, I'll hide in here!" he thought. "No-one but a fool would stay in the

war room during a raid."

But no sooner had he opened the door than a knife flew at him. He dodged, shooting at everyone in the room until they, too, were dead.

"Yay! I did something important! Now the Lemon people will really respect me!"

In the middle of the table inside the room, somehow unscathed, was an everyday-sized sheet of worn paper with what said "PLANS FOR ATTACK: INVASION OF URANUS" on the top.

"Woah..." whispered Smithy, beginning to cackle quietly.

He ran out of the building as fast as he could, through the rows of dead bodies and fallen weapons and fires, and he saw his fellows boarding a military vehicle (belonging to the Welkinish), as bullets rained down upon them.

"LOOK WHAT I FOUND!" shouted Smithy through the sound of fire.

"WHAT?" answered someone boarding the back of the vehicle.

"THE WELKINISH PLAN OF ATTACK! LOOK!"

"TOSS IT OVER!"

"OKAY!" And Smithy threw the rolled up paper into the private's hands, but he realized he mistakenly threw the Martian map instead, and then he threw the plans too, before the door slammed shut and Smithy was shot dead, the truck taking off and making it past enemy lines into the Martian side of the battle, and delivering the plans into the war board's hands.

CHAPTER TWO

TWO WEEKS AND EIGHT HOURS LATER

A fellow Lemonland saucer landed on their Uranus colony, and out trod a dull-looking man, holding a box saying "MYSTERY INSIDE; DO NOT OPEN IF NOT YATRID JOGAN."

"Where is the governor right now? I have something for him from the military," he asked the clerk at the spaceport.

"How should I know? Probably in his office at Town Hall."

"Thank you."

He hailed a cab and took it to Town Hall, but he was told the governor was at an important meeting right then.

"Should I wait here then?"

"Go ahead. Or you could just give me the package and I'll give it to him when he gets back."

"I don't trust you."

"Fair enough."

One hour later, Yatrid came walking through the Town Hall doors drinking his coffee, and the man sprang up and handed him the package.

"A certain lieutenant, Lieutenant Smithy, rest he in peace, managed to get a hold of the Welkiners' plans to invade Uranus with a hundred and fifty million soldiers—"

Yatrid spat out his coffee in the man's face.

"What!?"

"Yes. Now here is the package. It also has a map that he left behind, which you might find of some worth. Well, goodbye."

Yatrid quickly opened the box and read the contents of the plans. He then went to his office and called his head advisor, Oswald, to discuss the matter.

"We only have ten thousand soldiers," said Jogan, now calm. "We're outmatched fifteen to one."

"I wonder why these assholes are even bothering with us," pondered Oswald.

"Divide and conquer? Get rid of the colonies, and you weaken the empire, slowly of course."

"It seems we're doomed this time. At least we are if we stay on Uranus. If everyone evacuates to Mars, we should be fine."

"No. I have one idea."

"What is it?"

"There is a certain man, Oswald, whom I know very, very well, but I haven't spoken to him in a long time. He helped this colony become what it is now. Without him, we all would have starved to death by now, and the colony faded away as a futile project. He is a man who saved me personally from death, and fought the most powerful man in the Solar System. He was the governor here before me."

"Never heard of him."

"Oswald, how old are you?"

"Twenty-six."

"I probably should have hired someone older, with more experience. No offense."

"None taken."

"Good. Anyway, you should have been about seven years old when he did all that, and then vanished. He fled to Jrugland for a time, until they allied with the Lemon Republic and made him go into hiding."

"Okay, so what's his name?"

"Phinnary. Phinnary Hecklesburg."

"Hmmm. Rings a bell, like I've heard of him once before, but—"

"Okay, it doesn't matter. We're finding him, and having him help us out of this predicament."

"Yes, sir. So where is he?"

"Don't you know what 'find' means?"

"Overall."

"Well, let's look at this Martian map that came with the plans." Yatrid pored over it carefully.

"Does it say where he is?"

"No!"

"Alright."

"We'll USE IT to FIGURE OUT where he is, based on clues and our wits."

"I see... What clues have you on his whereabouts?"

"Well, he's not in any major city; otherwise he'd get caught. You know, political stuff."

"Yes."

"He's also probably not in Lemonland."

"Makes sense."

"Because that's where they want him dead, in particular."

"Yes."

"He could be in the Southlands of the Jrug Republic, though. That place is in the uplands, so there's not so many folks living there, making it a good place to hide."

"Okay."

"Likewise with New Texas. Not much else to say."

"Alright."

"Then there's the Hallowed Lands, which used to be a part of Jrugland a long time ago, so I hear. Now it's just an unincorporated stretch of land neither of the empires wants to fight over. It's pretty bare. But what makes that an attractive choice is that my great grandfather once told me he swore the Fountain of Youth lay there, in the Hallowed Lands."

Oswald started laughing.

"Withhold your insolence, Oswald. I'm serious. He swore that he had once been there, and that he had gotten 'youthened' by its waters – which he says tasted rather sweet too – and that's how he lived into my twenties. He was a hundred and three years old."

"That can happen naturally, too, you know."

"Shut up, Oswald! He wasn't lying, I can tell you that much."

"How do you know?" Oswald smirked.

"How do I know? He was a truthful man. A little too truthful. Like that time he told the insurance company—well, it doesn't matter. But he wouldn't lie to save his life, probably. The point is, I knew him very well, and you didn't."

"Fine. So why should this Hinnary Feckleman, or whatever—"

"Phinnary Hecklesburg."

"Yes. So why should he be within the Hallowed Lands?"

"He might not be. But it's our best bet. It's near Jrugland, while being one of the loneliest, barest places on the continent. Since he's been banished, that seems a likely candidate to where he would go. Let me pack up, and we'll go. You pack up too."

"Yes, sir." Oswald didn't like the idea of going.

Yatrid took the plans and the map and some seeking equipment, as well as food and water and weapons, and they fared out in his official governor's SPACE BLASTER 200, putting the Secretary of Colony, Melvin Pumpernickle, in charge in his stead; and soon enough, after playing enough Gin Rummy, they landed at the Pankainia Spaceport (PNK), and took a cab as far northward as they could go, which was the border by the Hallowed Lands. They tipped the driver and got out.

Already the Northern reaches of the town were bare and had its houses far asunder each, but the heath before them was all the emptier of civilization.

"NOW LEAVING: JRUGLAND. NOW ENTERING: HALLOWED LANDS." said a signpost.

"How will we find our way?" asked Oswald.

"I brought a compass."

"That's it?"

"Well, we walk North for a while, and then... we'll figure it out as we go. My great grandfather told me there was an old man who drank from the Fountain of Youth and didn't die, who said he was the 'guardian' of the land. If he kept drinking from the Fountain, he should still be alive, and as 'guardian,' he should find us before we find him. And then we'll tell him our tale and ask him if he knows anybody named Phinnary."

"Crazy."

"Whatever."

Yatrid led the way along the heath, as they trod over hillocks and shrubs and thistles, getting lost a few times.

The Sun was at about forty-five degrees when they started, but quickly came the night, and they were cast into darkness.

"Fortunately, I brought my handy-dandy gas lamp," said Yatrid. "That ought to help."

He turned it on and continued onward, seeing slightly more than nothing in the wan light.

"Look yonder!" Oswald stretched out his arm and pointed toward what seemed to be a mildly beaten path, just big enough to be manmade.

"I was about to start heading the other way! Good job, Oswald! I think you're onto something."

They walked nearer to the path and saw that it went onward from there a long distance, going roughly North, so they began to follow it.

"Finally we get to eat our trail mix," said Oswald, and they both ate as they walked. They could have sworn they heard a laugh-track for a second.

Though the path had bends and warps in it, to avoid the spots of the heath thickest with thornbushes, it led them overall Northeast. The sun had not yet begun to rise, when they saw smoke drifting upward from a chimney of a cabin at the path's end.

"Oswald, you did a great job in seeing this path! Now, that house could belong to Phinnary, or to the elder my great grandfather mentioned, or someone else."

Oswald rolled his eyes.

They reached the house after a short while, and Yatrid, giddy but nervous, knocked on the front door, which was a makeshift slab of old wood with a makeshift handle (and the cabin was made of wildly differently sized logs).

"What," said the man inside in an elderly, hoarse voice. "Who goes there?" And he hesitatingly opened the door slightly, peering out at them. He looked to be about seventy years old, but heavily weathered and worn beyond his years.

"I am Yatrid Jogan, governor of Uranus. And this is my knight, Oswald."

"I'm not interested in talking to anyone. Leave!" And the man slammed the door shut on them, locking the deadbolt.

"So, was that your guy?" asked Oswald.

"It might just be..."

"Then why didn't he want to talk to you?"

"That, I don't know.."

Thence onward, going North, the trees grew thicker and nearer together, and the ground evened out.

"Maybe he couldn't see very well? And maybe his hearing is bad too?" suggested Oswald.

"That could be it. We need to find the Fountain of Youth—"

"Oh, this poppycock again?"

"Oswald, stop. You're my advisor and knight. You're meant to HELP me in fulfilling my goals, not hinder me."

"You've got a point."

"So let's go through these woods now, and maybe the elder man will meet us."

"Okay."

Wielding the lamp and drawing their swords, they carefully set foot into the wooded area, and began onward again.

"Sir, if we split up and walk in different directions, we'll have twice the chance of finding, or being found by, the elder! I'm sure he knows his way around these parts like the back of his hand!" He didn't actually believe Yatrid's grandfather's tale, and he didn't like walking in the near-dark through thick trees, so he thought he would leave the woods and forsake Yatrid.

"Good idea, Oswald!"

"Thank you, sir."

And they split up.

"Hey Oswald, you're not supposed to go South! That's where we came from! Go any other direction but straight South!"

"Yes, sir." And he went East for a short while.

Ten increasingly worrisome minutes passed and Yatrid, wishing he, too, had left, saw a man wielding a sword approach.

"Who goes there?" shouted Yatrid in fright.

"That's a bit of a presumptuous thing to ask me, huh? After all, I'm the owner of this land, and its guardian. What are YE doing here, pipsqueak?" The stranger reared his sword.

Likewise, Yatrid reared his sword, thinking he was being threatened.

The man laughed heartily. "Oh, that's rich!" He looked like he could be more than a hundred years old, but sounded sixty, with a churlish accent. "Okay, put down the sword, lad. Yer not foolin' anyone with it."

Yatrid kept holding it fast.

"If ye drop your sword, I won't hurt you. But I don't like being threatened on my own land."

Yatrid dropped the sword, and so did the elder.

"Thank you. I hope I didn't scare YOU!" And the man laughed again. "I don't mean you any harm, lad. Alright, what are ye doing around here?"

"I seek two things: the Fountain of Youth, and my friend Phinnary Hecklesburg. Do you know anything about either of those?"

"Know anything about the Fountain of Youth? I know everything about it, lad! I was the man who found it first!"

"How about my friend?"

"No, I've never heard such a name before, sorry."

"Thanks anyway. Say, have you met my great grandfather?"

"Mean ye the asshole fellow?"

"No, wrong guy. Name of Yozzi Jogan."

"Oh, THAT man! Yes, let's just say he was an often customer. Aye, I liked that old bastard! No, just yankin' yer leg, he was sweet. Too sweet. 'S he still around?"

"I'm afraid not."

"That's too bad. Well, my name's Josheb, if ye be wondering."

"I was wondering."

"Alright, let's get out of this old wald and I'll take you to my house. I've built 'er real nice."

"Thanks, Josheb. May I call you Josh?"

"If ye wish."

"Wait, first we have to find my knight, Oswald. We came together, but split up about fifteen minutes ago."

Josheb's face went stern and hard. "There be no point in looking for him. He's a lost cause."

"Why?"

The elder began leading Yatrid to his house.

"Look, I didn't want to tell you this yet, but there be a monster that lurks around these parts calling himself the Hbabateeb. I've only seen the bastard once, and he was lookin' like a wild dog, but he was just taking the shape of one. Once he take yer blood, even a tiny little bit of it, he can turn to look and sound like you. Same works with trees, beasts, any living thing. But with trees he takes the sap instead. He also likes to steal yer skin off ya and wear it. And he be fierce, don't make any mistake about it. If yer attendant be out there still, I'm sure the Hbabateeb has gotten 'im good. I'm sorry."

Yatrid's face turned ashen and he began to weep.

"I'm real sorry, lad. Had I only known he were coming, I would've rescued 'im beforehand."

"Well, I'm not going on without trying to save him!"

"Look, son, I understand ye want to help him, but ye can't—"

"Wait for me here. I'm going after him!"

"Sonny, wait up!" But Yatrid ran out of sight. "They always think they can help..." The elder sighed.

After a little time of walking, Yatrid came upon a leigh amid the woods where he saw a shadowy figure standing. Drawing nearer and casting the lamplight on it, he saw it was his knight! His head was down and he looked almost dead, standing.

"Hey Oswald, it's me, Yatrid!"

Oswald's head shot up. "Hello! Guten tag!" Then his arm shot up robotically and waved at Yatrid, before dropping again.

"Hey, normally you don't say 'guten tag.' What's that about? That's weird." Yatrid walked aback, feeling creeped-out.

"Hi! I'm glad you could find me here!" He strode toward Yatrid, then lunged at him, whetting his teeth. Yatrid beheaded him reluctantly with his sword, blue blood oozing everywhere.

Yatrid screamed.

Soon Josheb found him and said, "I told you, laddy, he was a lost cause! But folks never listen to me when I say that! Well, now that you've killed that one, I've gotta tell you one more thing, and I swear this be the last surprise: there be TWO

Hbabateeb! The elder and the younger. Now I can't tell which one ya've just slain, but ye ain't out of the 'woods' yet. Follow me to my house. The other one will be looking for you now."

They scurried away to the Southeast, until they reached the edge of the woods and a huge log-cabin fitted with windows and doors and a chimney, and even two sinks in each bathroom.

"Fret not, lad, I've never known a Hbabateeb to come near me – too much of a fuckin' sissy! – so you're sound as long as ye stay with me."

"Well, you have a wonderful house, I must say. Did you make it yourself?"

"Did I make it myself? What is that to ask? No shit I built 'er myself. By the way, the Spring – it's not actually a fountain – of Youth is nearby. I'll take you there come morning."

Josheb dwelt alone in that house, but it was made to house a whole family. It had couches, a long, oaken dining table, a bed made for two, two bathrooms, and even a guestroom, where Yatrid slept the night, after eating some wild dogs-flesh prepared in Hallownut (native to the Hallowed Land) oil.

CHAPTER THREE

At breakfast, which was some kind of grass salad and oatstalk soup, Yatrid and Josheb discussed the Spring of Youth.

"How often," asked Yatrid, "do people come here?"

"Hmmm... Good question. I think about every year or two someone comes. But I like being lonesome. Ah, the life."

"What does the Spring actually do?"

"It youthens you. That's it. Actually, gray hair might stay the same, and the voice can stay hoarse, but that's it. It'll give you back yer youthful strength and keenness. That's how I've lived for two hundred and twenty-three years.

Yatrid spat out his bite of oatstalk soup.

After breakfast, they left and Yatrid took his belongings, heading toward the Northeast for the Spring of Youth. It wasn't far walking.

"This is it?" moaned Yatrid. The "spring" was a leaky, rusty spout sticking out of a hillside and trickling into a bucket.

"No, no. This is not the source, this is just where it's easier to collect the water. If ye climb all the way up the hill, ye'll find a nice and lively spring. But this be good enough. And the bucket's already full."

Yatrid smelled it. "The water smells sour."

"Shite. This pipe's been out here in the elements for a long time. Alright, let's just go walk up to the actual Spring."

"Good."

Though it was a half-hour's hike, they made it easily enough to the hilltop, and found the brightest-green plants and grass at the top, with the strongest and healthiest blossoms in all colors, as well as a mighty tree that somehow looked like a sapling and ancient at the same time. Even the air felt young. And the stones were bouncing about or fighting amongst each other, or seeing which stone could run the fastest.

"Woah, the grass waved at me," said Yatrid.

"Yeah, it does that sometimes. Anyway, let's splash a little water on ourselves and get some and go."

The water sprang up from the middle of the peak, and ran down the side of the hill, looking crystalline and crisp. Jogan splashed it on himself and Josheb. It was cool and felt like it softened his skin and restrengthened his muscles. And his hip (which hasn't been mentioned thus far anyway) stopped hurting.

"THIS IS AWESOME!" he yelled out, and let some pour into the bucket.

"Alright, let's go, lad. Lead me the way to yer friend's house."

It took them a long time, but they made it and saw Oswald lying just outside the door.

"Oh, you're alive!" shouted Yatrid.

"Yeah, yeah." Oswald sounded out of breath, despite having lain there a long time. "Some monster thing came up to me and cut me up real bad, licked my blood."

"Thank heavens," said Josheb. "He be yet alive."

"Yeah. I'll be alright. It's stopped bleeding." Yatrid patted him on the head and rubbed the wound with youth water.

"Holy canoli, it feels better now! That's that Fountain—"

"Spring," interrupted Josheb.

"Spring of Youth water you were talking about?"

"Yes."

"It's real!"

Yatrid knocked on the hut door.

"Who in tarnation wants me? Go away." The voice was still hoarse and raspy.

"It's Yatrid again. Yatrid Jogan."

"Jason Logman? Never heard of him."

"Yatrid Jogan."

"Jacob Showland?"

"Yatrid Jogan."

"Howard Jewton?"

"Ya · trid · Jo · gan."

"Utter Sowhand?"

"Unlock the door!"

"NEVER!"

Josheb kicked down the door, crushing the man inside underneath.

"Sorry, lad, didn't mean to do that." Everyone walked inside the tiny hut.

Yatrid picked up the door and poured the whole bucketful of springwater on the wretched man.

"What the hell's the big idea?" the man shouted. "Hey, my throat isn't dry anymore. And I can see! And hear! What happened? Yatrid?"

"Phin?"

Phinnary sprang up with youthful vigor and hugged Yatrid.

"Holy hell, you came to see me! Too bad I was blind and deaf."

"I figured you'd be here."

"Stop huggin', ye sappy old lads! So ye used to be the Governor of Uranus? And yer name is Phinnary? Ye said yer name were Oldtimer McDone."

"Yeah, I got tired of my old name. And as an exile, I figured I should change it."

"Well you're Phinnary again from now on," said Yatrid.

"Oh, alright. I haven't heard that word in nineteen years. Crazy."

"So look, Phinnary, my friend, I know it's dangerous, but I want you to come with me back to Uranus. There's a crisis brewing. A big one."

"Like?"

"One and a half million soldiers –" he took out the plan and showed him – "are going to invade Uranus in fifteen days!"

Hecklesburg fell backward in shock, somehow managing to break down one of the hut walls (and the meal-table too) and falling through it.

"Don't worry, I was that shocked too when I found out about it. Only I didn't destroy any walls."

Hecklesburg rose again and asked, "How am I supposed to help you with this? I'm just a hermit now. And if I show my face in public, they'll kill me."

"You'll be undercover."

"Oh, like in the movies!"

"Yes."

"I'm sick of living in this hallowed land and never going anywhere. Let's go! And goodbye, Josheb."

"See ya, laddy. Be well!"

And they went South on the path that led them there, and then returned to the border.

But as they were coming close, a wild dog ran up and bit Jogan in the leg before they could draw their swords. Then the dog ran off again, and Jogan's leg was bandaged up to stop the bleeding.

"Well, that was weird," Jogan said once he felt better.

"Yeah, probably nothing. I wouldn't worry about it," said Hecklesburg. "What we do have to worry about is hitchhiking."

Yatrid held out his thumb. "If anyone asks, you're still Oldtimer McDone."

"Got it."

They waited for an hour by the edge of town for any car to drive by, and realizing that none ever would, they walked further South until they encountered real traffic. Then Jogan held out his thumb again. Soon someone picked them up.

"Where ya guys headed?" the driver asked.

"Pankainia Spaceport," answered Jogan.

"Alright, I guess I got nothing better to do." And the driver took them all the way there, as they played more Gin Rummy.

At the spaceport, they thanked the driver, and went to their ship.

"Woah, Pankainia," said Hecklesburg. "I haven't been here in nineteen years. Or anywhere else, also."

"Ah, here it is!" called Jogan on the private ship parking lot. "Here's the Space Blaster 200! Hey, it's unlocked. Shit, I swear I locked it. But hey, it's still here, so we're good."

"That is odd," added Oswald.

"Indeed," mused Hecklesburg.

They all walked aboard.

"Phin, do you remember how to fly these things?" asked Jogan.

"Of course I do! Ah, the Golden Years. Anyway, lemme turn her on – gimme the key." Jogan gave it.

Hecklesburg started the engine, then began flying upward.

"This is your captain speaking," he said. "We should be expecting some mild flatulence."

No-one laughed; in fact, they managed to do the opposite. Shortly, Jogan and Oswald went into the Sleeping Deck to rest, while Hecklesburg steered and played the on-board video games, almost crashing into several meteors and battlesaucers—or their bullets—in the process.

As the ship was nearing Saturn, Hecklesburg was enjoying a game of Grease Wiper 2. Jogan came out from the Sleeping Deck with a sledgehammer and began hitting every electrical panel and control board in the Control Room, and Hecklesburg's hand.

"What the fuck was that for?" Hecklesburg yelled.

"Hello. Guten tag! Nothing was that for!" And Jogan went on smashing everything, breaking these wires here, or that box labeled "CAUTION: DO NOT SMASH WITH A SLEDGEHAMMER" there.

"EMERGENCY BACKUP SYSTEM ACTIVATED," the ship's intercom system called out. "SHIP LANDING IN: 60 SECONDS. 59, 58..."

Jogan threw the hammer at the intercom box, breaking that too, and then escaped in the emergency escape pod.

"Wow," said Hecklesburg. "Trid's really being an asshole today."

Jogan and Oswald ran out of the Sleeping Deck.

"Yatrid, what the fuck was all that about?" shouted Hecklesburg.

"That's what I was gonna ask you."

"Didn't you just destroy the ship?"

"No."

"Then explain that escape pod over there—" he pointed out the window.

"If I'm here, that means that can't be me."

"Oh yeah... Then who is it?"

"The Hbabateeb!"

"Hbabateeb! I haven't heard that word in a long time. Probably 'cause I've been deaf. That thing's on the loose?"

"Remember," reminded Oswald, "when that wild dog bit you? That was probably the Hbabateeb, based on what you told me about how it works."

"Aw shit!" Jogan slammed his fist on the wall.

"It's been about a minute now," said Oswald, as the ship began nose-diving down toward Saturn's surface.

"WE'RE DOOMED!!" everyone yelled at once.

"Hey, there's another escape pod," suggested Oswald.

"It only fits one person! It's too tiny!" said Jogan. "You take it! Me and Phinnary need to be together for—"

And Oswald entered the pod and flew off.

"Hmmm, we're falling oddly slowly," said Jogan. "That gives us time for one more idea!"

"What is it?"

"This machine over here can teleport small items or pictures to a nearby Tradio station, and they can send something back. Put your bloody finger in there, we'll send them a picture, and they should be on their way to help us!"

"Alright!"

Jogan hit SCAN&SEND.

"We're getting a little too close to the planet now..."

"Wait, it's downloading something! Maybe it's a message!"

A small bandage materialized in the slot.

"Shit. We're really doomed," said Jogan.

"One of us should've taken that escape pod."

"I figured we needed to be together to—"

"WE'RE ABOUT TO CRASH! COVER YOUR HEAD!"

BOOM!

"Ow!" yelled Hecklesburg. "Fuck, that hurts!" He had stubbed his toe when they landed from the knockback.

"Hey, how come we're still alive?"

They eagerly left the ship.

"WORLD'S BIGGEST PILLOW," read the sign next to the pillow the ship had landed on.

"Well, I've stubbed my toe worse before," said Hecklesburg. "Wait, where are we?"

Everything around them was bare and empty, save a few little stones here and there. And in the distance was a tree, whose boughs had no leaves.

"WE'RE DOOMED!" yelled Hecklesburg.

"Not necessarily." Jogan pulled out his compass. "Let's try heading East. Most Saturnian civilization is found in the East."

"Sure, whatever."

"Our biggest want is water. We don't have any."

"WE'RE DOO—"

"Look, there's water over yonder." Jogan pointed to it.

"Oh yeah, there is. Well, I'm thirsty."

They both ran toward the water, only to find when they got closer that it was just a cardboard cutout of water (reading "PROPERTY OF WORLD'S BIGGEST PILLOW, LLC").

"Shit!" they both said together.

"Alright, let's just start heading East and see what we find," said Jogan.

"Fine."

One hour later, at about midday, as they were all the thirstier, they found a cactus.

"Draw your sword, Phin, and we'll cut her open and drink her!"

"Ok."

They sliced open the cactus, dipped their water jugs inside, pulled them out, and drank the whole jugful, repeating again until they had drunk all the water except what was in their jugs.

"Thanks, cactus!" yelled Hecklesburg as they went on Eastward.

It was three hours later when, as they finished climbing through a dry field of boulders, they saw a food stand in the middle of the wilderness saying "FREE FOOD! COME RIGHT ON OVER!"

"Hello, sir?" asked Hecklesburg.

"Welcome to the 'Free Food, Come Right On Over' food stand. What can I get you today?"

The only item on the list was Siberian wolf roast.

"And it's for free?" again asked Hecklesburg.

"As ye, uh you, can see on the sign, it's for free! That means you won't have to pay for it!"

"Is this one of those 'buy now, pay later' schemes?"

"No schemes at all! You won't ever have to pay for this food!"

"Will I ever owe you anything?"

"That means the same thing: no."

"Phin, let's just take the food already."

"Alright, two plates of Siberian wolf roast coming right up! Actually, they've already been cooked! And these are the last two in stock! Enjoy your day, guys!"

"You too!" waved Yatrid. And the foodseller took his cart behind a boulder and disappeared.

"Geeze, that guy was weird."

Yatrid had already eaten half of his food, and so Hecklesburg started too. It tasted hearty but metallic.

"Too bad he didn't give us any forks," said Hecklesburg, after they had both finished eating. "I haven't eaten with a fork in nineteen years! But they can be a little dangerous, in my experience."

Soon after they resumed walking, they started to feel dizzy and had to lie down against a cliffside.

"What happened to us?" asked Hecklesburg.

"Don't you see what it is? It was that stupid Siberian wolf roast that we ate!"

"Oh!"

Everything was spinning in circles around them.

"Who was that guy?" asked Jogan.

"I don't know..."

"Wait, maybe it was that Hbabateeb!"

"Oh... That would explain a lot. And his overall suspiciousness."

One hour later, when they thought they felt a little better, they decided to stand up and try going onward.

"Hey, this is working!" said Hecklesburg.

"Yeah, we're doing it!"

"Hey, why do I keep seeing the same cliff over and over again?"

"Oh yeah, that is weird..."

"Actually, I think I keep seeing everything over and over again."

"Let's try running. Maybe that will help."

"Good idea."

They ran in circles for a few minutes, until Hecklesburg bumped into Jogan and

they fell to the ground on top of each other.

"I figured it out!" called out Hecklesburg.

"Oh yeah? What happened?"

"I think we're still dizzy."

"You actually have a point there. You're right. Let's give it another hour."

They lay there some more.

When they finally felt better, they continued walking. After the sun set they found a spaceship lying next to a hill.

"It looks abandoned," said Jogan. "I'll check it out."

"Be careful."

Jogan opened the back door (it had one of those), seeing that it was unlocked, and he walked inside. The door slammed shut behind him and the ship rose into the sky and flew off to the Northeast. Hecklesburg looked up to see that the ship's underside was lit-up with word "WELKIN."

"Well shit, here we go again."

Without the sun it was getting cold, but Hecklesburg was able to walk in the ship's direction until sunrise, when what looked like an army base, with chain-link fences and barbed wire, appeared in the distance. Each corner had its own concrete tower with a radio antenna on top.

"Uh-oh," he said.

He walked nearer to the base, where he could see a back-entrance. A guard atop a tower boomed at him, "Who goes there?"

"Officer Phinnary Hecklesburg, sir."

"Why are you out of the base so early?"

"There was a suspected spy out by the sand-dunes, sir."

"And why are you entering through the back-door?"

"It's closer, sir."

"Next time tell people you're leaving. No-one forewarned me. I'll open the door for you."

"Thank you, sir." The back-door slowly opened and Hecklesburg walked into a dark hallway that led to the other end of the gate.

"Just where do you think you're going?" asked another soldier, startling Hecklesburg.

"To check on the prisoners."

"Oh, okay. Wait! There's only one prisoner."

"Yeah, that's what I said."

"Oh, sorry." And the soldier left.

"Good thing it was too dark for him to see I have no uniform!" Hecklesburg laughed.

"What was that?" The other soldier turned around.

"Nothing."

"Alright."

"I'd better keep things to myself from now on..."

"Okay, I heard that this time!"

"Shit! I mean, it's just a mental note. It doesn't involve you. Now get back to your duties."

"Yes, sir."

Hecklesburg wandered around the dawn-brightening courtyard of the camp, looking for Jogan and seeing whom he could beat up to steal his uniform. But instead he found the room "EXTRA UNIFORMS" on the outside of the courtyard wall.

He went in, beat up the guard inside, and took his clothing.

"Woah," Hecklesburg whispered, reading the name-badge. "Now I'm Colonel Zbxbwfpfsnn Cmbrrtroxl! That's awesome!" He left the room, and saw Jogan being escorted out of the camp by guards who held at least seven different guns to his head.

"I'll handle this, boys," said Hecklesburg. "Give me the guns, and I'll shoot him with all seven outback."

"You da man, Colonel Cmbrrtroxl!" they all said, giving him their guns.

"Alright, BUDDY" -Hecklesburg winked twice. "Look's like I'll be taking you outback."

Once the other guards were gone, and after Jogan thanked Hecklesburg for coming to save him, Hecklesburg asked him where the ship was.

"It should be parked just behind that wall," he pointed.

They both went through the wall (using a door) and boarded the ship, whose back-door was still unlocked. The key was also still in the ignition.

"Everyone out!" ordered Hecklesburg to the other personnel in the ship. "I wanna have some 'fun' alone with this Uranish prisoner before I kill him. You know,

let him suffocate in the emptiness of outer space. So out!"

"Yes, sir!"

Hecklesburg tore off his colonel badge and threw it in the trash. "This is a cool new outfit for me, isn't it, Jogan?"

"Yeah, it goes well with your beard."

"Oh yeah, that... Well, it's time we blast out of this shithole." Hecklesburg turned on the ship and flew it all the way back to Uranus.

CHAPTER FOUR

No sooner had Jogan proudly opened the door and given everyone a "Guess what? We're back!" look, then two swords crossed his neck.

"Hbabateeb, you're under arrest for impersonating the governor!" barked the head policeman.

"See your ass in court, monster!" shouted the other.

"What's happening?" The blood ran from Jogan's face.

"Save it for the judge, and real governor."

"What's going on?" demanded Hecklesburg.

"Don't worry. Your 'friend' here is an impostor--"

"No I'm not!!"

"Shut up!"

"And the real governor will straighten everything out."

At the Supreme Court of Uranus, Governor Jogan stood beside the High Judge and near an odd-looking machine. The newly landed Jogan sat in the defendant's seat, and Hecklesburg looked on from the side of the court, unsure which Jogan was the real one.

"I am High Judge Shamir Ainhadash, and I shall be deeming this case today. Here is our plaintiff and Governor, Yatrid Jogan, and there is our defendant, Yatrid Jogan. Will the plaintiff please state the case?"

"Thank you," said Governor Jogan. "I'm sure this event shocked me as much as it did everyone else, and I'm sure many of you were UNsure that I were the true governor upon this blatant impostor's arrival--"

"Bullshit!" shouted Defendant Jogan.

"Order in the court!" yelled the judge. "Please let the plaintiff finish his case; then you may speak."

"Anyway," went on Governor Jogan, "In the midst of a dreadful war against

the other sunly planet Welkin, I was forced to seek the help of a certain Phinnary Hecklesburg, former governor – let's all give it up for this great hero, Phinnary!—" the crowd clapped and screamed, especially the elder generation who remembered him. Hecklesburg blushed, while defendant Jogan had a look of horror on his face. "So I had to seek his help where I thought he likeliest would be found, in Jrugland's Hallowed Lands, where an evil, shapeshifting monster called the Hbabateeb dwells, as I've already forewarned you all in my Homecoming Speech." He glanced at his audience.

"So, somehow this monster got into my ship, which we used to leave Jrugland for Uranus. And so, finding out about the monster being among us, I had to act fast to prevent it from getting to our homeplanet. So I took out the sledgehammer I had left on board and smashed the ship's electrical circuits and panels and such, until the ship began to crash down towards Saturn. Now, because I had little time and wanted to do this stealthily, without the Hbabateeb noticing me, I didn't talk much, but I figured when I took one of the two escape pods out, that Hecklesburg—" the crowd clapped again –"hold on, that Hecklesburg—" they clapped once more –"can you guys stop clapping for a moment? Thank you. So, I thought that Hecklesburg would figure out what had happened and take the other escape pod with Oswald, because each pod can hold two men, not one, as the false Yatrid told Oswald and Hecklesburg. I figured they would leave the Hbabateeb to die on the crashing ship, saving the day. But that's not what happened. In the end, they all managed to get back to safety, in some way or another, and thus we stand here today in this predicament, where there are two of myself. There is one easy, definitive way to prove which one is which, but first, as the law needs, we must hear the impostor's case, too. Defendant Jogan, also known as the Hbabateeb, you have the floor."

Most of the crowd, as well as Hecklesburg, applauded.

"Everyone! Countrymen!" Defendant Jogan began, "All of what this 'man' has been saying is a total lie! I don't know how to prove to you, or the judge, that I'm your true governor, but I'm the one whom my dear friend Phinnary Hecklesburg—" everyone clapped again –"came with. I'm the one in whom Phinnary set his trust, until this fickle monster, this fiend to our country and smooth-talker, came in and—"

"Order in the court," said the judge calmly but sternly. "Do you have any actual evidence for your case?"

"Well, I... I don't know..."

"Well I know!" Governor Jogan stood up, his face wearing a broad, giddy smirk, as if he were ready to deal out justice to a murderous criminal. "I had my Head Doctor fetch us this blood-testing machine. Here are two syringes: one is labeled 'PLAINTIFF,' and the other 'DEFENDANT.' My Head Doctor, Rafa Damra Jones will draw blood from both of us, and my Head Advisor, Oswald, will mix them up randomly, put them in the machine, and read the results, to eliminate bias." He sat down and the doctor drew blood into the 'PLAINTIFF' syringe, showing everyone to soothe them of no foul play.

"This'll be rigged!" yelled Defendant Jogan.

"How do you know that before it's even happened?" answered Governor Jogan. "I already explained how it WON'T, and CAN'T be rigged."

"Well, I just know that I'M the real governor!" yelled Defendant Jogan.

"You're just making your case worse."

Defendant Jogan had blood drawn, and Oswald mixed the two vials up in his hands, while blindfolded, and then placed both of them into the machine on opposite ends. He pressed the ON button.

Ten seconds later, a reckoning was printed out of the machine on both ends, of each sample of blood, with its measurements of different substances' concentrations.

"Vial B," read Oswald to the judge and crowd. "This is the one for the Governor..." He read out the figures. Everything seemed normal.

"Vial A, this is the defendant: ... Iron, 1%. 1%! The 'expected value' is 0.004%! Head Doctor, is that true?"

"Yes! Human blood can never naturally have a concentration of 1% iron! Your Honor, Ainhadash, are you ready to make your verdict based on this?"

"Let us see both charts side-by-side," said the judge.

"Yes."

The only anomaly was iron concentration on Defendant Jogan's chart. The judge nodded.

"I hereby find the defendant, Yatrid Jogan, guilty of impersonating the governor and lying under oath; and I hereby sentence him to life imprisonment in the Underground Dungeon!"

Everyone, including Hecklesburg, clapped, as the distressed, pleading Jogan was

taken away and told to shut up already, the judge has already made the verdict.

As Governor Jogan proudly walked out of the court, Hecklesburg ran up to him and hugged him.

"I can't believe the Hbabateeb tricked me so well! He acted so convincingly!" said Hecklesburg.

"I think he had us all fooled for a moment," said the governor. "And I'm glad you were able to make it back safely. Now, I'm going to need your help with some business. We're going to my office. I need to send some of our troops to Saturn, if we ever want to win this war!"

"Yeah we do!"

Meanwhile, the newly-prosecuted Jogan was being lowered down into a pit, his arms bound in chains.

"I swear I'm the real governor!"

"That's what they all say, Hbabateeb."

"The trial was rigged!"

"We have judges for a reason, idiot."

But Jogan couldn't hear them any more, because he was underground.

Now, in order to allay confusion, the Jogan that remained governor will be called "Jogan A," and the one that was lowered into the prison "Jogan B."

Jogan B's rope was cut, and he fell to the stonen floor of the prison.

"Get up, I'll take you to your cell," ordered the guard.

"Yes."

"Yes, SIR, that is."

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

"Thank you, sir. Shit! I didn't mean to call YOU that. Anyway, come with me."

"I can't, because my feet are still fettered. Sir."

"Hop. You think we're gonna make prison life easy for you scum?"

"Maybe, sir."

"Well the answer is N-O, no!"

"Very well, sir."

"Let's go."

"Alright, sir." And Jogan B followed the gun-wielding guard, hopping to his new cell.

"We just installed spikes in the cell," said the guard. "You know, in order to punish you more, by direct order of the real, not-Hbabateeb Governor Jogan."

"That's unlawful, sir."

"He is the law! That's actually what he told me. But it checks out, him being the governor – the real one – after all. Anyway, stop trying to chat with me, scum. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

Jogan B entered the cell, which didn't have bars, but rather was made of hard stone, and the guard slammed the door on him.

He was fed and given water, and soon made to do hard labor for the colony, such as bridge-building, bridge-destroying (both done underground of course), and bearing heavy loads. And of course none of the other prisoners believed he was innocent, and when he brought it up, they would usually beat him.

Having had Hecklesburg send half of the Uranish troops to destroy the Welkinish army base on Saturn, Jogan A decided to have him also do these things while he worked on weightier matters: like blow up several Uranish military bases he suspected of secretly being communist; tear down the city's outer wall, in order to, in the future, build a better one; put everyone's soldiership under question until further inspection; and ration the army's butter supply, in order to help the house-wives stay strong in the "real battle of the home-front." Hecklesburg dutifully did everything the governor asked, and somehow even more. A lot of those things seemed very strange and unhelpful, but he didn't doubt the governor's better wisdom.

"Sometimes there's just things we're not meant to understand," Hecklesburg said and shrugged his shoulders, moving on to blow up more buildings, or deem that bridge communist, or discharge those army watchmen, or hold that emergency protocol for inspection, or something else like that.

Hecklesburg also upheld every decision the Governor made when it came to the law, even when everybody disagreed with it.

"I say," began Jogan A at a speech, "we raise taxes by 100%, to, uh... help with the military front, and stuff."

"Yeah!" Hecklesburg shouted before the booing crowd, "Great idea!"

"Well, Governor Jogan," started Oswald, "it would be greatly impractical—"

"In fact," went on Jogan A, "according to this here graph" (he quickly drew a graph) "it might be better to raise it by somewhere between 200% and 300%. What do you think, Phinnary?"

"200% sounds—"

"Okay, 300% it is! The Head Former Governor has spoken! 300% higher taxes!"

"Wow, good idea!" Hecklesburg praised him. "Everyone, stop booing! He has a plan! 300% taxes, yeah!"

"Thank you."

Soon Jogan A had Hecklesburg plaster up posters all over town calling for Jogan B to be executed by firing squad before all the townsmen. "THE LAW CAN WAIT. A MONSTER IS STILL LURKING UNDERGROUND." That is, of course, because it would be unlawful to have him executed.

When Hecklesburg thought of that and brought it up to Jogan A, after he had finished putting up all the posters, Jogan A said, "As I've been telling everyone lately, I am the law!"

"If you're the law... then why do the posters say 'The law can wait?' You don't even sound like you can wait at all."

"Most people, you must understand, haven't fully grasped that I am the law. So we need to appeal to their more primitive senses."

"So you're saying you just want to lie to everybody? Actually, come to think of it, Jogan, you've been lying a lot lately. A little too much. Not THAT much too much, but still."

"Ah, dear Phinnary, you were doing so well until today, not wasting our war emergency time asking silly questions about how to run the colony. Do you wish to be governor?"

"No, silly, I'm already through with my governing career. That ended a long time ago."

"Look, I'll give you one more chance, Hecklesburg, to do my bidding without this uptight bullshit about 'what does the law say,' or 'lying is wrong.' I would watch it if I were you."

"Is this some kind of joke?"

"No!"

"Ah geeze... Alright, I'll try."

"You'd better. If I were you!"

"Okay."

It was the next morning, after Jogan A told Hecklesburg to pour a vial of poison into the army's water supply, that Hecklesburg finally put his foot down (the right one), and refused, saying Jogan A was crazy and he should probably have let him stay in the Hallowed Lands, and also that he could stick that poison up his ass.

"I will do no such thing, Hecklesburg. Guards! Arrest this traitor and throw him in the Underground Dungeon or else ye be fired!"

"Sorry, man," said one of the guards to Hecklesburg as he put the handcuffs around his wrists. "I'm just following orders."

"How about you stick those orders up your ass as well!"

"Shut up." And he struck Hecklesburg with his club. Both of the guards hauled him away to the pit-entrance, where he was lowered down in chains and given the same treatment as Jogan B.

"Welcome to the dungeon, thug!" yelled the officer waiting beneath. "You'll be staying in here for a long time!"

And he led Hecklesburg to his cell, which at least had bars and a toilet, that also functioned as a sink.

The next day at the midday meal-recess, as Hecklesburg was getting served his helping of brown slop with some gray slop to the side, he heard a familiar voice ring over the room's speaker system. It was Yatrid (B).

"Dear gentlemen and fellow inmates, I, your lawful governor-turned Commander In Chief of Lunch, have a very important speech to deliver today. I swear that, as best as my efforts can, I will bring us a better future here, as regards the lunches they serve us, and I will do away with that gray slop and that brown slop, and give you instead tacos!" Applause. "And hamburgers!" Applause. "And salads!... Anyway, hey, is that Phinnary? Hey Phinnary, come join me at the podium! Phinnary, I'm so glad to see you! How'd you end up here?"

Hecklesburg ran up. "I'm pretty sure that other guy, the current governor,

tricked me." Hecklesburg told the whole tale, hugging Jogan and telling him he was so sorry that he didn't believe him before, and so on.

"Alright, buddy, it's okay. Look, I think I figured it out: the Hbabateeb served us that 'Siberian wolf roast' in the wilderness, which tasted very metallic, because it had a lot of iron in it! He tricked us into eating it so my blood would show off the charts iron levels!"

"So THAT's why my blood has felt so 'hard' lately," said Hecklesburg.

"Look," Jogan began, "I am hereby promoting you, my best friend, to one rank above me—"

"You can't just do that!" yelled one of the guards in the room.

"Well, I mean for honorary purposes. So, I am hereby promoting you, honorifically, to the Commander In Chief of the Commander In Chief of Lunch."

"Woah..."

"Now, I have a plan, Phin. Go along. Hey everyone! All you prisoners! All you fellow inmates!"

"What?!"

"ARE YOU READY TO ROCK THIS JOINT? Guitar-Jones, start playing your guitar! Phinnary, start dancing." They did so.

"YEAH!"

"ARE YOU READY TO RIOT?"

"YEAH!"

"ARE YOU READY TO OVERTHROW THE GUARDS?"

"YEAH!"

"We're not!" shouted the guards.

"GO GET 'EM!" commanded Jogan, the music blasting over the dungeon stereo, Hecklesburg still dancing.

"Come on, Phin, let's get out of here while they're still fighting!"

"Oh, yeah." They both rushed off the stage and out of the recess-room.

They ran to the guards' unguarded weapons closet, where they each took a gun, and started toward the exit, which would lead to the aboveground.

But, foreseeably, a few leftover guards ran over to stop them.

"Phin, make sure not to kill any of the guards! They're our folk!"

"I know!"

They each went separate ways to fight their respective guards.

Hecklesburg ducked under tables, hid behind walls, and ran in zig-zag patterns as he shot at the guards' shins, defeating them and moving onto the next group.

"Dammit! That's the one place we forgot to put bulletproof armor!" they yelled, but it was too late.

The guards concentrated very hard on capturing and neutralizing Hecklesburg, while Hecklesburg kind of just ran on instinct, thwarting all of their precalculated moves.

"Crap! How did he know we were going to be there?!"

"I didn't." And he shot them in the shins.

The guards all moved very predictably, and in foreset patterns (like marching in a straight line, or a square formation), making it easy for Hecklesburg to overwhelm them.

He was just running around like crazy, and ducking or dodging or jumping in the air, while they stuck to checkerboard formations, or to stopping, stretching out their arms, and yelling "Fire!" before firing. Hecklesburg did none of that. Soon the guards were all defeated, keeling onto the floor in throes over their dear shins.

Jogan rejoined him and they continued their escape. When they were nearly at the exit, Jogan A (the Hbabateeb) walked out, holding a gun.

"Looks like ye aren't going nowhere."

"Why not?"

"'Cause I be holding a gun at you! A more powerful gun."

"Checks out."

"If ye don't drop yer weapons, I'll shoot."

They dropped their guns, but as the Hbabateeb began loading his gun, they ran away.

"Get back here! Ye may run be ye may not hide from me!"

They ran back to the weapons closet and got more guns. Hiding behind tables or chairs or injured guards or prison cells, they shot the Hbabateeb over and over again, but he kept standing.

"What is it with this guy?" moaned Hecklesburg, from behind the trash can he and Jogan hiding behind.

"He's a monster," Jogan answered. "Monsters are usually tough."

"Interesting..."

As they were out of the his line of shot, the Hbabateeb slowly walked toward them and pointed his gun at them.

"Take this!" yelled Hecklesburg, kicking the Hbabateeb in the balls.

"My one weakness!" And the creature dropped his gun.

Hecklesburg and Jogan shot at him some more, but to no avail.

Suddenly, the Hbabateeb rose and started running toward the exit, realizing he couldn't win.

"You get back here, Hbabateeb!" yelled Hecklesburg, chasing after him. He foolishly kept shooting, and one of the bullets hit the Hbabateeb's head. Bright red blood began pouring out.

"Got you!"

But the Hbabateeb quickly fled. By the time Jogan and Hecklesburg caught up with him, he was gone.

"How'd he get away so quickly?" wondered Jogan, leaning against a tree with his hand at his chin.

"At his pace he shouldn't have gone much farther than here by the time we got out."

"Well, I'll have my guards on the lookout."

"Yeah. Let's go back to Town Hall and get you your governorship back."

"Good idea." And, still clad in prisoner-clothes, they hitchiked to Town Hall. They marched inside and Jogan called out, "I'm the real governor!"

"And I'm his witness!" shouted Hecklesburg.

"Hey, aren't you the Hbabateeb?!" Oswald came toward them, looking angry.

"Let me explain, Oswald. You only saw one side of the story."

"I did?"

"Yeah, Ozzy!" said Hecklesburg.

"Let's go back to my office and we'll tell you what really happened," said Jogan.

"Alright." They walked into Jogan's office, which had several WANTED posters of the real Jogan and one of the 'THE LAW CAN WAIT' posters, as well as a picture of Jogan on the wall that was being used as a dartboard.

Jogan and Hecklesburg told Oswald everything that had happened to them, how the Hbabateeb had betrayed Hecklesburg, and how he had been trying to

destroy the colony and kill everyone.

At the end, Oswald knelt before Jogan with tears in his eyes, and begged not to be executed.

"Oswald, enough! I won't execute you for an honest mistake like that. It was a little misguided of you, but I don't do things like that. And yes, you get to stay as my Head Advisor."

To cut a long, boring, and overly-political story short, Jogan took back his seat as governor, and he and Hecklesburg mostly undid the things the Hbabateeb did in his stead, like fixing some bridges, replacing the army's water supply, beginning to build another city-wall, and renewing all the discharged soldiers to their duty.

"Well, looks like we're all done now," said Hecklesburg.

"No, not even close!"

"Oh yeah, right."

"We still need to gather a big enough army to thwart the Welkinish, and weapons for them, and then we need to actually win the war."

"Shit."

"So remember, the Welkinish are sending one and a half *million* soldiers—"

"WHAT?"

"I told you this before."

"Oh yeah."

"So they're sending one and a half *million* soldiers to invade Uranus in twelve days. But we only have two hundred thousand soldiers!"

"Maybe the Lemonland Empire will lend you some."

"They're already using all their troops in the war."

"Maybe we can still convince them to give us some, after we explain the Welkinish invasion plan."

"I guess we should at least try. Alright, let's go."

They boarded another Space Blaster 200 and flew to the Lalace's (as the Lemon Palace was not-so-creatively named) spaceport.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Greetings!" shouted Jogan, as Hecklesburg waited in the ship. "I am Yatrid Jogan, Governor of Uranus, and I wish to speak to the Head General of our New Lemon Republic."

"Right this way, lord," said a servant.

Jogan was brought to the general's office. "So ya want some extra troops, eh?"

"Yes."

"What for?" Jogan explained the matter to him.

"Okay. How many troops do ya wish ta have?"

"One million."

"One million my ass. I could give two hundred thousand. Max."

"Two hundred and fifty thousand?"

"Hmmm..."

"We need every soldier we can get. Our colony is in deep danger. And if we defeat the oncoming troops, that will turn out in the Mainland's favor as well."

"Fine. Two hundred and fifty sounds like a nice compromise. I'll have 'em sent over soon. But you'll need ta supply ya own weapons. We are super low on those right now."

"I understand, sir. Thank you."

"Pleasure."

And Jogan flew him and Hecklesburg back to Uranus.

"I guess I didn't need to come," said Hecklesburg.

"It didn't hurt. Well, howbeit, we're now at four hundred and fifty thousand soldiers. But we'll need *at least* another five hundred and fifty thousand if we want to best the Welkinish."

"Where are we going to get that from?"

"Hmm... What if we asked the Jrugland General?"

"Why would he help us?"

"Remember, the Lemon and Jrug Empires are in an allyship. And if I warn him that if he doesn't help us, the Welkinish will overtake Uranus and use that as a new base, he may wish to give up some soldiers."

"Nice thinking."

"Thank you."

They flew to Joesville and asked for a hearing with the Head General.

"Why in tarnation would I give you any soldiers?"

Jogan explained the problem to him.

"Still, why should we get involved?" asked the general.

"Because if Welkin defeats us, they'll have a whole planet to use as a base for themselves, in our own Solar System! That would be bad for you, too!"

"Crap, you're right..."

The two haggled for a while about how many soldiers to give, but at last the general settled on six hundred and fifty thousand, which Jogan was surprised at.

"You know what, Mr. General? That's a pretty good deal. Thank you."

"You're welcome. The troops shall arrive tomorrow morning."

Jogan and Hecklesburg went back to Uranus.

"I think that should be enough," said Jogan. "Because if we have the city wall built by then, we'll be taking the defensive position, and we'll also have the high ground."

"Shouldn't we have the battlefield away from the town? You know, so those Welkin assholes don't have a chance of getting in. Probably."

"That's a good idea. But we'll reckon the logistics later."

Back in Jogan's office, Oswald and Hecklesburg gathered with Jogan and discussed how they were going to get a million guns for the soldiers, with enough bullets as well.

"We'd better have a hundred bullets a gun," said Jogan.

"How are we going to get that?" chode Oswald. "For that we would need *one hundred million* bullets, and if each bullet weigh twenty grams, we would need about sixteen billion grams of lead, and four billion grams of gunpowder!"

"Okay... That IS a lot, but if we manage our resources well, we might be able

to gather that much."

"Bullshit! Where do they even have that much of any of those substances? Huh?"

"Well..." Hecklesburg jumped in. "They have lots of gunpowder on Venus, I think Jupiter has steel, and Earth has lead."

"This guy's an idiot!" shouted Oswald.

Jogan was taken aback. "Oswald! Silence! Don't say that about my dear friend again!"

"Sorry, sir."

"Very well."

"So," went on Hecklesburg, "let's go down to Venus and ask the king if he'll give us any gunpowder, or if there's any other way to get it there. We'll just tell him the same thing we – you – told the Jrugland Head General."

"Well, the invasion's in twelve days, so we may as well try it," said Jogan.

And he and Hecklesburg got up to leave.

In Pustyertame, Venus's capital, where it was night, they knocked on the castle courtyard gate, and eventually someone answered.

"What want you?" asked the guard.

"I am Governor Yatrid Jogan of the Lemonland colony on Uranus, and I wish to discuss a deal with the king here, as concerns the late war with the Welkin Empire."

"And who is your fellow?"

"I am Oldtimer McDone, formerly Phinnary Hecklesburg, Best Friend of the Governor of Uranus."

"You may enter." And the guard opened the gate.

"I remember this place," said Hecklesburg. "Sure brings back nineteen-year-old memories."

They appeared before the king, who had both of his hands.

"Good. This isn't the same king from last time," whispered Hecklesburg.

"Be quiet!" ordered the king, who held a big, heavy-looking stick in his hands, as he stood before his throne. "Only he who holds the Talking Stick may speak."

"What is this, kindergarten?" asked Hecklesburg.

"Be silent! You need the stick to speak!"

"Oops."

"Stop talking!"

"Okay."

"You did it again."

"Oh, yeah, I kind of did."

The king struck Hecklesburg with a metal rod.

"Take this one out from my castle," he ordered a guard, who walked Hecklesburg back to the lobby. "Now, what do you, Governor of Uranus, wish from me?" And he passed over the stick to Jogan, who stood four feet away, behind the throne-steps.

"I have heard – actually, from my friend who kept talking without the stick – I am sorry about that – that your planet is rife with the materials needed to make gunpowder, as we are engaged just as well as you in the war against the Welkin Empire."

The king pointed at his mouth and tokened that he wanted to speak.

"Oh yes, here is the Talking Stick." And he handed it back.

"Thank you. Anyway, we, for which the reason should be clear, are being very careful right now with certain materials such as gunpowder, but we would be glad to sell some to you at the market price." He handed Jogan the stick.

"So what is that market price. We need..." Jogan grew shy, and started to laugh. The king again tokened to Jogan that he wished to speak, so Jogan handed back the stick.

"The Talking Stick does not let you laugh. For that, we have another stick. Which you may not use." He gave the stick back to Jogan.

"Ah, so we wish to have... uh, one hundred million bullets' worth of gunpowder; that is, two hundred million grams..." He gave back the stick.

"Oh, alright then. That shall be two hundred thousand doubloons."

Jogan motioned for the stick.

"Ah, the stick. Here you go."

"That's it?!?" Jogan handed back the stick.

"Yes. Will that be all?" The king handed Jogan the stick.

"Yes. We will get the two hundred thousand doubloons, somehow, and return soon. And here is your stick."

"Thank you, and it was a pleasure discussing business with you. Come again."

Jogan walked out to the lobby where Hecklesburg was, and saw that he was watching the television in the room (which was golden).

"Hello, this is Shrap Tendlebaugh, and you're watching Pustyertame Late Nite News! And today, or rather tonight I should say, we have a special announcement: We are now offering a one hundred and ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-nine doubloon bounty to whoever can capture 'The Destroyer.' Born retarded, 'The Destroyer' grew up to become a dangerous killer, traveling from town to town and killing people. Also called the 'Man-Beast,' he oftest is found in the jungles of Pustyertame, when he is not killing more people, usually the elderly or the very young." And a picture of him was shown onscreen, with the caption "WANTED, PREFERABLY DEAD OR ALIVE: 199,999 DOUBLOON BOUNTY."

"Hold on, we have somebody calling into the station right now!" continued the newsman. "Welcome to Late Nite News! You are LIVE on the airwaves! Tell us your name, age, and address, please."

"You're DEAD!!!" screamed a beastly voice before hanging up.

"Ladies and gentlemen at home, this just in: The Destroyer has just CALLED IN LIVE TO THE STATION! Be on the lookout for anyone with that EVIL voice!"

"Holy shit, Jogan, did you hear that?" Hecklesburg waxed excited.

"What? About The Destroyer?"

"Yeah!"

"Hmm... That just might work.."

"So where are the Jungles of Pustyertame?"

"I don't have a clue. But if we're gonna beat this asshole before anyone else does, we'll need to go back and bring some military-grade weapons. Like a machine gun."

"You mean we have to go all the way back to Uranus?"

"Yes."

And there they went, got two Doomblaster UltraGuns and some camping gear, and went back.

"Excuse me sir," asked Jogan to a street-passerby. "Do you know anything about the Jungles of Pustyertame?"

"Yeah, of course I know somethin' about it. Big deal. What, are you runnin' some kind of survey on everyone? To see how much everyone knows about the Jungles of Pustyertame? 'Cause I'm not interested, and I demand you take my answer off your list. Got that?"

"Actually, we just wanted to know where it was, and how to get there. We're travelers."

"Oh, I'm sorry, fella, I thought you was tryna run some stupid survey on me to figure out how many folks in town know about the Jungles."

"Well, that was not the case."

"I see."

"So where is it?"

"Ah yes... So ya take that there street up about seventeen miles. And there ya go."

"McCormick Lane?"

"Yes. Well, fare ya fellas well."

Hecklesburg hailed a taxi, they got in, and told the driver to take McCormick Lane Northward, until the town's edge, he and Jogan imagining that they were playing Gin Rummy on the way. They had forgotten to bring the deck of cards.

"Well, here we are," said Hecklesburg when they got there. "The sign even says, 'Jungle Ahead: Take Care, and Put Some Pep In Your Step.'"

As they walked into the jungle along a dirt-path, they began to fear The Destroyer might strike them.

"So what if The Destroyer, like, destroys us?" asked Hecklesburg.

"The whole point is that we kill him first."

"And?"

"That way he won't destroy us."

"Alright, good."

The trees around the path thickened, until the path disappeared altogether, and they started walking on some other path, which led them back to McCormick Lane.

"Consarn it!" yelled Hecklesburg. They followed the path back to the thicket, and wandered on to the North.

"Here, Destroyer, come here!" they started calling. "We have stuff for you to destroy!"

An hour of walking passed, and they still didn't see anything, other than trees and boughs smacking into their faces and animal shit lying on the ground.

"Maybe someone already took the bounty," despaired Jogan.

"That's just what that someone wants you to think! Sometimes you have to think outside the box like that. That's what they aren't expecting."

"I guess you have a point there."

One minute later, they heard loud half-man-half-monkey sounds coming from their right. They sounded almost like someone saying, "I will destroy you."

Jogan and Hecklesburg yelled "AH!!" and fell on their asses and each other on the ground.

"Take out your gun!" yelled Jogan.

"I will destroy you!" That time it sounded almost like a baby.

"Aww, isn't that cute?"

"It kind of is, actually. But shoot!"

They shot at The Destroyer for several seconds, until he ran away (though he somehow did so facing sideways).

"He's too tough!"

They started chasing after him, but quickly got lost and fell into a cold stream.

"Lost him," bemoaned Hecklesburg.

"Well," suggested Jogan, "remember how he preys on the elderly?"

"Yeah."

"We can lure him out by you acting really old!"

"Why me?"

"You *are* old."

"Fine." Hecklesburg started pretending he couldn't see very well, soiled his pants – feigning incontinence – and imagining his hair were gray.

"Come on, do something," said Jogan.

"I am. But being old is a lifestyle, not something superficial that you can just see in someone standing still. Being old can come in many sundry forms, like having a long life of wisdom to share–"

"Just shut up and act like you're dying of old age!"

"You can't just 'die of old age;' that's a common miscon--"

"Phinnary, come on!"

"Alright, alright! Okay, let's see. Ah, here we go..." Hecklesburg started slouching and pretending to hold a cane and telling Jogan about his grandsons (he didn't have any) in a raspy, but particularly loud voice; and saying he forgot what year it was, and when Jogan told him the year he got angry and said "You're lying to me, young man!"

Soon enough, as Hecklesburg was talking about how incontinent he was because he was ninety-three, they both heard a rustling in the bushes, followed by more rustling, and then the same baby-like voice saying "I will destroy you."

"You will WHAT me? Say that again."

"Hecklesburg, enough. Draw your gun!"

"Oh, right."

They both drew and shot ten times at the Destroyer, as he was running toward them ready to kill.

"It's not working!" yelled Jogan. "Phin, tell him a funny joke! Laughter is the best weapon!"

"Hey, Destroyer!"

No answer.

"Hey, Destroyer asshole! And I mean that in a nice way! What's a pirate's favorite letter?"

The Destroyer growled.

"The answer is Arr!! Get it?" But The Destroyer was now throwing stones at their faces.

"I don't think he understands language," said Hecklesburg.

"He can say 'I will destroy you' just fine."

But a stone hit Hecklesburg in the jaw, so he couldn't answer. Instead he shot at The Destroyer's face.

"GRR!! I will DESTROY YOU!!" The Destroyer screamed and ran off again.

"Wait, no! Come back! We didn't mean that!"

But he was gone into the darkness of the jungle.

"How come the bullets don't do anything?" Hecklesburg was annoyed.

"Yeah. I shot him at least fifty-three times by now, and nothing happened,

except he ran away."

"Well, whatever the case, let's keep going in the jungle. Maybe we'll find him again."

"Alright." And on they went.

After another four ambushes and following jokes that had no effect on the monster, and following stone-throwings and fleings thereof, they realized they needed "to get smart about this," in Hecklesburg's words.

"Alright, I have a plan," announced Jogan.

"What is it?"

"We'll need a stick—"

"How's a stick gonna help when the guns didn't?"

"Hold on. First we have to get the stick."

"That doesn't answer my question."

Grabbing a big stick he found and beginning to set it in the ground firmly, Jogan explained, "The Destroyer is so stupid that, if I stand behind this stick, he'll come after me, but the stick will keep blocking his path, and he shouldn't go around it. I don't think he knows how that works. So while I'm shielded behind the stick, you can shoot him from the side until he dies. Sound good?"

"That's just crazy enough to work!"

After Hecklesburg spent ten minutes of pretending to be old(er) again, The Destroyer came walking toward them.

"I will DESTROY YOU!! ARGH!!"

"Hey, Destroyer, what did the Pustyertamer say to the Glorkwichling at the bar? The—"

"Phin, the jokes don't work! Follow my plan! Also they're not that good!"

"Okay!"

Jogan stood behind the stick, and Hecklesburg ran beside him too, and The Destroyer walked right into it, slamming his nose against it.

"GRR! I WILL DESTROY YOU!"

Jogan smote The Destroyer with another stick on the head, while Hecklesburg shot him with the gun. Until it ran out of bullets, so he took Jogan's gun and shot The Destroyer with all those bullets too.

"The bullets aren't working!" Hecklesburg yelled, and he threw the empty gun

at The Destroyer for good measure, and then he threw the other one.

The Destroyer looked almost dead, barely still standing, trying to walk past the stick.

After an hour of long fighting and beating (while The Destroyer stood behind the stick, trying to get through), he finally keeled over and collapsed.

"We did it!" yelled Hecklesburg and Jogan.

"I will destroy you!" growled The Destroyer.

"How is he still alive?"

"He's not moving anymore," said Hecklesburg.

"Now he is!" The Destroyer started wiggling his limbs a little.

"Let's just take him to the station. This is good enough."

Hecklesburg and Jogan dragged The Destroyer all the way back to McCormick Lane, and took another cab to the news station.

"What's that dead body thing about?" asked the driver.

"Oh, it's for a bounty. We're bounty hunters."

"Can I buy him off you?"

"How much?"

"Ten doubloons."

"No."

Once at the station, Jogan and Hecklesburg dragged The Destroyer's growling body up the stairs and toward the BOUNTY RECEIVING ROOM.

But before they could reach the door, a worker oddly clad in a lab-coat too big for his size came up to them and asked if that were The Destroyer and if they were there to claim the bounty.

"Yes!"

"Good work, fellows! You did it! Let me quickly do the autopsy for the body, inside this room. Please wait outside. We'll hand over the check shortly." And he rushed into the room.

"Well, I guess we just wait here," said Hecklesburg. "That's what that man told us, at least. I think he's got it under control."

"Let's lean against this wall."

Meanwhile, the man inside cast off his lab-coat, revealing the rugged gear of a

bounty hunter. Well, a bounty hunter costume, to be more exact. Particularly one that was bought at a party shop.

"I have caught The Destroyer!" he yelled proudly to the eagerly-sitting newscaster. "Nobody else did; it was I who caught him. So you can just hand over the check to me and I'll be on my merry way!"

"Well," said the newsman, "he's not actually dead yet--"

"GRR!" growled The Destroyer.

"But he should 'expire' in a little bit." He chuckled. "So *HERE'S YOUR ONE HUNDRED AND NINETY-NINE THOUSAND, NINE HUNDRED AND NINETY-NINE DOUBLOON CHECK, AND *HERE'S YOUR FIRST CONTRACT FOR YOUR FIRST EPISODE AS 'THE DESTROYER KID' IN 'THE ADVENTURES OF THE DESTROYER KID!'** Sign here. Here's a pen."

The man signed. He was then led to a stage in the far-side of the room, and the Camera Crew, Lighting Club, and Script Fellowship came rushing out of the closet to wish 'the greatest sharpshooter in Pustyertame' a warm welcome to stardom.

"In slaying that awful blight to our country and community--"

"GRR!" growled the blight.

"In slaying him--"

"GRR!"

The announcer kicked The Destroyer in the head. "You have shown yourself worthy of having your very own television show! Here is the script. Cameras roll in thirty minutes!"

Thirty minutes later:

"Pustyertame South Studios presents: *THE ADVENTURES OF THE DESTROYER KID!* Starring: The Destroyer Kid, in "The Sharpest Shooter." A banner with the show's logo and episode name was stretched out covering the stage, and The Destroyer Kid leapt through it holding his gun, tearing the paper.

He began to sing:

"When untame men be on the loose

The Destroyer Kid (that's me!) 'll hunt 'em like a wild goose

Bested the mighty Destroyer

He's... The Destroyer Kid, yeah!"

He left the stage, the curtain was withdrawn, showing the Pustyertame Park background, and on walked the famous (on Venus, at least) actor Uxpirt Shirpley, playing The Destroyer, dragging an old lady behind him.

"I will destroy you! Hahahaha! That's what I do best!"

"Somebody save me!"

"No-one can hear you here, honey. Get ready... TO BE EATEN! HA! Someone needs his food, lest he starve."

"Get a job! Buy food at the greengrocer's!"

"I'm too retarded for that!" He drew out a knife, fork, and bib.

"HELP!!" screamed the lady.

"I already said that doesn't work." From offstage, the line-prompter loudly whispered to him to say "Grr!" more. "Grr!" he said.

"There's no reason to be afraid! 'Cause you're about to get paid! Paid back for your crimes!" The Destroyer Kid ran onstage with his gun, and slapped the Destroyer with the handle.

"GRR!"

The Destroyer threw his knife and fork, and then his bib, at The Destroyer Kid, but the Kid shot them down while they were in the air.

"It's over, Destroyer!"

"Never! Grr!" And The Destroyer fled the stage.

The Kid helped the lady get on her feet, and sprang away to destroy The Destroyer.

In the next scene, which was a chase, the same background was rotated behind them as they ran in place, making the illusion that they were actually doing something.

After passing "Bob's Pancakes" five times, the background stopped and the Kid leapt on top of The Destroyer, felling him to the ground.

"Not so 'Destroying' now, are you?" He smirked.

"What about if I EAT YOU?! GRR!"

But the Kid shot him ten times. The first was a boring, regular straight shot, but the rest were creative. Number three, for example, he did between his legs facing backwards; number eight he did from the "Bob's Pancakes" rooftop; and number ten from two sides of the stage at once (a mirroring effect was used). The Destroyer lay

dead on the pavement.

"That's the first time you see the Kid, and also the last!"

"No, no! You were supposed to say 'but NOT the last!'"

But The Destroyer Kid was already jumping out of the window, escaping.

Meanwhile:

"How long does it even take to do an autopsy?" asked Hecklesburg? He and Jogan were lying on the floor outside the room.

"Yeah, maybe we should ask."

"I'd give it another ten minutes."

"Okay."

But suddenly the BOUNTY ROOM erupted in chaos and men ran out (to go downstairs to see what had happened to the Kid), trampling Jogan and Hecklesburg under foot.

When the trampling was over, and they finished dusting themselves off, they walked in the room and demanded an explanation.

"You're not fooling me," said the newsman in his chair smoking a cigar. "The guy who killed The Destroyer got his check an hour ago."

"Mister, he was lying! We killed The Destroyer! WE did it! We swear!"

"I've heard it all before. Security! Take these idiots or madmen out."

"But we could even show you the gun that we killed him with."

And they were gently tossed out of the building face-first and told to stay out, but that they were still encouraged to watch Late Nite News and other Pustyertame South Studios media. And good riddance!

"Alright, we've got to find the man who has our check," said Jogan.

"What if he's already cashed it?"

"Who even was he?"

"I don't know!"

The team of studio-workers that trampled them in the hallway came up to them, and asked if they had seen where the Destroyer Kid had gone.

"The who?"

"He was holding a gun and wore the clothes you'd see on a bounty-hunter. He jumped out of that window." They pointed. "But we saw him get up. That's it."

"Did he have a \$199,999 check?"

"Yes, what about it?"

"Oh, nothing."

Jogan and Hecklesburg left.

CHAPTER SIX

But hope was not lost. As they were walking drearily down O’Cormicky Boulevard, they saw a crowd gathering down the street, and heard shouts of “You’re the greatest, the Destroyer Kid!”

“Destroyer Kid?!” Hecklesburg jumped. “That reminds me of something.”

“The Destroyer?”

“Yeah, that was it.”

“This may be a lead.” Jogan started running toward the crowd, and Hecklesburg followed after.

The man in the middle of the crowd was trying to break free. “Thank you, everyone. I wish you all my warmest and truest thank-yous and appreciations for your support for my heroship, but I have to get going now!”

“Trid, he looks kinda ‘bounty-hunterish.’ That’s the guy!” said Hecklesburg, loud enough that the Kid could hear.

“Show’s over, folks!” desperately yelled the Kid. “I have a destroying or sharpshooting appointment for fifteen minutes from now. Bye! And keep ye lads off drugs!” At last, the crowd opened the way for him, and he made a run for the main street.

Hecklesburg and Jogan followed after in pursuit, but the crowd withheld them and didn’t let them move.

“He SAID he needs to go to an appointment!”

“Wait!” said Hecklesburg. “I’m pretty sure that’s Destroyer merchandise they’re selling over there.” He pointed behind the crowd, at what happened to be a building’s wall.

“At the wall?”

“Yes.”

The men released them and started heading to the bank building to buy

merchandise. Meanwhile, Jogan and Hecklesburg ran toward where the Kid had run.

"Shit! We lost him!" moaned Hecklesburg.

"Hey, look, over yonder is a hotel." Not very far from where they stood was a short building (amid a block full of much taller skyscrapers) called "Mid-South Pustyertame Luxury Inn," only the X in luxury was missing. Sometimes you can't afford to fix your signs right when you need to. That's today's lesson.

"Maybe he went in there!"

Their theory was helped by the fact that they saw the Kid walk through the door.

"Let's go!"

Once they had reached the inn and gone inside, they asked the clerk (who happened to also be the manager and owner, apparently) if they could know which room the bounty-hunter had just taken.

"Ya know, our secret here at Mid-South Pustyertame Luxury Inn is that we DON'T reveal our customers' details willy-nilly like ya wants me to. Buzz off. Unless you're wantin' a room."

"No."

"Buzz off, then."

They chose to take their case to the police.

"Hi! How can I help you?" said the officer at the desk.

After explaining their story – twice, as the officer kind of thought the story was hilarious and kept speaking over them about the great irony – the officer stiffened up again, only laughing a little bit now, and said, "So, it's one of those fake bounty-collector stories, huh? There's a lot of those. So what, you want the keys to every hotel room?"

"Uh, well, sure."

"'Cause by law they gotta give us a copy of every room's key. Here ya go. Have fun. I mean, do justice or something. Also, here's a warrant you can show the boss."

Jogan and Hecklesburg went back to the Luxury Inn, and showed the manager the warrant they were given, and he was forced to let them go search in the rooms, of which there were ten.

"Some 'luxury,'" scoffed Hecklesburg.

On the second and only other floor, they started opening the doors in order and seeing who was inside.

- 1) A drug dealer dealing out drugs to a client.
- 2) Nobody.
- 3) Nobody.
- 4) A whore giving her client the bill.
- 5) The hotel owner's wife and two sons.
- 6) The Destroyer Kid!

He was fast asleep, and the \$199,999 check was on the nightstand next to his gun. But his sleeping body was doing things that normal bodies don't do, like his eyes were wide open, his snores were at a pitch too high for humans to hear, and his face kept fading in and out of his head.

"Hbabateeb!" whispered Hecklesburg.

"Let's shoot him and run once we have the check!"

They sneakily took the check back, picked up the gun, shot the monster, and fled.

"Come back here, ye wusses! I'll getcha!"

But they were faster than him, and were able to rewrite the check in the Venus King's name and hand it to him.

Wielding the Talking Stick, the King said, "It is a pleasure indeed to do business with you, and I shall have the two hundred million grams of gunpowder sent in ships to Uranus." He gave the stick to Jogan to speak.

"Thank you, my lord, for this, and I await to see it arrive." And he gave the stick back to the King, bowed, and he and Hecklesburg left for home, before the Hbabateeb could find them. He was having a lot of trouble moving around with all his newfound fame; even when he changed shape, folks seemed to recognize him somehow.

"Jogan!" called Oswald at Uranus's spaceport as he and Hecklesburg were getting out of the ship. "Look what I found!" He was excited.

"What, Oswald, what?"

In Oswald's hand was a flyer that read, "ONE-V-ONE FIGHTING

MATCH: BRING A WEAPON AND YOU HAVE A CHANCE TO WIN
15,000,000 LB. OF PURE STEEL!!!"

"Where did you find this?!" asked Jogan.

"There were a few of these posters nailed up around the town."

Hecklesburg and Jogan went to the latter's office to discuss which one weapon to bring.

"How about a sword?" suggested Hecklesburg.

"That's probably a popular choice."

"A gun?"

"Wait, I know! How about a Lightstiller 2.0? It's a new weapon our secret Uranish services have come out with that shoots a bright laser up to a hundred yards out, and knocks everyone out witless for a few hours, completely paralysing them."

"That's awesome! I bet no-one else has one of those!"

"Yes. Probably."

"Where do you have them?"

"I actually have a couple in the closet right here. Never know when you're gonna need 'em." He took one out and handed it to Hecklesburg.

The competition was on Mars in Lemonland, so they left the next morning and landed at the Upperclassville spaceport, and took a taxi to the club.

The building was broad and tall, though at first they confused it for the other, bigger fighting club offering money as the prize half a block down the road. They even went inside and registered, before realizing their mistake.

Coming this time to the right fighting club, they went in and registered.

"Thank you for coming, Mister McDone. You came just in time. The fight's about to begin. Join the other eight fighters in that room to the right."

"Only eight?"

"Yes, sir."

On the platform the announcer stood before the huge audience, and yelled, "GET READY FOR THE FIGHTS OF YOUR LIFE! TO WATCH THEM, THAT IS. LET'S MEET OUR FIGHTERS!" The crowd went wild. "First, meet Buff Billy, the official Rascal of Upperclassville!" The crowd cheered as he bowed.

"Next, we have his brother, Rough Riley, the Bastard of Upperclassville!"

"In third place, we have the mysterious Oldtimer McDone, hitherto unheard-of in

the world of professional fighting!" The crowd cheered as Hecklesburg proudly pointed his Lightstiller in the air and took several cool poses.

"Fourth, we have John "The Stone" Benson!

"Fifth, the Handless Bandit, who throws a mean punch with his prosthetic hands!"

"Sixth, Professor Heindsworthingham, who has both the brawn AND the brains!"

"Seventh, Shlob 'The Seventh' Mogley, with his patented and trademarked™ Boomerang Blade! Watch out!" He was clad in steel armor.

"Eighth, Ball Buster McGee, with a regular, and still deadly, ol' gun."

"And last but maybe most, Robo-Randy! He says he'll crush you with his five-times-life-size robo-armor-suit, replete with the deadliest of steel arms!"

Hecklesburg shivered.

"Before the game begins!" called out the announcer. "Mr. McDone, I'm sure the audience out there really wants to know why you've come this far, just to win fifteen million pounds of pure steel. Tell us a little about yourself."

"Okay, thank you, it's an honor. Uhh, well, it's kind of secret, so can I tell you in private?"

"Sure! I'm sorry, folks, we'll be right back!" And he ushered Hecklesburg toward the corner of the stage. "So what's your reason for wanting all this steel, Oldtimer?"

"It's a whole, long story, that I don't think I'm meant to tell anybody, but— do you swear to keep a secret?"

"Why of course."

"Okay, thank you. So it all began when I was born—"

"Tell me the later part of it. Like, the last few days, maybe."

"Okay." And Hecklesburg told him the whole story, even from before the last few days.

"Wow, that Governor fellow sure seems like the asshole in that story, but anyway, what do you plan to do next, now that you'll have all the gunpowder and steel that you need?"

"Well next, we're going to Earth's old lead-mines to get about sixteen billion grams of lead. You know, for all our bullets."

"And where on Earth are you going?"

"I don't know. Wherever all the lead is."

"Hmmm... Very interesting, very interesting indeed. Well, this talk has been fascinating, I must admit, but I have to head on over to the restroom before the games start. Well, see you in just a minute."

"Okay, thank you for this discu—" The announcer was already gone off the stage.

Hecklesburg went back to the middle of the stage to wait with everyone else.

A few, boring minutes went by, in which Hecklesburg tried making smalltalk with the other fighters, and tried charming them, so he could easily beat them later, but they just told him to shut up, Weak Face.

Eventually a young woman came on the stage, who it turned out was an intern at the fighting club. "I'm so sorry, everyone, but tonight's planned announcer has told me he has a horrible emergency that needs attending, and therefore he cannot be here any longer to host the show. So now I'm in charge for tonight! ROUND ONE! Uh, let me check my list.. Uhh.. Stonewall Jameson versus Mad Dog Jones—"

"That's the wrong night!" yelled someone offstage.

After a lot more waiting and sitting around, and papers being looked at, and looking for other papers, the new announcer came back with the right list for that night's show.

"I'm very sorry, guys. So ROUND ONE! Buff Billy versus Rough Riley!"

"Objection!" shouted Rough Riley.

"What is it?"

"I can't fight my own brother!"

"But someone has to win!"

"Miss! I hereby forgo this round, for my own brother's honor. Let my brother Buff Billy have the win."

"Fine! ROUND TWO! Buff Billy versus Oldtimer McDone!"

But by this time the crowd had their hopes down and didn't cheer.

Hecklesburg shot Buff Billy with the Lightstiller, and Billy fell onto the floor and didn't get up.

"We have a KNOCKOUT!!" shouted the announcer. "Alright, ROUND THREE! Oldtimer McDone versus John 'the Stone' Benson!"

Mr. Benson was likely called so because his body stood stiff like quartz, and his face bore a stony expression that made him look like he never flinched. Also, he wore a stone pendant around his neck.

"Alright guys, I've got this," smirked Hecklesburg. Of course, the crowd couldn't actually hear him, but they got the idea. The only problem was that John Benson was already hurling a heavy stone at him, which he had taken from his pocket. By the time Hecklesburg turned from the audience back to the fight, his cheek had been stricken, and he began to drop the Lightstiller.

"Ow, Mr. Benson! That really hurt, man!"

Benson was running toward him from the other edge of the arena, hoping to attack while Hecklesburg was down, but the latter was quick enough and beamed the Lightstiller at Benson, felling his stony ass to the ground.

"We have another KNOCKOUT for Oldtimer McDone! Now it says here in my notes.. Ummm... Okay, so, for round four you're supposed to fight without using any weapons, that's the twist. So Oldtimer and Mister Handless Bandit, give me your weapons."

Hecklesburg was frightened. The Handless Bandit didn't have any weapons.

"Well, here we go. ROUND FOUR! Oldtimer McDone versus the Handless Bandit!"

Now, the Handless Bandit was an older fellow, whose arms held wooden fists in stead of his real ones. He also had a scar across his face.

"So, how'd you get those wooden fists?" asked Hecklesburg.

"Shut up, fool. I used to be a boxer. Your ass is grass."

Hecklesburg felt hurt, and, fearing his jaw getting smashed in and his ass being grass like the guy had said, he began running away until he reached the stage's right end, and then he ran some more into the corner, until he could run no further.

Soon the Handless Bandit caught up to him, laughed at how Hecklesburg had cornered himself, and at his impotence without his weapon, as well as other things too for a while. But, feeling the audience waxing bored, the Bandit turned to them and said, "Don't worry, I got this."

He suddenly drew his right elbow backward and started winding up his fist in a circle, readying himself to punch Hecklesburg's face with leverage. But all of that spinning also began loosening the wooden hand, and soon it fell off his wrist.

"Oops, my bad," he said, winding up his left fist even more confidently than he did the right. "That shouldn't happen again." It did.

Hecklesburg took this opportunity to smash in the Handless Bandit's nose. The Bandit collapsed down onto his fallen fists, overwon, and the announcer called out, "And that's another KNOCKOUT for Oldtimer McDone!" Hecklesburg bowed.

"Alright, ROUND FIVE! Oldtimer McDone versus Professor Heindsworthingham! You may use your weapons again!"

Hecklesburg picked up his.

As the Professor walked on stage, everybody felt it was a little weird that his image lagged a bit behind the rest of their sight, and that sometimes his body almost seemed to flicker for a split second; but Hecklesburg was too busy aiming his Lightstiller to worry

about optical illusions.

Heindsworthingham shifted forward almost casually, and Hecklesburg shot him with the Lightstiller's beam with a smirk.

Hecklesburg started to do a victory dance, and the Professor shouted out in a slightly tinny voice, "Yer cooked, lassy! But I am only a hologram, sent by your favorite and also *last living* Hbabateeb, who has already seized all of the Earth's lead by the time yer hearing this—"

The crowd suddenly began cheering and getting really excited, now that something interesting had actually happened.

"Go Oldtimer! You can do it!"

"Get 'im, McDone! Get 'im!"

"I'm not done yet!" barked the hologram. "And yes, this message was prerecorded. Okay, so —" Hecklesburg kept shooting at it while it spoke, in vain — "Ye'll have to come and find me if ye want yer stupid lead for your even stupider war that ye'll already never win! I'll be waiting. But if this hologram can kill you first, make sure yer best friend comes here instead!"

Hecklesburg tried hitting the Lightstiller and shaking it and looking into the barrel to get it to work, but the hologram had come near enough that it threw him a half-tangible punch in the face.

The crowd was jumping in their seats, jumping on their seats, screaming, and fighting among each other about whether McDone should win or the hologram.

Hecklesburg started running around the stage to evade the hologram. But since he didn't really watch where he was going, he ended up backstage and accidentally bumped into a big piece of machinery, knocking it over and hearing little crackling noises of broken circuits and fuses.

Walking back on stage and giving a facial expression reading "Oops," he saw that the hologram was gone.

"Get back here, you asshole! I'm not done with you yet!"

But the announcer announced, "KNOCKOUT!! You managed to break the hologram's projector! Good job! And clever, too! ROUND SIX! Oldtimer McDone versus Shlob 'The Seventh' Mogley!"

Mogley strode onto the stage, armor clanking, Boomerang Blade in hand, and wearing a helmet of chain-mail. Hecklesburg at once realized that the Lightstiller might not work on him.

"I ween I was wise to bring this helmet, wasn't I?"

"I guess so.." muttered Hecklesburg.

He tried using the Lightstiller on Shlob, but the steel armor bounced the beam right back into whence it came, the gun's barrel.

"Impressive!" said the announcer over the newly connected speaker system.

"I'm about to show you why your name is 'McDone!'" boasted Mogley.

"Actually, that's not my real name. My *real* name is –"

"Shut up!" yelled Jogan from where he sat in the audience.

"Okay, nevermind.."

"Your real name is 'Nevermind?'"

"Umm... I guess you could say, yes.. Yes, it is."

"More like Dumbass!! Ha ha ha!" And Mogley threw his Boomerang Blade right at Hecklesburg, sharp and wide enough to cut off his head.

But while the blade flew in the air past Hecklesburg, ready to slice him on the way back, he took off toward Shlob and pointed the Lightstiller at his face and fired; and the beam faded on through the chain-mail, and Mogley, too, collapsed onto the floor in defeat. Now in flight back to its wielder, the Boomerang Blade landed on his chestplate, scratching the armor.

"KNOCKOUT!! McDone is yet on the rise! ROUND SEVEN! Oldtimer McDone versus Ball Buster McGee!" Shlob was drawn off the stage.

And on stomped McGee, bearing his gun.

"Your streak ends here, princess," he said. "As soon as you draw out your ray gun, I'll shoot you with my actual gun." He held it firmly in his outstretched arm, pointed toward Hecklesburg.

"Why don't you just shoot me now?"

"Hmm, I hadn't thought of that. I reckon I could."

"Then why don't you?"

"Well, I guess if I threaten to shoot you, I can get you to admit defeat without even fighting."

"You can give up and that counts?"

"Yep. So drop your ray gun or I'll shoot."

"It's called the Lightstiller 2.0."

"Whatever the hell it's called."

Hecklesburg didn't drop it.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"You actually want me to shoot you? I will."

"You're all bite and no bark."

"I don't think you even know what you're saying." McGee's arm was growing weary.

"Prove it."

"You just used the idiom all wrong. In fact, you reversed the meaning."

"Still not shooting me, huh?"

"I'm getting to it."

"When?"

"Soon."

"How soon? I can't just wait all day."

"In ten seconds if you don't drop the stupid ray gun."

"It's the Lightstiller 2.0!"

"Nine."

"Can you make it, like, twenty?"

"No! Eight."

"What if I put my hands up instead?"

"Fine."

"Will you shoot me if I do that?"

"No."

Hecklesburg put his hands up in the air, while still keeping the Lightstiller in his right.

"You're supposed to drop the gun first!"

"Oh, I forgot. Can I still put it down without you shooting me?"

"Sure." McGee's gun was no longer aimed straight at Hecklesburg.

Hecklesburg started to lower his right arm, as if to put the Lightstiller on the ground, but quickly he turned the barrel toward McGee and shot the beam. McGee fell face-first onto the floor – Try saying that five times fast – somehow shooting himself in both feet on the way.

"KNOCKOUT!! And now it's time for the LAST ROUND!! Oldtimer McDone versus Robo-Randy! Who will take home the 15 million pounds of steel!?! LET'S FIND OUT!"

Onto the stage walked a ten-foot-tall, hulking robot, controlled by Randy in the cockpit. And without warning he started charging toward Hecklesburg, calling out over the robot's loudspeakers, "You've finally met your match! Two thousand pounds of steel!"

Hecklesburg leapt between the robot's legs and ran to the other end of the stage.

"When I win this prize," he said, "I'll build an army of machines, more or less like this one, and then I'll even be a match to the army!"

Randy flung the robot's right fist, which was attached to a spring, at Hecklesburg, who jumped out of the way just in time.

Somehow Hecklesburg still had the Lightstiller in his hand, but he didn't dare try using it, because he knew this time that it wouldn't work, and would make him look even stupider than he already did.

The robot started chasing Hecklesburg around the stage, ending up going in circles and zig-zag lines and even some shapes that hadn't been invented yet (for which Hecklesburg was later given full credit, so don't worry). Jumping over flying metal fists and ducking under harpoons and dodging pieces of the floor and withstanding steel kicks to the ass was hard work, and Hecklesburg was growing very tired.

The robot charged at Hecklesburg again, and again he managed to flee in time. After all, weighing two tons, the robot couldn't be very fast. And again they went around in circles.

When next Randy threw the robot's fist at him, a (very crude) idea came to his mind: after dodging it again (the fists were about as quick as the robot), he set his Lightstiller on the inside of the spring to which the fist was attached, perpendicular to the robot's body, to jam the mechanism or something like that when Randy withcalled the fist.

"Wise guy, huh?" yelled Randy over the speakers. "That was actually smart. But I still have the other hand!" And he drew the right fist back to the robot, which at once short-circuited, started emitting smoke from the inside, and crashed down onto the stage, falling through it as well, which left a Robo-Randy-shaped hole.

"KNOCKOUT!!! OLDTIMER MCDONE HAS JUST OLDTIMER MCWON!" And a gold medal was pinned on Hecklesburg's shirt. "Mister McDOne, how do you feel now that you've just won not only the competition, but also each and every round?"

"I feel pretty good, I guess."

And he was given a sheet to fill out about where the steel should be delivered.

Once finished and a proud man, Hecklesburg walked out of the club, which had now called the Upperclassville Fire Department owing to the burning robot and such, and he ran up to and hugged Jogan.

"I did it! WE did it! And the delivery is free, too!"

"You really did it, Phin! You were ..."

And so on, for a while, of emotional conversation, until at last they took another cab back to the spaceport.

"Now, about that Hbabateeb..." said Hecklesburg inside the taxi.

"Oh yeah.."

"Yeah.. He said he wants us to find him."

"Shit."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Once inside their ship again, where Jogan had fortunately stowed a few guns beforehand, the two readied themselves to go down to Earth to get the needed lead.

"This guy, the Hbabateeb, he just never stops, does he?" asked Hecklesburg rhetorically.

"All 'cause his asshole father had the gall to try and kill me! So I killed him instead! What else should I have done??"

"I know, right?!"

"Wait, so, where is all the Earth's lead anyway?.."

"Hmmm... I have no idea.. Hold up! I think I might have an encyclopedia left in the glove-box." It was so called because spaceships formerly were operated with "flying gloves."

Jogan unlocked the compartment and behold!— there was the old 2940 edition of the Encyclopædia Lemonlandica! To hold all of the million pages in one lone book, they were made of NanoFilament® MicroGlass® (Lemonland Patent Office no. 1,895,828,049), which you need not understand beyond that they were very thin.

"So how does it work?" asked Hecklesburg.

"What do you mean?"

"How do you use it?"

"Well, it's ordered alphabetically."

"Okay..."

"And we're looking for 'Earth,' so that'll be under 'E.'"

"Wow, that's a clever system they got there!"

Jogan turned to page 191,642, which began the "Earth ^(abandoned planet)" heading, and a few pages later was "Earth, Lead."

The relevant deal read:

"Earth's biggest lead mine is located in Albakercky ^(Albuquerque, archaic spelling), Old New Mexico, near the foothills of the Sandia Mountain Range..." And the coordinates thereof were given.

"Okay, let's try that one!" Hecklesburg put forth.

"Alright, lemme set the coordinates in the ship's compass... Okay! She's ready!"

And the ship took off toward Albuquerque, Earth. On the way, Jogan and Hecklesburg made up sundry insults and jokes about the Hbabateeb, and vulgar references to his mother and theories about whom she liked to lie with, and so on.

"The Hbabateeb is so fat," began Hecklesburg, "that when he walks in the room he goes, 'Fee fi fo fum!'"

"But he isn't actually fat," corrected Jogan.

"Yeah, but it's still funny."

"I'll give you that."

Soon they landed, in an empty field by the mountains.

"Hey, fatty!" shouted Hecklesburg, getting out of the ship. It was night.

Jogan slapped him on the back. "He's not fat! Use a better insult!"

"Okay.. Hey fickle fuckface! Hey shapeshifting bastard! Show yourself!"

"Those were actually pretty good."

"Thanks."

But there was nobody about. There was, however, a nine-hundred-year old Tour Trolley whose tracks led up to Sandia Crest, where they could but barely see the sight of a great spaceship and some kind of movement, and even a little light.

"Yonder!" shouted Hecklesburg. "I mean, let's go there!"

Guns in hand, and mean, tough looks on their faces, Hecklesburg and Jogan boarded the Tour Trolley, and it started off, at a little above thirty miles an hour, slowly climbing the mountain.

"One of the great attractions of America," spoke an ancient voice through the speakers of yore. "The Sandia Mountains have been called 'The Everest of the West.'"

"What's that?" said Hecklesburg.

"No clue."

The voice went on: "Make sure to keep your hands, and limbs in general for that matter, inside the trolley at all times. Anyway, there are rumors that the World's first lily blossom sprouted atop these very hills. Also, folks, if you turn to your right, you'll even see the famous ABQ airport in the distance! Isn't Albuquerque wonderful?? Some Americanologists, such as John Bigchee, have called it a real 'Western Wonderland.'"

"Huh?" Hecklesburg was bewildered.

Jogan pressed the "shut up" button and the voice stopped.

Eleven minutes later, they at last reached the top and got out. They were about a

mile from where the great ship and mounds of lead were.

Suddenly a gun fired at them, but missed.

"Ye've actually come! Good job, ye real dimbrains! I am only a hologram, sent by the true Hbabateeb."

Hecklesburg shot at it, and it disappeared, flashes of light spraying everywhere.

He and Jogan ran along the mountain way toward the lead, and several more holograms appeared and tried to shove them off the narrow cliffside to their doom. They retreated a ways and shot down the holograms, coming back and ending up in a broader field, where stood heaps upon heaps of leaden bars, which looked like they had been made in elden days.

Next to it lay a mighty and wide spaceship, crafted for bearing cargo or bulk materials, whose loading dock was open and empty.

"I'll go look for the Hbabateeb asshole," said Hecklesburg. "And you load all this lead onto the ship." On the ship's side was an electrically controlled magnet, used for lading metals on board. "Figure out how to use it."

"Alright!"

Hecklesburg ran on along the mountain way, all the ancient houses and buildings in the distance looking like sand-grains.

A third of a mile later, he came upon another even deal of ground, about fifty feet broad and overlooking a four-thousand-foot drop.

"Well, well, well..." began the Hbabateeb, lighting a cigar and picking up a bat with nails beaten into it. "Ye have finally made it. It took you long enough."

Hecklesburg held his gun firmly. "Shut up." Standing twenty feet away from the devilishly smirking Hbabateeb, he fired the gun. The bullet hit the Hbabateeb who gave no reaction.

"Ye thought ye were clever, bringing a gun with you! Yer cooked, lassy, and I'm getting my revenge tonight!"

Hecklesburg shot five more times, to no effect.

"Ye dolt!"

"Fickle fuckface!"

The Hbabateeb slowly started walking toward him, readying to swing the bat, and still smoking the cigar.

"Alright," he said. "Let this fight begin!" And he charged forth and started chasing Hecklesburg with the bat across the mountain-top path.

The Hbabateeb was a little faster, and struck Hecklesburg in the back.

Stopping at once before the Hbabateeb could react, Hecklesburg landed a punch in the Hbabateeb's face.

"Shit, lassy! Ye got me!"

They kept running, each being careful not to slip in the narrower spots.

Soon they came upon another broad field, in whose corner was a little mound. Hecklesburg rose to the top, and fired his gun again at the Hbabateeb, who tried to come up there too, but was stopped by Hecklesburg kicking.

"How come my shots don't do anything to you??" yelled Hecklesburg.

"Why should I tell you, fool?"

"If you don't tell me I'll shoot! Oh wait, nevermind."

The Hbabateeb tried again and again to get atop the mound, and at last he got up and slammed Hecklesburg's foot with the bat. Hecklesburg shot his gun at the bat, and blew a hole right in the middle. Then he fled down the other side of the mound, back onto the even field. He checked his gun and saw that he only had eleven bullets left.

The Hbabateeb's cigar was getting short, and so he snuffed it out and yet kept holding it in his hand. Then he bore on with the chase, leaping off the mound and running in wrath at his greatest speed.

Hecklesburg stood still, and when the Hbabateeb came near, he fired a bullet at the bat's handle and the Hbabateeb's hand. The rest of the bat broke off, blue blood beginning to flow out of the monster's shorn fingers, and Hecklesburg tossed the bat off the cliff as he knelt on the ground where he picked it up.

"Yer doomed, lassy!!" As the Hbabateeb bent down to Hecklesburg's level to strike, the latter threw up a punch at the Hbabateeb's jaw. The Hbabateeb stood back up, unfazed.

Through all of this, he still held the put-out cigar in his hand, which he raised to the level of his head.

Hecklesburg tried to get up, but the Hbabateeb kicked him in the face and elbowed him in the belly, falling upon him and beginning to wrestle with one hand; the cigar kept far away from Hecklesburg.

The first thing Hecklesburg tried to do was take the cigar from him, but the Hbabateeb fought mightily not to give it up.

"What's with the cigar??"

"I won't tell you!"

Hecklesburg pounding him with both of his hands made for a very uneven fight, so

at last the Hbabateeb dropped the cigar and used his two hands to retch the gun from Hecklesburg's holster, as the other tried to strangle him.

The Hbabateeb nearly got the gun out, but then hit Hecklesburg in the neck. Hecklesburg drew out his gun, despite the foe's efforts to steal it, and he shot the Hbabateeb stark in the stomach, whence streamed out a rivulet of blood. The Hbabateeb suddenly went limp and Hecklesburg kicked him in the side of his head.

Taking some deep breaths, the overwon Hbabateeb started speaking, calmly. "I bet ye wish to know how I did the 'Not-Hurt-By-The-Gun' trick, don'cha?"

"Yes. I asked you."

"Oh yes. We Hbabateeb, of which I'm the last one by cause o' yer friend, can shift into another creature's shape as long as we have a little bit of its blood, or into a plant if we have its sap. I got some o' yer friend's blood and so I was able to turn myself to look like 'im. Couldn't manage his speech, though. To someone who isn't an idiot, it should've been obvious. But... Well, anyway.." He coughed up a little blood as he lay there on the ground. "That cigar there, in the leaves – it's not really tobacco, it's actually a cigar made of oak leaves – is a wee bit of the sap, or the juice, or whatever ya wish to call it. So, sucking some of it in as it burnt, I got enough of the D.N.A. to harden my body like the oak tree at the very instant yer bullets hit me, so I didn't bleed a bit. I only did it so swift ye didn't see a thing! And it's not that easy..."

"That's actually pretty cool." Hecklesburg shot him again twice.

"LASSY!! DON'T SHOOT ME ONE MORE TIME! I swear, ye and yer friend, ye win! I'll take the loss! I give up! Ye beat me!"

"You're already going to die."

"Yes... But please don't shoot again."

Hecklesburg thought about it. "Okay, but don't get any ideas. 'Cause if you do, I'm definitely gonna shoot you."

"Fair enough."

Suddenly, Jogan, out of breath from running, arrived to see his friend standing over the bleeding, dying Hbabateeb who had dealt him so much trouble.

"Ye!" shouted the Hbabateeb.

"Yes. The ship says we need a four-digit code to fly it. What's the code?"

"I won't tell you directly. I'll have yer friend give it to you. Get out of here, ye bastard!"

Jogan went off, Hecklesburg swearing to retch the code from the Hbabateeb with force if needed.

"Ahh... It's 1413. But wait! Don't go just yet!"

"Why?"

"Now that ye've just slain the last of our whole kind, at least show us pity and be here while I die."

"Fine."

"Thank you. By the way, lassy – eh, laddy – can I just ask you one favor for after I die? Ya know, in exchange for the code I gave you?"

"Hmmm..."

"Please... Even if not to honor me, at least to honor my race as a whole, and my father."

"What is it? Fine, I'll do you one favor. But it better not be so big."

"When I expire, which I think'll be in just about a minute, please take my body with you, burn it, and spread my ashes, or dump them, or whatever ye wish, in those Hallowed Lands where my real home is. Please."

"Alright, Mister Hbabateeb."

"Do ye swear?"

"I swear."

"Alright, thank you, laddy. Ye fought well. Ye were bold, and ye did me in fair. Goodbye."

"Fare well." But before the Hbabateeb could hear those words, he died.

Hecklesburg bore the Hbabateeb's dead body back to the cargo ship, and told Jogan the code.

Jogan entered it. "One-four-one-three... 'Ship now starting!' Yes!! Hey, what are you doing with his body?"

"Well, I kinda swore to him that I would spread his ashes back in the Hallowed Lands... Ya know, a deal is a deal."

"Whatever."

"Hey, look, there's a freezer!" Indeed, in the ship's cabin, for whatever reason, was a large freezer box. Hecklesburg stowed the body inside. Jogan initiated liftoff, and they were quickly out in space again, headed back to Uranus, bearing sixteen million kilograms of lead. That's thirty-five million, two hundred and seventy-three thousand, nine hundred and twenty pounds.

CHAPTER EIGHT

By the next morning the steel had been delivered, and Jogan bade the Military Arms Factory begin making the million guns and accompanying hundred bullets each.

That evening the factory finished.

"Here's your gun, and here's your ammo. Next!" All the soldiers were lined up, single-file, and the weapons were dealt out.

The army gathered back at the main base. Jogan stood up on the Speaking Box and began speaking.

"As you all know, we have no general, because normally there's no wars going on out here. So I'll be your general, in effect, for this battle; which is set to begin tomorrow, according to the Welkinish plans we received."

"Woohoo, you're doing great!" yelled Hecklesburg in encouragement from among the soldiers.

"Thank you, Phin! Now, we have two main sides to this battle – 'fronts,' if you will: the Northern Front and the Southern Front. These are at the two normally weakest points in the city wall, where the gates are. They are the only openings to the city. Thus we will try to funnel all of the enemy forces into these two spots, so we can better beat them." And he explained in detail and answered questions from the soldiers, some of which were from Hecklesburg. "How can both the North and the South be at the front? That doesn't seem to add up," And "When is the battle again?" And "Wait, am I fighting in this one too?" And so forth.

The next day, half the troops were sent to the Southern front, with Hecklesburg as leader, and the other half were sent to the North, with Jogan and Oswald as leader and vice-leader, respectively.

Hecklesburg wielding the biggest gun of the Southern army, he stood looking over the defensive wall, until the sky grew dark for a minute, and down flew hundreds of ships that had the word Welkin printed on them in a scary, somewhat edgy font, and then they started parking on the open field about a mile off from the defensive wall.

Hordes of Welkinish soldiers charged forth from the ships at the North and South

fronts, and Hecklesburg called out to the Uranish troops and waved with his hands that "The Welkinish are coming!"

Soon shots started flying from both sides, but mostly the Welkinish soldiers were killed, mainly because they were thirty feet below everyone else.

For the next three hours, just about the same thing went on more or less – you know how wars work – only the heap of dead Welkinish got bigger, almost becoming an obstacle in its own right, and those dead on the Uranish side were born off and given burial or something. Of course it probably wouldn't be a very good burial, or for that matter a deep one. "Well at least I'm still safe," said Hecklesburg.

A new ship flew down through the Uranish atmosphere and landed by the rest of the fleet.

"Hahaha, a soldier is late I see!" chuckled Hecklesburg.

But then out came a battering ram from the back of the ship, and Hecklesburg spat out the coffee that he had just been given.

The battering ram was drawn toward the wall faster than you've ever seen a battering ram move (or your money back) while the Uranish troops shot at it in vain, and it slammed the wall with such might that the rest of Hecklesburg's cup of coffee fell and shattered.

"Shit," he said.

Then the battering ram struck again a few more times, until pieces of the wall started cracking and falling off, fortunately landing on some of the enemy troops.

"Yeah! Get 'em!" yelled Hecklesburg as that happened.

Shortly, the wall began tipping over, as if it were about to collapse, and Hecklesburg and the other soldiers fled, to Wall #2, which was only one foot thick and eight feet high. Don't even get me started on how wide it was.

Anyway, the Uranish soldiers hid behind it and shot at the onslaught of Welkin men. Wall #1 had apparently fallen right on top of the battering ram, so there was no more of that, to Hecklesburg's and his fellows' slight relief.

But soon, as night started creeping in, the Welkinish footsoldiers alone were enough to overwhelm the wall, and they even started hurling the bricks thereof at the Uranish men, jeering and mocking and middle-finger-giving all the while.

At the same time, Hecklesburg heard over the Walk-N-Talk that Jogan had given him, "Phin! Phin! Copy! Over."

"Yes, Trid, what is it? Over."

"The Welkinish have overtaken the Southern front, and we're fleeing to our backup

wall as we speak. Over."

"Shit! The same thing has already happened to us, and I think we're losing. Half the wall has already been thrown at us. Over."

"We're doomed, Phin! DOOMED!! Over."

"We'll be fine, Yatrid. Don't worry. OW! My face! They threw a brick at my face! And it was my better side! I gotta go. Be well! Over."

As the Uranish troops tried to lay the thrown bricks back in place, the other bricks were picked out and thrown at them. Soon enough, a part of the wall wholly collapsed, and the Welkinish swarmed on through and marched toward the city.

"DOOMED!!" yelled Hecklesburg, in his head of course. He was hiding behind the leftover wall, right where he wouldn't be seen.

Once all the Welkinish troops had gone through the wall, Hecklesburg went through himself to the other side and started running over to the Northern front, now holding a sword (as he had used up his big gun).

"Phin! Phin! They're already in the city! Shit! Ass! Over."

"Same for my side! Over." But while he was saying this, a little spaceship, with "Welkin" printed on it in even scarier, edgier letters, floated down from the sky and landed by the rest.

"Well, I'm gonna try and save our colony anyway," said Jogan. "Do what you can! Over!"

"Good luck! Over."

Out of the little ship trod a somewhat old-looking man wearing an army-hued suit with five colorful badges thereupon and wielding a sword with what was likely his name on it. "Xgarflgheel II." He also had a hat on. A menacing hat.

"Hey, you there!" shouted Hecklesburg. "Who the hell are you?"

"Who are *you*, pipsqueak?? I am General Xgarflgheel II of the Happy Folks' Republic of Welkin."

"Wait, that's its full name?"

"Yes. It's a part of the greater Proximus Shitholi Empire."

"Wow. I guess you really do learn something new every day, huh?"

"I suppose so. So what do you want of me? I'm here to note the progress of my troops in overtaking the colony here and report it back to my lord the King of the Happy Folk of Welkin."

"Go on."

"Alright. And then he will start a new colonizing campaign here, to turn the whole

planet into a Welkinish army base. Well, now you must die, since you know our plan. Of course, I was going to kill you anyway." He reared his sword at Hecklesburg and lunged forward.

"On the guard!" yelled Hecklesburg, who blocked with his sword.

"Sharp, I see..." said the general.

"I'll have you know, mister general, that I am this colony's governor's right-hand man." They went on fighting.

"How nice..."

Hecklesburg tried to strike his left side, but the general parried. Hecklesburg withdrew his sword and parried the general's next attack. It went on for some time like this, until both were weary.

"I kinda feel like taking a break," said Hecklesburg, as they kept trying to hit each other.

"You can if you want; I'll just behead you right then and there."

"But that's not fair!"

"You might say this whole war is unfair. Which it is."

"Then why are you doing it?"

"The King commanded me to. I have no choice. Well, I could resign, but that would be plain silly." Hecklesburg got close to striking the general.

"Hmmm, I get it. You know, I once had a boss who wanted me to do stuff that I didn't want to do, and he was the king, and I ended up kind of overthrowing him. I didn't take his stead, though. I just did it – OW! [he had been grazed by the sword] – to help my friend... Who's actually that governor of this colony that I mentioned."

"Wow, how interesting. So we are more alike than I would have thought."

"Yeah! Friendship!"

"I suppose you could say."

By this time, Hecklesburg had the general's sword well blocked, and so he said, "And by the way—"

"Yes?"

"By the way, how about THIS?"

"What? OW! SHIT, you got me!" Hecklesburg had tried to kick him where humans have balls but missed, but fortunately where he hit instead was where the Welkinish race have theirs. Hecklesburg later called this "A happy little coincidence."

Hecklesburg took that time to scrape the general's hand that held the sword. The general dropped it.

"Fiddlesticks!" shouted the general.

Hecklesburg took the sword from him and tossed it several yards away.

"Crap. Maybe I shouldn't have done that. Whatever."

Hecklesburg held his sword above the general, ready to strike with full strength. The general said, "I surrender! I surrender! And I hereby forgo this war, too. You can have your colony!"

"Thanks. And now you're coming with me."

"Where?"

"Jail."

"Fine."

Conveniently, a few soldiers and Yatrid Jogan came running out of the fordome wall, looking bright and smiley.

"I have the general!" called Hecklesburg. "General... X-garful-g'heel two. Take 'im away, boys!"

"Where?" asked the boys that he was talking to, by which he meant the soldiers.

"Jail!"

"Why not just kill him??"

"It's a bargain, you see. If we keep him alive, we can then have him officially surrender, and stuff."

"Okay, we'll throw him in the prison."

And they took the general away, as he yelled "NOOOO!!" the whole time.

"So Phinnary!" said Jogan.

"Oh, yeah. What is it?"

"We won the war!!"

"You what??"

"I said we won the war!!"

"Oh, right. Yay!! How did you do it?"

"With all the soldiers rounded up in one place, it was easy to just blow them up with bombs. It was that simple. The city's a little messed up now, but it'll be alright."

"Oh man, now I don't have to worry about this stupid war anymore. I think I wanna take a nap. Good job, Trid, you did it."

Several minutes of arguing about whether "you did it" or "no, *you* did it," a few hours of naptime, and one morning later, General Xgarflgheel appeared on T.V. and surrendered publicly, so all the Welkinish soldiers who hadn't been slain yet and who were eating their breakfast in the Uranus saloons, or trying to wash away their sorrows in the

Uranus bars with the Uranus beer, or buying more ammo at the local MILITARY GOODS shop, could see they could now quit, so long as there was a T.V. in the establishment. If not, then they would have to hear the word later. The word isn't just going to magically find them, or something silly like that. Surrenders take time.

CHAPTER NINE

Hecklesburg was appointed counselor for the official Lemonland Council, after being pardoned for killing the former king on account of his "Outstanding wartime merits." He often gave suggestions to the Lemon King in the kingly palace, and was given a little but fancy house to dwell in back in his home-town.

He and Jogan came up with the bright idea of making a war museum out of the leftover Welkinish weapons and used-up Uranish guns, as well as of the pieces of the fallen walls. It paid for itself, too, by having a kind-of heavy fee to enter. Everyone loves war museums.

Two days every week, Hecklesburg gave Jogan special counsel, with Oswald lowered in rank to only "Military Counselor." Also, Hecklesburg was given a working key to the city by Jogan. "I look a little akward in that picture," he said about the photo taken of the occasion.

"But there's one thing I still have left to do..." Hecklesburg said to himself.

He took the Hbabateeb's body with him down to Pankainia, Jrugland, and then to the Hallowed Lands, where he met up with Josheb the Elder, who was happy to see him, and there he burnt the Hbabateeb to a crisp.

"Ah, sad, 'tis..." mourned Josheb after hearing the whole tale of what had happened. "And that's when I've hated 'im the whole time 'e's been around. Howbeit, ye've done well, lad."

Hecklesburg spread the ashes about the woods. "And good riddance!"

He lodged the night and bode with Josheb, who made them supper.

"So, ye be a warrior, 's that so, lad?"

"A little bit. Really, it's by accident."

The next morning Hecklesburg and Josheb bade each other goodbye, and Hecklesburg started going on his way, when Josheb stopped him firmly and said in a stern voice, "There be one thing left I need to say to ya: What about the underground??"

THE END